

Make Liberal Noise for Free Choice

- Free choice is a human right
- Free choice is a global concern
- Free choice is freedom from oppression

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A new perspective on free choice

It is not long ago since pregnancy related sexual and reproductive health and rights were recognized as human rights. The resistance is strong, even in Europe. Liberal Women of Sweden, the women's organization linked to the Liberal Party of Sweden, cannot accept that women's fundamental rights are neglected and brushed aside by the European Union's member states. The liberal parties of Europe must be the watchdog of ensuring the choice, access and quality of sexual and reproductive health and rights

We do not demand common abortion legislation in the European Union. However, it is urgent that the perspective on abortion is shifted and that the union supports three essential standpoints:

- *Free choice is a human right – not a public health issue.*
- *Access to legal and safe abortions is a global concern – not only a national.*
- *Render the struggle for free choice the same status as the commitment of eradicating all other oppression of women.*

Make liberal noise for free choice

Earlier this year the EU-member states failed to unite behind a common view of women's sexual and reproductive rights at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Countries hostile to abortion bagged such an understanding. The political splitting will in lengthening have devastating consequences. More women, and their newborns, die as a consequence of pregnancy related complications every year than who die in AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria put together. Every hour, eight women perish in the suites of unsafe abortions. The maternal death is a humanitarian disaster, let to continue in silence. The European Union, the world largest aid donor, must not turn its' back on this.

The access to contraceptives, maternal healthcare services and ultimately legal and safe abortions is a question of life or death for the women of the world. The most intimate issues holds the key to meeting global challenges; the struggle against poverty and maternal death. Gender equality within the European Union and outside its borders can never be attained without the guarantee of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. If the European Union wishes to be regarded as a modern project and a staunch supporter of justice and equality; the Union must lay out the women's right to abortion in plain text.

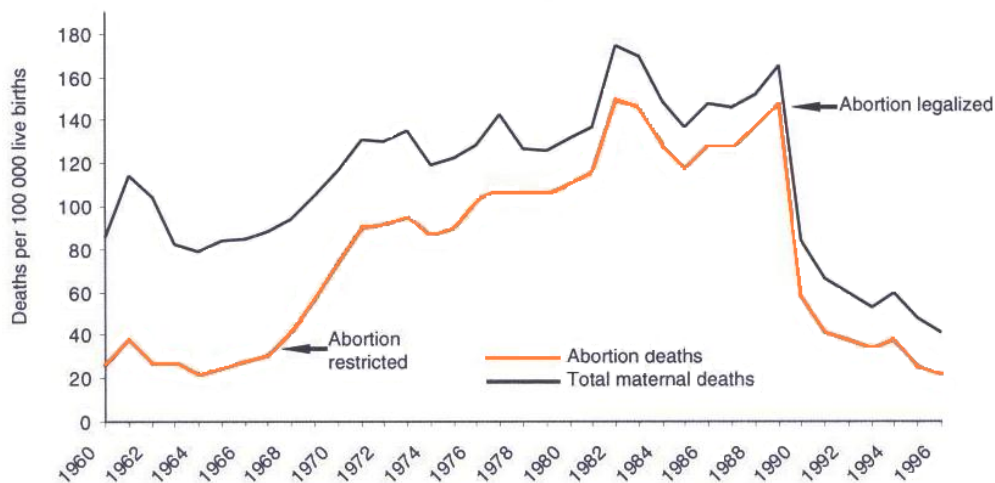
The developing countries have in general a stricter regulation for abortion than the developed world and thus, a higher maternal mortality rate than nations where women have access to legal abortions. However, women's ability to access safe and legal abortions is restricted de jure or de facto in most countries in the world. In fact, even where abortion is permitted by law, women often have severely limited access to safe abortion services because of lack of proper regulation, health services, or political will. Europe is no exception. Many nations in the region have restrictions and complicated requirements that discourage women from obtaining an abortion, which fosters illegal and unsafe abortions.¹

¹ UNFPA, WHO Regional Office for Europe, *Entre Nous No: 59-2005*, page 3

Millions of women in Europe are restricted from accessing reproductive health services and by law denied the control over their own bodies; thousands of women in Europe therefore leave their country to seek help elsewhere. Those who are unable or cannot afford such a journey are compelled to seek the dangerous solution of an unsafe abortion. It is estimated that more than half a million women risk their lives and health in unsafe abortions in Europe every year.²

Out of 200 million pregnancies world wide, 72 million are unwanted. There will always be unwanted pregnancies, hence, women will always undergo abortion weather it is legal or not. In countries where abortion is legal and permitted on broad grounds they are generally safe, in countries where abortion is restricted or illegal it is often unsafe, causing millions of personal tragedies around the world. The graph below is a clear outline of how maternal deaths correlate with the access to legal abortions.

Number of maternal deaths to 100 000 live births, by year, Romania, 1960–1996



Source: World health statistics annual, various years

Free choice - a human rights issue

The denial of a woman's independent choice to make a decision over her own body violates a number of human rights:

- **The right to health** is a universally recognized human right to which all people are entitled; respecting women's right to health requires the decriminalization of abortion.
- **The rights to non-discrimination and equality:** abortion is a medical procedure that only women need. The denial of health care services needed only by women is a discriminatory act. The U.N. Human Rights Committee has repeatedly established a clear link between women's equality and the availability of reproductive health services, including abortion.
- **The right to privacy:** decision of parenthood is deeply personal and exactly the type of interest privacy rights should protect.

² UNFPA, WHO Regional Office for Europe, *Entre Nous* No: 59-2005, page 3

- **The right to plan the size and spacing of the family** can only be implemented when women can determine when or if they are to carry a pregnancy to term without interference of the state.³

The United Nations Human Rights Council, UNHRC, has established that it is a crime against human rights to deny a woman the access to abortion if it's legal in the country. The European Court of Human Rights in 2007 ruled that a Polish woman's human rights had been violated when she was denied an abortion on therapeutic grounds. The Supreme Court of the United States of America has through the case *Roe vs. Wade*, ruled that laws against abortion laws against violates the constitutional right to privacy. In the USA, where the anti-choice movement is strong, the states are forced to yield to the federal power.

Free choice - a liberal cause

The liberal parties of Europe must be the watchdog of ensuring the choice, access and quality of sexual and reproductive health and rights. To guarantee women's right and opportunity to make choices about their bodies and health without interference from others is a basic liberal cause.

The woman's freedom to choose whether to fulfill or end a pregnancy rests upon the liberal fundament of the individual's free will and freedom of choice. The individual's right to decide over ones own body and health is perfectly described by J S Mill's, "Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual."⁴ One fourth of the world's women are by law prohibited to undergo a termination of a pregnancy due to rape or incest and 22 percent of the world's women are denied an abortion even if the pregnancy poses a threat to their health.⁵ In practice the number of women denied access is much higher since the discrepancy between legislation and practice is wide in many countries.

Free choice – combat poverty

It is estimated that 13 percent of all maternal deaths world-wide are due to unsafe abortions. Every year, 500 000 women die due to the complications of a pregnancy, 99 percent of these women and girls live in the developing world. Approximately 70 000 women and girls die as a consequence of unsafe abortion procedures. In some African countries 40 percent of the maternal deaths are caused by restricted access to safe abortions.

The individual's reproductive and sexual health and rights are fundamental for prosperity and a better quality of life. There is a strong relationship between poverty and reproductive rights: attacking poverty improves reproductive health and realizing sexual and reproductive rights helps en poverty. Exercise of their reproductive rights strengthens women's families as well, both in lessening time lost due to illness and the number of untimely deaths, and because planned children are wanted children, and having fewer children means more of the family's resources are available for each.⁶ The improvement of sexual and reproductive health care is the most cost-efficient investment into development.

³ Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org/backgrounder/americas/argentina0605/

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1869

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Abortion Politics 2007*

⁶ UNFPA, <http://www.unfpa.org/intercenter/reprights/sustainable.htm>, 2008-09-16

FIGURE
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Deaths from Unsafe Abortion



Source: World Health Organization, Maternal Health and Safe Motherhood Programme (Geneva), unpublished estimates.

The importance of women's reproductive rights in the context of development has been recognized by 179 countries at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and eight years ago at the United Nations Millennium Summit, 191 countries identified maternal health as a key to addressing inequality and poverty and committed to reducing the maternal death with three quarters by 2015.

The European Union is actively promoting sexual health and encouraging the development of a safe-sex culture and the EU member states provide over two thirds of the core funding of the United Nations Population Fund. However, these commitments have had an insignificant impact on the lives of women in the developing world. Still half a million women die due to lack of sexual and reproductive health and rights and the maternal death toll has not budged since the 1980s.

Deaths due to unsafe abortions are preventable and must get the highest priority in the European Union's action plan for sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of poverty reduction. Where women are empowered to decide on their own lives they contribute to the foundation for economic recovery. To this end women have to be in control of their own body.

Liberal Women of Sweden do not demand common abortion legislation in the European Union. However, it is urgent that the perspective on abortion is shifted and that the union supports three essential standpoints:

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