

# FREEDOM OF CHOICE

A toolkit for anti-oppressive  
advocacy for abortion rights



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# INTRODUCTION

When we advocate for sexual and reproductive rights, we are also advocating for the recognition of the equality of all genders: that all the rights set forth in all human rights instruments must be fulfilled, respected, protected and promoted without any form of discrimination. While abortion tends to be framed from a women's rights perspective, it is imperative that abortion is not seen as a gendered aspect of healthcare. When advocating for abortion rights and access to safe abortion, we must be inclusive with the language we use. Trans\* and intersex people are often excluded from such conversations that directly impact their body and their right to bodily autonomy.

It is important that when we are talking about advocating for abortion, we use a language that includes different bodies and gender identities, such as transmen, transmasculine, non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, agender, intersex people and anyone else who can get pregnant and does not identify as a cisgender woman. This is because these communities have been historically excluded from abortion discussions and advocacy, leaving them out of the legal framework and therefore in a situation of vulnerability which in most cases they cannot access to comprehensive abortion services including post-abortion care or are discriminated when accessing them.





# WHAT IS SAFE ABORTION?

## Safe abortion from a healthcare perspective

The World Health Organization (WHO) gives **definitions of both medical and surgical abortion, which encompass the methods used**; medical abortion is the use of pharmacological drugs to terminate pregnancy, and surgical abortion is the use of transcervical procedures for terminating pregnancy [1].

The WHO also makes **clear definitions between safe and unsafe abortion** in their technical and policy guidance document on safe abortion. When we are advocating for abortion we are advocating for abortion that is followed by a qualified professional, in a safe environment, and that is accessible (without legal, economic, or social barriers to accessing abortion).

[1] WHO. (2018). *Medical management of abortion*. Available from: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/278968/9789241550406-eng.pdf?ua=1>

When we advocate for safe, comprehensive abortion service, the continuum of care must include:

- Evidence-based treatment
- Post-abortion care
- Options for remote consultation and telemedical abortion, where appropriate
- Qualified staff
- Confidential services
- Provisions for accessibility
- Services free of prejudice, bias, stigma, oppression, judgment, and coercion
- Youth-friendly services

When advocating for young people's right to safe abortion, it is crucial that all of the above are included in your messaging.





## Legal Framework Governing Abortion

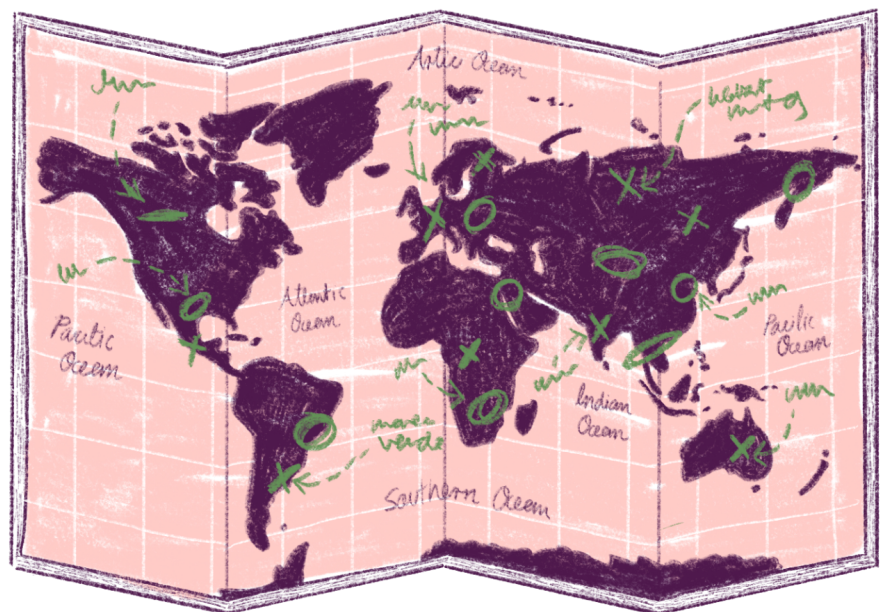
The legal frameworks governing access to safe abortion services globally can be categorized into five main approaches [2]. These are:

1. Prohibited on all grounds
2. To save the life of the pregnant person
3. To preserve the physical and/or mental health of the pregnant person
4. Broad social or economic grounds
5. On-demand (varying gestational limits apply)

Within these categories there can be further restrictions. **Before embarking on your advocacy campaign it is important to map out the current restrictions on abortion in your country or state and how these impact young people.** This information will be the basis of your advocacy campaign.

The Centre for Reproductive Rights offers a comprehensive list of countries and their abortion legislation that you can use. You can check it out [here](https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?country=POL&category[295]=295).

DON'T FORGET  
TO MAP OUT  
ABORTION  
RESTRICTIONS  
IN YOUR  
CONTEXT!!



[2] Adapted from: Centre for Reproductive Rights. (2020). The World's Abortion Laws.

Available from: [https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?country=POL&category\[295\]=295](https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?country=POL&category[295]=295)

## A Human Rights Perspective

While we advocate for abortion as a human right, and our messaging around safe abortion is rights-based, there are no international human rights instruments that expressly categorise abortion as a human right. This does not prevent you from taking a **rights-based approach** to your abortion advocacy.

You can cite the following international human rights mechanisms in your advocacy:

**Safe abortion comes under many other rights that are protected by international instruments. These include:**

- The right to bodily autonomy
- Reproductive rights
- The right to be free from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment
- The right to life (of the pregnant person, not the foetus)
- The right to health
- The right to privacy
- The right Liberty and security of the person
- The right to equality and non discrimination

- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#)
- [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#)
- [Convention of the Rights of the Child](#) (in the case where someone under 18 is pregnant and may want to seek an abortion)
- [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

Because access to abortion is something that is covered by more than one human right, it can be difficult to pick one or two paragraphs within these mechanisms for you to utilise. Instead, we recommend you scan documents you think may be relevant to your situation and pick out the rights that you feel best fit your situation.

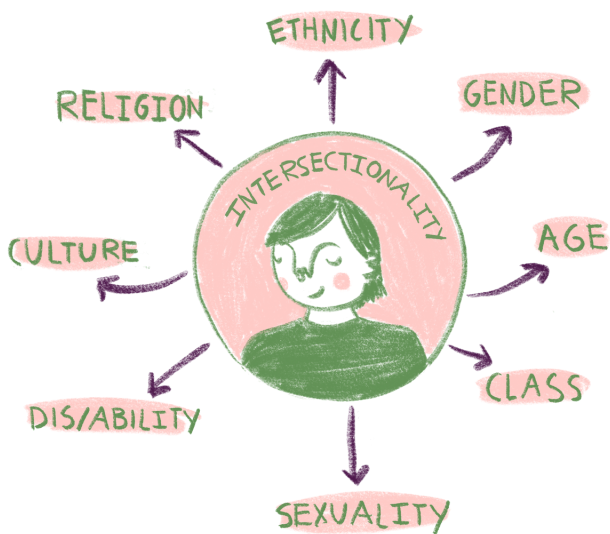
The core argument remains that denying access to safe abortion services clearly violates the rights of people who are pregnant. While it may not be explicitly enshrined as a human right, the argument is still a valid one and can be a powerful base from which to advocate.

# HOW DO I ADVOCATE FOR ABORTION RIGHTS WITH AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE APPROACH?<sup>[3]</sup>

## What is an anti-oppressive approach?

An anti-oppressive approach to advocacy recognises the history of legislation, policies, and social and economic structures targeting people who can get pregnant in an attempt to control, disenfranchise, displace, disempower, and assimilate their bodies, value systems, and communities into what are generally cisheteronormative, racist, ableist and patriarchal systems. It is also an approach that is rights-based, acknowledges intersectionality, led by communities, and respectful of all people.

An anti-oppressive approach examines all messaging and demands from a lens that interrogates **how these demands have been influenced by the factors mentioned above and working with affected communities to ensure that the demands we make when advocating for abortion rights are not influenced by the above factors**, and indeed work to mitigate and abolish the impact that these factors have on communities.



An anti-oppressive approach should also not stigmatise abortion any further than it already is, and work to eliminate abortion stigma. An anti-oppressive approach centres the right to choice as a paramount right for all people who can get pregnant and ensure that in our advocacy we are not, wittingly or unwittingly, putting any restrictions on people's ability to access abortion based on gender, class, race, migration status, dis/ability, cost or any other individual's identifiable trait(s). For examples of anti-oppressive approaches, you can check out our guide on trans and NB-friendly advocacy [here](#), and the Nairobi Principles developed by CREA [here](#).

[3] This section was created through a participatory and consultative process, including a global survey and focus group discussions to ensure an anti-oppressive approach.



## Implementing an anti-oppressive approach

In order to implement an anti-oppressive abortion advocacy campaign, it is key that you **ensure diverse representation with your organisation and campaign**. This should not be confused with tokenism; ensuring diversity in your leadership, paying diverse people and putting power in the hands of those most impacted by restrictive abortion laws is one of the most important aspects of implementing an anti-oppressive approach. Sometimes, this may mean you taking a backseat during conversations and campaigns and amplifying the voices of others. This may also mean you turning down some opportunities and offering to find a replacement participant or candidate in order to ensure true diversity and representation.

When possible, recognizing that youth-led orgs have limited access to resources, you should also ensure that you are paying people for their contributions to campaigns, in particular marginalized populations and young people.

## Effective Advocacy

Advocacy is not one size fits all, and it can take different forms, from a phone call to a politician, writing an article, a twitterstorm, or a protest in the street. Think about what tactic you feel most comfortable with and then go for it!

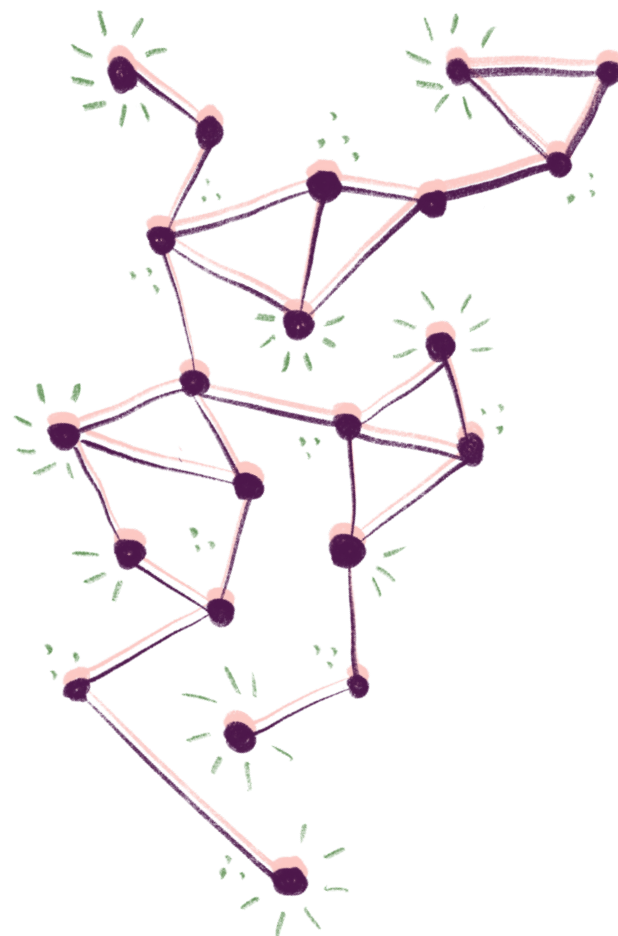


### Here are some tips for doing advocacy at an international conference:

- Find out who is the government official leading your country's delegation in that conference and write them a letter demanding that they send the highest level of representative on the Official Country Delegation alongside key populations' representation. Offer to meet with them and offer your support in the negotiations.
- Work with advocates and community-led organisations to develop a position paper or document that you can use to influence the government's negotiating position.
- Engage in global advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of issues and civil society's collective voice by using social media & hashtags.
- Reach out to the local media and have them cover the conference and what's happening. Be their inside person and help shape the story.

Some of the organizations that you can **connect with before or during international conferences** to align strategies on how to demand progressive language on abortion rights are:

- **Safe Abortion Action Fund (SAAF):** This is the only global fund focused exclusively on women's rights to safe and legal abortion. You can look for them, or for their grantees as strategic partners on these conversations.
- **Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (YCSRR):** You can always count on us to advocate for inclusive and progressive language regarding abortion rights.
- **International Planned Parenthood Federation** has global, regional, and local branches that you could connect with for support



## Regional and global mechanisms

You may be able to highlight the issues in your country at the regional and global level. Be aware that getting abortion rights recognised on these platforms is both a long and expensive process, but can help build international pressure on your country. As a youth-led organisation, **it may be worth exploring the possibility of doing this with larger national and regional civil society and abortion advocacy partners.**

### Some regional and global human rights defense platforms include:

- [The European Court of Human Rights \(Council of Europe\)](#)
- [The African Commission on Human and People's Rights](#)
- [Inter-American Court of Human Rights \(Organization of American States\)](#)
- United Nations Human Rights Council and the Universal Periodic Review process
  - [Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council](#)
- [UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights Treaty Monitoring Bodies](#)

There is no regional human rights court or mechanism in Asia or Oceania. Also, keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list of all human rights platforms that you can approach in your advocacy: you can find out more about regional and global mechanisms as well as some relevant case studies in our legal standards toolkit [here](#).





# HOW DO I DEAL WITH COMMON OPPOSITION ARGUMENTS, POSITIONS, FALLACIES, AND STIGMA RELATED TO ABORTION?

As a young advocate for abortion you will come across much opposition and stigma to your work.

## Such arguments may include:

- “Pro-life” (anti-choice) arguments - people who argue that an embryo or a foetus has the same right to life as the pregnant person
- Legalisation will lead to the use of abortion as a contraceptive (this is called a “slippery-slope” fallacy and identifying these arguments will make them easier to counter)
- If you are a person without a uterus, you may be told that it is not your place to advocate for abortion or even to have an opinion on abortion

There are eight (8) logical fallacies that are commonly used dishonestly to undermine pro-choice advocacy. You can find a list of them, how to spot them, and counter points [here](#). We have also created a list of common anti-choice arguments and youth-friendly pro-choice responses which you can find [here](#).

Rights-based approaches can offer you a way of tackling this issue through a tried-and-true method. Using other countries as well as human rights treaties and resolutions can be a powerful tool to demonstrate the moral basis for your argument, however you should also be prepared to deal with counter arguments such as:

- **“Other countries are not the same as us, their example does not count”**
- **“INGOs should not be getting involved in our national issues”**
- **“External groups are trying to influence us to change, we should resist external pressure”**
- **“You don’t know the reality of it, you’re too young to know”**

## The three targets of abortion advocacy

During your advocacy you will probably come across three types of people:

- People who are pro-choice (on your side)
- People who are on the fence (the “moveable middle”)
- People who are anti-choice

It is important to **focus your advocacy on where it will have the most impact**. Often this means that you should ignore the last group, and **focus your advocacy on those who are on the fence**; this is the group most likely to change their mind on abortion and to push for the legal framework needed for free, safe, and legal abortion.

Advocacy with this group should not just include raw data and facts, but should attempt to humanise the topic. For example, asking the person to reflect or to think about if they or their loved one was in a situation where they needed an abortion what would they do?

Make sure you tailor your arguments to your audience without being disingenuous to your targets and cause, and staying true to an anti-oppressive approach.



## How do I deal with the stigma of being an abortion rights activist?

Despite having many international human rights mechanisms, bodies, and other institutions behind us, advocating for abortion, particularly in certain settings, can bring stigma for a lot of us.

It is important to recognise that you are not the only one out there working on this issue. **Seek out other organisations or like-minded people to support you with your advocacy.** Peer support is key.



Make sure you **take breaks** from your advocacy. As young people we know it can be difficult to switch-off from this issue, but **it is important to ensure that you look after yourself** as this is a long-term commitment.

If you ever feel unsafe or if there is a threat to your safety, take whatever precautions you must to safeguard your security. **Do not feel guilty about putting your safety and wellbeing first.** Your personal wellbeing and mental health always go first, **self-care is a very important aspect of your advocacy!**





We have some tips for staying safe online as an advocate, recommended by our members. These include:

- Keep personal social media profiles separate from ones you use for advocacy
- Have your social media accounts set so that you can vet accounts before they follow/message you
- You may want to not use photos of yourself on some accounts - it is perfectly okay to use some artwork or generic stock photos if it helps you stay safer!

## How do I deal with stigma relating to abortion?

Abortion stigma is a very difficult obstacle to tackle. In particular, stigma exists for people who accessed more than one abortion. Some people might believe that accessing abortion services once can be seen as “forgiveable” as the person has made a “mistake”, but more than once and the person is just being “careless”. This of course is not true, and the right to safe abortion applies to everyone equally, no matter how many times someone may wish to access services.

Abortions are a safe and common medical procedure, and when advocating should be framed as such. This helps reduce the shame around it. Never accept the argument that there must be a reason for someone to have an abortion or that there is an acceptable or valid number of abortion per person and above that is unacceptable; the core advocacy argument is that it is a right that people must be able to access whenever they so choose to.

**Tip:** Use the plural “**abortions**” in your advocacy and messaging to help **reduce the stigma around this.**

INSTEAD OF SAYING...

“people should be able to have an abortion no matter the reason”

TRY SAYING...

“people should be able to have abortions no matter what”

# NEXT STEPS

We hope that you have found some of the information in this guide helpful. This guide is not intended to be an exhaustive list of things required for anti-oppressive abortion advocacy, but a starting point for your campaigns that you can tailor to your national setting. Remember, there is an entire international community supporting you and your work; abortion advocacy is a worthy cause and one that we will keep fighting for together.



## Acknowledgements

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