

REPORT OF THE 2-DAY INCEPTION MEETING: "A SUPPORTIVE LAW AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT FOR SAFE ABORTION"

ORGANIZED BY: SGBV JUSTICE NETWORK (SJN)

VENUE: AMBER RESIDENCE HOTEL, 16 ESUGBAYI STREET, IKEJA GRA, LAGOS, NIGERIA

DATE: OCTOBER 30TH - 31ST, 2024

Introduction

The two-day inception meeting aimed to kickstart the project, "A Supportive Law and Policy Environment for Safe Abortion," by bringing together key stakeholders from the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) sector across Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, and Osun states. The primary objectives included aligning the understanding of the project's goals among partners, discussing implementation strategies, and identifying specific state-level gaps in safe abortion guidelines. The meeting also explored steps towards reinstating the Lagos State policy, reviewing the state Safe Termination of Pregnancy (STOP) guidelines, leveraging the WHO guidelines, and planning advocacy efforts.

Meeting Objectives

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Define the project goals, objectives, and develop a work plan with coalition partners.
- Review the existing STOP guidelines in the project states, identify gaps, and strategize for advocacy efforts in line with WHO standards.
- Develop advocacy briefs targeting key stakeholders, including policymakers, parliamentarians, and health workers.

The agenda included detailed project unpacking sessions, interactive technical discussions, action planning, and outlining the next steps.

Meeting Highlights

The meeting began with participant introductions and a national prayer, followed by a welcome address by Mrs. Eni Ayeni, the Southwest Zonal Coordinator. She recognized the sensitivity of abortion issues in the region and highlighted the due diligence required in selecting partners capable of engaging in such a sensitive space. She expressed her excitement to see partners attend the meeting and was

optimistic that partners seemed fully ready to have a meaningful deliberation toward kick-starting the project. She wished everyone a fruitful conversation.

Project Introduction

Jerome, Uneje - SJN National Coordinator, outlined the project objectives, focusing on creating a *supportive legal environment for safe abortion in line* with World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines. She also highlighted activities that will be conducted during the project lifespan. Questions and discussions addressed the monitoring of community outreach programs, emphasizing the need for partners to engage with CSOs, CBOs, and other stakeholders to effectively advocate for the comprehensive reproductive rights of women and girls in Western Nigeria.

Technical Session on Reproductive Rights and WHO Guidelines: Building on the discussion, Ifechi Aleke, Legal Officer with Lawyers Alert (LA), facilitated a session on reproductive rights and WHO guidelines, highlighting international standards and best practices. This session was interactive, with participants actively engaging in discussions about the practical implications of WHO recommendations on local contexts.

State-Specific Reviews of STOP Guidelines

Each state partner presented a situational analysis of the existing STOP guidelines:

- Osun State: Strict legal restrictions and lack of comprehensive contraceptive access.
- Ogun State: High stigma, inadequate training for healthcare providers, and insufficient data collection.
- Oyo State: Absence of STOP guidelines, with a plan to adopt a model based on WHO recommendations.
- Lagos State: The suspension of STOP guidelines due to sociocultural pressures and ongoing advocacy for reinstatement.

The most significant finding was the non-existence of specific STOP guidelines in Oyo State, which was previously assumed to be covered under the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Law (VAPPL).

Participants discussed the need to harmonize these guidelines across states to ensure consistent implementation and improve access to safe abortion services.

Feedback and Learning Points

The partners underscored the importance of capacity building, awareness creation, and stronger advocacy efforts to address stigma and legal barriers. Participants expressed concerns about the sociocultural and religious resistance to safe abortion practices, emphasizing the need for a tailored approach in each state.

Development of Work Plan and Next Steps

Participants developed state-specific work plans focusing on mitigating identified gaps. They prioritized advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and incorporating WHO recommendations to expand women's comprehensive reproductive health rights into the state's STOP guidelines.

Day 2 Activities

The second day began with a recap of the previous discussions. A notable takeaway was the need to strategically limit media engagement on abortion-related issues while intensifying efforts to raise awareness about women's comprehensive reproductive health rights.

Validation of STOP Guidelines

Facilitators reviewed the identified gaps and WHO recommendations, and partners agreed to begin advocacy by incorporating provisions for rape, incest, and fetal abnormalities into the guidelines.

Advocacy Policy Briefs Development

Participants developed advocacy policy briefs, identifying key messages and stakeholders for effective dissemination. The session emphasized building strategic partnerships and mapping potential allies and opponents for the advocacy efforts.

Learning Points from the Meeting: Recommendations

- **Media engagement:** Media utilization for awareness was discussed, with partners agreeing to collaborate with experienced organizations for strategic communication.
- **Awareness creation:** The importance of addressing sociocultural norms and stigma surrounding abortion was emphasized as crucial for acceptance within communities. Therefore, it was agreed that advocacy engagement issues would be tailored around mental health and physical care for the women to gain community support and acceptance.

- **Empathy and Human Rights Perspective:** Stories shared by participants highlighted the need to view women's reproductive health rights through a human rights lens.

Next Steps and Action Points

- **Development of MoUs and Terms of Reference:** Establish collaboration frameworks with Local Resource Partners.
- **Stakeholder Mapping:** Identify key players and allies for effective advocacy.
- **Harmonization of State Work Plans:** Align activities across states for uniform implementation of STOP guidelines.
- **Accountability Measures:** Assign specific roles and set deadlines to ensure timely action.

Conclusion and Closing Remarks

The inception meeting successfully set the footing for project implementation, establishing a shared understanding among partners. In identifying critical gaps and devising a roadmap for addressing challenges, the team designed a strong basis for advocating for a supportive law and policy environment for safe abortion in Nigeria. The meeting marked the beginning of a coordinated effort to improve access to safe abortion services and reduce maternal mortality through enhanced legal and policy frameworks.

The meeting finally concluded with a vote of thanks from Jerome Uneje, who appreciated the dedication and active participation of partners. She emphasized the importance of continued collaboration as the project progresses.

Experience Sharing

- **Minimal utilization of media and publicity around issues of abortion:** An AmplifyChange Coalition Partner in Ogun working as a grantee under this project informed the house that publications in newspapers and social media have dragged the Director of the Ministry of Health, Ogun State who attended and made a commitment at the recently concluded SRHR Summit 1.0 in Abuja. Nonetheless, partners unanimously agreed to be guided by working with organizations that have been creating and publicizing issues of abortion, particularly Media and Health Rights (MHR), the SRHR focal person for the Punch newspaper, etc.
- This issue was extensively discussed regarding the milestone tasks on "launch campaigns using radio and social media to raise awareness and distribute posters.

- Awareness creation on the importance of women's comprehensive reproductive health rights resonated from an experience that was shared: This experience was shared by a Partner from Oyo, a Counsellor. She counsels women and girls on marriage and marital issues. She said she discovered that most times, some women don't rest easy because of guilt and condemnation owing to their values and beliefs, including the stigma surrounding the issue of abortion. Once a woman or girl procures an abortion, they begin to feel terrible as though they have committed murder in the real sense of it. Therefore, unless citizens begin to see it as an issue of mental health and physical care for the woman, there can be no acceptance within the community.
- Additionally, a partner from Lagos State, who works on issues of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, shared her first-hand experience working with survivors (women and girls) who have been raped or sexually assaulted. She related a story of a girl who was impregnated by her brother (incest), and the family decided to kill both siblings, however, an organization in Oyo State intervened by rescuing the girl and moving her to Lagos. While in Lagos, her parents were still in contact with the organization and refused to condone any form of abortion-related option. The girl was allowed to deliver the child but had to give up the child at the orphanage, and as of today, the child is 2 years old. She would call often to check in on the child, inasmuch as the pregnancy was unwanted, the connection or bond between a mother and a child has made her forget the painful part that the child is a product of incest. These stories elicited empathy from almost every participant and made them see the issue of women's reproductive health rights through the lens of human rights.

Pictures from the meetings:



Fig. 1: Photo - Mr. Olufemi Olusola, during the presentation of the States' STOP guidelines overview, identified



Fig. 2: Photos from Group work, participants developing state-specific work plan



Fig. 3: Photo from Group Presentation – a participant from Oyo during the presentation of work plan by participants.



Fig. 4: Photo - Mr. Olufemi Olusola, capturing the agreed points to expand the States' STOP guidelines, leveraging the WHO guidelines during the validation session.



Fig. 5: Photos from Group Work on policy brief/advocacy messaging targeting stakeholders/policymakers



Fig. 6: Group Photos of participants