



## **ABORTION IS A HUMAN-RIGHTS ISSUE**

Human rights ensure that governments do not discriminate based on sex, race, economic status or other characteristics in their efforts to improve or influence people's health and lives. Abortion is linked to the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to privacy, the right to be free of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and the right to make decisions about one's reproductive health and life, as protected by international agreements.

The understanding of a woman's human right to decide when and if to have children has evolved and grown over the past 40 years. At the international level, governments recognized the right to make childbearing decisions at the first global meeting on human rights, as articulated in the 1968 Proclamation of Teheran. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), was the first international human-rights treaty to explicitly mention family planning. At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, 179 governments agreed that free and informed decisionmaking about pregnancy and childbirth is a basic right. In 1999, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly agreed that, "where abortion is not against the law, health systems should...ensure that such abortion is safe and accessible."

Safe abortion services are necessary to ensure that women can reach the highest attainable standard of health. Several UN Human Rights treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, articulate the right to health. And the majority of international human-rights expert committees, in their observations to specific governments, have identified unsafe abortion or lack of access to safe abortion as a human-rights issue. The Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantees the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, with equity and non-discrimination. In 2004, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health made explicit the need for abortion services so that governments fulfill the right to health, writing that "where abortions are legal, they must be safe: public-health systems should train and equip health-service providers and take other measures to ensure that such abortions are not only safe but accessible," echoing earlier UN proclamations.

In nearly every country, abortion is legal in some circumstances. But no abortion law or international treaty by itself can ensure that a woman can safely terminate a pregnancy that is unwanted, damaging to her health or dangerous to her life. The health of these women, and even their lives, can depend on their ability to have access to safe abortion services.

