

OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE AND ABORTION

Ideas on self-defense for
people having abortions



women help women

Women Help Women is an international feminist organization that works to ensure access to safe abortions and reliable contraceptives, regardless of restrictive laws.

Our team of activists and trained counselors provides timely and concrete information and solutions to anyone needing access to reproductive health services.

We answer emails in seven languages and work in partnership with local groups to support and strengthen projects that support the right to abortion without conditions.

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Introduction to the English version

This booklet was created in 2017 in collaboration with feminist collectives in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the translation to English, we have tried to adapt the content for a wider global context. We have also tried to adjust our language to be more gender neutral.

At Women Help Women, we know that transsexual, transgender, intersex and gender non-binary people also experience pregnancy and need abortion care, and we work to ensure that our activism and services are gender-inclusive.

What is obstetric violence?

Obstetric violence is a specific type of gender-based violence. Like all forms of gender-based violence, obstetric violence originates in the social system that discriminates against and subordinates women, femininity and those who do not conform to gendered expectations. Obstetric violence is any psychological, physical or sexual mistreatment or aggression that occurs during healthcare provision in pregnancy, childbirth or abortion.

Obstetric violence violates our fundamental rights as women and pregnant people. It has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a public health and human rights issue⁽¹⁾, and is penalized in several countries around the world. In Latin America, only Venezuela, Argentina and Mexico have laws that specifically penalize this type of violence.

Obstetric violence has been defined as “the set of practices that degrade, intimidate and oppress women and girls in the field of reproductive health services”⁽²⁾, which includes “the appropriation of women’s bodies and reproductive processes by health workers” and is expressed in “dehumanizing treatment, in an abuse of medicalization and pathologizing natural processes, bringing with it a loss of autonomy and the ability to decide freely about their bodies and sexuality, negatively impacting the quality of life of women”⁽³⁾.

The most frequent expressions of obstetric violence are performance of non-consensual and/or non-medically indicated procedures, verbal abuse, physical abuse, delay or refusal of care, refusal to administer pain management medication, and the disregard for privacy^{(1),(4)}.

Abortion and obstetric violence

The term obstetric violence is generally associated with pregnancy and childbirth. This has led to the invisibility of obstetric violence in abortion-related care. While experiences of mistreatment and dehumanization during pregnancy and childbirth care are very common and are a serious violation of our rights, it is important to recognize that obstetric violence also occurs during abortion care.

In addition, during abortion care, obstetric violence is often compounded by cultural beliefs and stereotypes about people who have abortions. It is also compounded by the stigma associated with abortion in general, with the self-management of medical abortion in particular, and with clandestine practice in countries where abortion is legally restricted.

In many countries around the world, people who seek medical care for follow-up during an abortion or a miscarriage, for the induction of a legal abortion (in cases that are permitted by law), or because of an obstetric emergency during a self-managed abortion are mistreated by health workers. The most common forms of obstetric violence during abortion care include giving out false information about abortion (e.g. overestimating the risks of abortion, especially self-managed abortion, or saying that they would know if the pregnant person took abortion pills), threatening to report the abortion to the police, denying or delaying care for a legal abortion or medical emergency, inserting or implanting contraceptive devices without consent, performing procedures that are not medically necessary and/or delaying or denying proper pain management (e.g. performing unnecessary curettage and not using anesthesia)⁽¹⁾.

What is self-defense?

The idea of defending ourselves against the injustices and violence that we experience in different places and moments of our lives has been key to the organization and emancipation of women and gender non-conforming people. We have a long history of organizing to stop violence, to defend ourselves, to fight oppression and repressive laws. Self-defense is a response to an aggression and helps to protect our physical and mental integrity.

Defending ourselves against aggressions, regardless of where and when they occur, is an act of self-protection and self-care.

To be able to defend yourself in a situation of obstetric violence, you need to:

Recognize the fear and learn how to deal with it⁽⁵⁾: Many times, the fear of an unknown situation can paralyze us, and can lead us to impulsive behaviors or irrational decisions. Recognizing that we are afraid, analyzing the situation that causes us fear, and planning possible responses helps us to learn how to manage the fear.

Inform yourself: Understanding the abortion process and the situation you will find yourself in, knowing what your rights are, what resources you have and what can you do in each possible situation helps you be more confident and defend yourself better.

Be prepared: Think about the possible situations of aggression or violence you may encounter. Planning and rehearsing different responses to each possibility helps to know what the best response is for you in the face of an aggression.

Search for solidarity: Having company and support always makes it easier to defend ourselves. Find people who understand you and can support you, ask them to be with you during the situation that causes you fear, and ask them also to be informed and to prepare themselves. Discuss ahead of time about possible responses to different situations, and how you would like them to support you.

What should I know about medical abortion to defend myself against obstetric violence?

- Abortion is a common event. Worldwide, 1 in 4 pregnancies end in induced abortion⁽⁶⁾ and 15-20% of pregnancies end in miscarriage⁽⁷⁾.
- A medical abortion is similar to a miscarriage.
- The symptoms and treatments for the complications of a miscarriage are the same as those for a medical abortion. Health workers cannot tell the difference unless they find remains of the pills inside the vagina or unless the pregnant person admits to having used the pills.
- Regular hospitals and health centers do not have the resources to test for misoprostol in the blood or urine⁽⁸⁾.
- Medical abortion is a safe and effective process and there is scientific evidence that it can be self-managed^(9,10).
- A safe abortion is always less risky than carrying a pregnancy to term and giving birth.
- WHO recommends against sharp curettage as a method to perform or complete an abortion. Recommended methods are vacuum aspiration and the use of medication (misoprostol alone or in combination with mifepristone)⁽⁷⁾.
- Most incomplete abortions can be treated with misoprostol. In many cases, the process can be expected to end on its own, without the need for medical intervention and as long as the pregnant person has no discomfort or symptoms of complications⁽¹¹⁾.
- The choice about when to start using birth control after an abortion is yours alone. For more information about abortion and contraception, [click here](#).

How can I defend myself against obstetric violence if I seek medical care during an abortion?

If during the abortion process you have symptoms of possible complications (to find out what the signs of complications are, [click here](#)), you need to seek medical attention immediately. Some people may also want to go to the hospital to confirm that the pregnancy is no longer continuing and/or to make sure everything is okay. If for any reason you need or want to go to the hospital, remember:

- Use the pills buccally or sublingually, never vaginally. Remains of pills used vaginally can be found several days after use. Pills used orally or sublingually leave no trace. If you have already used the pills vaginally, you can use your fingers to remove the remains of the pills before going to the hospital.
- Have someone with you and make sure they are informed about what will happen.
- You do not need to say that you used abortion pills. A medical abortion is similar to a miscarriage and should be treated in the same way by health workers.
- You have the right to receive treatment in case of medical emergency and to be respected during the process.
- Health workers must respect your privacy and confidentiality, regardless of the reason you are receiving care.
- You have the right to be informed about all medical procedures that will be performed while you are in the hospital. Ask!

What are my rights when I go to the hospital because of an obstetric emergency?

Everyone has the right to life, health, physical integrity and non-discrimination. In addition, during medical treatment, all people have the right to:

- Respect for confidentiality and privacy. No one should share information about your health condition without your consent.
- Receive proper treatment, according to the latest scientific evidence.
- Be treated with respect.
- Make decisions about the treatment, reject any treatment you don't agree with and leave if you are not satisfied with the treatment and/or attention you receive (you can ask for voluntary discharge).

What do I do if I know or suspect that I have experienced obstetric violence?

If you think you have experienced obstetric violence, you are probably not the only one who has been abused at the place where you were treated. First, it is important to be aware that what happened to you is unfair and a violation of your rights. Try not feel guilty or think you could have done things differently. You actually had the right to be treated better.

There are several things you can do after experiencing obstetric violence:

- Talk to someone you trust so that you don't feel isolated in this situation.
- Write down in detail everything that happened during the event, including your perceptions and what you felt at different times, in case you want to report it later.
- Report: Figure out where to present a complaint or report. You can ask for advice from organizations that work on gender-based violence or access to health about where to do this.
- Organize yourself: Find others who have experienced the same thing. Contact organizations that work against obstetric violence and make your case visible. You are important to prevent what happened to you from happening to others.

Information about abortion

If you need to access abortion pills or information on how to use them, visit our website www.womenhelp.org or write to us at info@womenhelp.org. We will get back to you as soon as possible.

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