

October 14, 2021

An Open Letter to Public Officials and Policy Makers:

As organizations advocating for reproductive health, rights, and justice, we urgently call on public officials and policy makers to use the word abortion. Abortion stigma—defined as associating a “negative attribute” towards people who provide, have had, or are seeking abortions—has facilitated the passage of radical laws like Texas SB 8, which bans abortion at approximately six weeks of pregnancy and has forced nearly all abortion services to an abrupt stop across the state. Failing to explicitly use the term abortion and reinforcing negative messages about self-managed or non-clinical abortion contributes to abortion stigma. It is more dire than ever that policy makers act now to protect access to care and make all possible efforts to break down abortion stigma, including using the term abortion.

Abortion is health care. Access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including access to abortion care, is essential to gender equity and equality. Abortion restrictions rely on and reinforce harmful stereotypes about gender roles and women’s decision-making instead of offering support, undermining their ability to control their own lives and well-being. When someone makes the decision to have an abortion, they should be able to access the care they need with respect and dignity, free from burdens, barriers, and stigma.

Even though abortion is common and a normal part of reproductive health experiences, with one in four women in the U.S. having an abortion in her lifetime, there remains considerable stigma about abortion. Consequently, public officials will sometimes refer to abortion as “women’s health” and the legal framework around abortion rights as “the right to choose”, “pro-choice” or “protecting *Roe v. Wade*.” Avoiding the word “abortion” reinforces abortion stigma and the notion that abortion is morally wrong, allowing opponents of abortion to define the moral narrative surrounding it.

Abortion stigma is central to the anti-abortion movement, which wields stigma as a deliberate tactic to erode public support for abortion, disparage health care providers who perform abortions, and shame and isolate patients who have received this type of health care. It has allowed dangerous misinformation about abortion to spread and facilitated passage of hundreds of abortion restrictions in the last decade, including restrictions on medication abortion and telemedicine access, which are not medically- or evidence-based.

Similarly, broadly casting any method of abortion outside of the clinical setting as “dangerous” or “unsafe” is outdated and contributes to abortion stigma. While pregnant people may have sought abortion through unsafe, invasive means when no other legal and safe options have been accessible to them, medication abortion *now* provides a safe and effective alternative method—though of course, all pregnant people should have access to a health care provider when seeking an abortion if they desire. Researchers have attributed self-managed abortion with pills to a worldwide decrease in abortion mortality. Based on existing evidence, the World Health Organization recommends medication abortion as a safe and effective method of ending a

pregnancy, including when self-managed within the recommended parameters (e.g. for people who are less than 12 weeks pregnant).

Also, because abortion is regulated in the criminal code of many states, language characterizing self-managed abortion as “clandestine” and “unsafe” can provide support to the criminalization of people who self-manage their abortion and the people who help them. Even though abortion is legal in all 50 states, we have seen examples of the investigation, arrest, and prosecution of pregnant people and those who support them.

The impact of abortion restrictions and criminalization falls most heavily on people who are living on low incomes, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, immigrants, young people, people with disabilities, queer and transgender people, and those living in rural and other medically-underserved areas—communities that already experience health disparities due to social, political, and environmental inequities, all of which are further exacerbated by restrictions on abortion.

It is imperative that public officials and policy makers help to dismantle stigma and express support for people who have abortions in the language they use and the policies they introduce. Accordingly, public officials and policy makers should explicitly use the word abortion and communicate that:

- abortion is essential health care;
- abortion is part of the full range of reproductive health services and should not be singled out for burdens; and
- access to abortion is a human right.

Sincerely,

Center for Reproductive Rights

We Testify

A Woman's Choice of Charlotte; A Woman's Choice of Greensboro; A Woman's Choice of Raleigh; A Woman's Choice of Jacksonville

Abortion Access Front

Abortion Care Network

Abortion Conversation Projects, Inc

Abortion on Demand

2+ Abortions Worldwide

Advocates for Youth

All* Above All Action Fund

American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union
American Humanist Association
American Jewish World Service
American Medical Student Association
Blue Mountain Clinic
Broward for Progress
Catholics for Choice
Cedar River Clinics
Center for Biological Diversity
Chico Feminist Women's Health Center
CHOICES Memphis Center for Reproductive Health
Choix Health
Circle of Hope Health Care Services, Inc.
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Cobalt
Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR) and COLOR Action Fund
Downtown Women for Change
EMAA Project
Equality California
Families USA
Feminist Majority Foundation
Feminist Women's Health Center
Forward Midwifery, Nursing, and Reproductive Health
Freedom From Religion Foundation
Full Circle Health Center
Global Justice Center
Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights (GRR!)

Guttmacher Institute

Healthy Teen Network

Heartland Alliance International

Hey Jane

Hope Clinic for Women

Ibis Reproductive Health

If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice

In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda

International Planned Parenthood Federation Western Hemisphere Region (IPPFWHR)

Ipas

Jacobs Institute of Women's Health

Just The Pill

Keep Abortion Safe

Kentucky Health Justice Network

Mabel Wadsworth Center

Management Sciences for Health

Medical Students for Choice

Midwest Access Coalition

Midwest Access Project

Minority Veterans of America

MomsRising Together

MSI United States

NARAL Pro-Choice America

NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland

NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina

National Abortion Federation

National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum

National Birth Equity Collaborative

National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Jewish Women
National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association
National Health Law Program
National Institute for Reproductive Health
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice
National Network of Abortion Funds
National Organization for Women-Louisiana Chapter
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Women's Law Center
Nebraska Abortion Resources
New Orleans Abortion Fund (NOAF)
Nightingale Medical
Northland Family Planning Centers
Not Without Black Women
NOW Baton Rouge
Nurses For Sexual and Reproductive Health
Oklahoma Call for Reproductive Justice
PAI
Physicians for Reproductive Health
Plan C
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Population Institute
Positive Women's Network-USA
Power to Decide
ProgressNow Colorado
Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need
Reclaim MI Win Fund

Reproaction

Reproductive Health Access Project

Reproductive Rights Coalition

Robbinsdale Clinic, PA

Shout Your Abortion

SisterSong: Women of Color Collective

Society for Humanistic Judaism

Southern Tier Women's Health Services, LLC

SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, Inc.

Stigma Relief Fund

Tampa Bay Access Force

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

The National Medical Association

The National Women's Health Network

The Womxn Project

UCSF Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health

UltraViolet

URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity

WCLA - Choice Matters

We Engage

West Alabama Women's Center, Inc

Whole Woman's Health

Whole Woman's Health Alliance

Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project (WRRAP)