

# **Report of the Stakeholder Dialogue on Women's Comprehensive Reproductive Health and Rights**

**Venue: Presken Hotel & Resorts, 16 Mojidi, Toyin Street, Lagos State**

**Date: 3rd February 2025**

## **Introduction**

On February 3, 2025, the SGBV Justice Network (SJN) organized a one-day stakeholder dialogue in Lagos State to facilitate discussions on Women's Comprehensive Reproductive Health and Rights. The dialogue focused on the need to expand the legal indications for safe termination of pregnancy, as outlined in the South-West States Safe Termination of Pregnancy (STOP) Guidelines.

The dialogue convened key stakeholders from the State Ministries of Health, Education and Women's Affairs, the Primary Healthcare Development Board, the Ogun State Advocacy Technical Working Group, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The primary aim was to examine the critical gaps and contributors to Nigeria's high maternal mortality and morbidity rates, particularly in the western states.

This dialogue aligned with the SJN project, supported by AmplifyChange under the initiative "A Supportive Law and Policy Environment for Safe Abortion in Western Nigeria." Participants were presented with findings from a recent review of the STOP guidelines in the project states.

## **The Dialogue Highlights:**

### **Opening Remarks**

Jerome Uneje welcomed participants and highlighted the objectives and overview of the dialogue. She emphasized that unsafe abortions significantly contribute to Nigeria's high maternal mortality rates due to restrictive laws and policies, including limitations in the existing Safe Termination of Pregnancy (STOP) guidelines. She urged stakeholders to consider the plight of women and girls at risk and to align state guidelines with international standards.

### **Keynote Address**

Mrs. Balogun Oluwakemi O., Chairperson of the Ogun State Advocacy Technical Working Group, delivered a keynote address. She underscored the profound significance of the discussions, which go beyond policy to touch on human dignity, gender equality, and social justice. She highlighted Ogun State's efforts in

developing the STOP guidelines and encouraged other states to take similar steps. She further stated that the Ogun State government, in a bid to address the high maternal mortality rates resulting from unsafe abortions due to restrictive laws and policies, is amending its criminal law to reduce the sentences under the section of the Ogun State Criminal Code relating to abortion and miscarriages.

### **Situational Analysis of STOP Guidelines**

Jerome Uneje presented findings from the situational analysis of the project locations, identifying gaps and challenges in the implementation of STOP guidelines across states. This prompted responses in the form of clarifications, comments, and contributions.

#### **Osun State Perspective:**

According to the Osun State Family Planning Coordinator (FPC) and State Ministry of Health (SMoH) personnel, women seeking services receive appropriate care, including abortion services. She said post-abortion services, patients are counseled on family planning options to prevent future unintended pregnancies and save them from subsequent attempts on abortion. She further stated that to strengthen the capacity of the workforce to deliver quality services, Osun State trained over 75 medical personnel on the provisions of the STOP guidelines. Additionally, there has been continuous grassroots awareness creation of the STOP guidelines and Family Planning, and data are being collected and documented at that level.

#### **Lagos State Perspective:**

A Lagos State Ministry of Health (LSMoH) participant stated that public hospitals do not provide abortion services. Instead, pregnant adolescents are enrolled in the "Young Mom Clinic," where they receive antenatal care and social health insurance support until childbirth. Notably, several former beneficiaries of the clinic post those sessions have gone on to pursue successful careers, including medicine.

#### **Oyo State Perspective:**

Dr. Olatunji, Executive Secretary of the Oyo State Primary Healthcare Development Board, reviewed the existing Safe Termination of Pregnancy (STOP) Guidelines of Osun State and noted that the guidelines are not exhaustive, as the

legal indications contained in them are what health practitioners, especially medical doctors, already follow in their day-to-day practice without recourse to the guidelines. He highlighted that while some doctors may perform these services discreetly, many would refuse due to personal beliefs, particularly for pregnancies beyond 28 weeks.

## **International Standards and Legal Framework**

Ifechi Aleke of Lawyers Alert delivered an in-depth presentation on WHO guidelines for abortion care. She emphasized that restrictive laws and policies exacerbate unsafe abortions and maternal mortality. The WHO recommends that abortion laws be liberalized to allow women to make informed reproductive choices.

Despite this, stakeholders from all project states largely opposed direct advocacy for abortion liberalization due to sociocultural sensitivities. Instead, they recommended a shift in advocacy language to focus on "Motherhood Care" and "Expanding the Scope of Medical Indications for Safe Termination of Pregnancy."

## **Key Recommendations**

To address the gaps identified in STOP guidelines, stakeholders outlined the following key mechanisms:

- ***Reframing the Advocacy Narrative***
  - Shift focus from "safe abortion" to "Motherhood Care" and "Expanding the Scope of Medical Indications for Safe Termination of Pregnancy" to align with state contexts.
- ***Leveraging Legal Grounds***
  - Utilize provisions for rape, incest, fetal anomalies, and sexual and gender-based violence as entry points for policy discussions.
- ***Grassroots Awareness Campaigns***
  - Educate communities on the dangers of unsafe abortions, health implications, and legal indications for safe termination.
- ***Capacity Strengthening for Key Stakeholders***
  - Train community members, traditional leaders, and religious leaders to challenge legal and sociocultural barriers.

- ***Enhanced Data Collection for Evidence-Based Advocacy***
  - Strengthen data collection mechanisms to support advocacy efforts.

### **Action Planning and State-Level Commitments**

Participants committed to collaborative advocacy, each identifying specific actions:

#### ***Ogun State:***

- Conduct stakeholder mapping and analysis to ensure advocacy efforts target key decision-makers.
- Maintain advocacy engagements with the Ministry of Justice.

#### ***Lagos State:***

- Engage the Ministry of Justice and State Assembly Members.
- Adjust advocacy language to align with socio-political realities.
- Stay off media attention while progressing with stakeholder engagement.

#### ***Osun State:***

- Ensure that key stakeholders, including Dr. Mariam Ajakun (consultant on the STOP guidelines), are involved in advocacy efforts.
- Engage relevant stakeholders, including PHCB and SOGON.

#### ***Oyo State:***

- Expressed willingness to collaborate with CSOs and support advocacy efforts once engaged.
- Ready to develop a structured framework for STOP guidelines.

### **Commitments from Stakeholders**

***Osun - Committed to women's reproductive health and pledged collaboration with relevant stakeholders.***

***SOGON - expressed concerns about potential media backlash and recommended limited media engagement to avoid political repercussions. However, they remain actively involved in internal discussions, particularly by bypassing traditional bureaucratic channels and engaging directly with the Governor.***

***Ogun State - Advocacy visits will target key stakeholders. Ogun participants asserted that their state has fewer barriers to implementation but will continue to engage with the Ministry of Justice.***

**Lagos State-** Plans to refine the advocacy approach, secure necessary approvals, and drive legislative efforts.

**WARDC Lagos State** - secured permission to work on relevant guidelines and will advocate at multiple government levels. A petition requiring 5,000 signatures to support policy change is ongoing, with 3,000 signatures collected so far.

**Oyo State-** Lacking formal STOP guidelines, Oyo is committed to working with CSOs and developing STOP guidelines with appropriate advocacy narratives.

## Conclusion

The stakeholder dialogue provided a critical platform for discussing reproductive health policy reform in western Nigeria. The consensus to reframe advocacy language, leverage legal provisions, and engage key stakeholders strategically presents a pathway for advancing women's reproductive rights. Moving forward, sustained advocacy, strategic partnerships, and grassroots mobilization will be crucial to achieving policy changes that improve women's health outcomes in the region.

## Pictures from the meeting:



Fig. 1: Jerome Uneje, in a cross-section of participants at the Stakeholder Dialogue, speaking on the identified gaps in the States' STOP guidelines



Fig. 2: A photograph of participants during the Stakeholder Dialogue in Lagos on Women's Comprehensive Reproductive Health and Rights.



Fig. 3: Dr. M. B. Olaturunji, Executive Secretary of the Oyo State Primary Healthcare Board, shared his views on abortion and his understanding of the STOP guidelines.



Fig. 4: Abatan Olorade Margaret, Osun State FPC/SMoH, shared views on the State's intervention on abortion care and the STOP guidelines.



Fig. 5: Dr. Yeside Shobbamimu, Lagos SMoH, shared goodwill message from the Lagos State Ministry of Health.



Fig. 6: Balogun Oluwakemi, Chairperson, Ogun State Advocacy Technical Working Group, delivered a Keynote Address.



Fig. 7: Mary George, a representative of WARD, spoke on CSOs intervention in Lagos State towards reinstating Lagos Guidelines.



Fig. 9: Eni Ayeni of SJN, making contributions on the Osun STOP guidelines.



Fig. 10: A Group photograph of participants during the Stakeholder Dialogue in Lagos on Women's Comprehensive Reproductive Health and Rights.