

## Leading sexual and reproductive health organizations issue a call to action to step up protection for the rights of frontline workers

*FIGO, ICM, Ipas, IPPF, and MSI jointly mark World Health Workers Week by calling for more effective action to address harms done to those working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights*

**London, UK – April 5, 2022** — Today, the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM), the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO), IPAS Partners for Reproductive Justice (IPAS), the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and MSI Reproductive Choices (MSI) launched [\*“Defend the Frontline Defenders of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights”\*](#) - a joint initiative to strengthen protection of frontline sexual and reproductive health workers and advocates. The five global organizations called on the wider health sector and authorities around the world to step up efforts to ensure that all health workers and advocates are able to go about their daily work without stigma, fear, threat or intimidation.

Hostility directed against frontline healthcare workers and advocates reportedly occurs most often at the hands of patients and their families and visitors. Notably however, those working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) often face hostility also from their colleagues, institutions, local communities and public figures too.

The five organizations, global leaders in the field of SRHR, highlighted that in their experience, wherever stigma is associated with provision of, or advocacy for, services and information about, for example, safe abortion, contraception, HIV/AIDs, or LGBTQI+ persons, that stigma also attaches to the professionals concerned. The organizations stressed that, around the world, health workers and advocates face greater discrimination, harassment and, at times, even physical attack, in settings and contexts where laws, public policies, government leaders and other public authorities are hostile to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

As Dr. Jeanne Conry, President of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics, explained: *“It is unacceptable that those on the frontline providing essential sexual and reproductive health care are on the receiving end of discrimination and violence for simply doing their jobs. We all know colleagues who have battled with stigma, career blocking, physical attack and other forms of harassment, forfeiting their mental and physical health and wellbeing in the process. This cannot go on. Alongside our partners, the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) is determined to raise awareness of this issue, and commits to effecting change for our colleagues providing sexual and reproductive health services around the world.”*

Public debates about SRHR and associated health services are among the most ideologically charged. Narratives opposed to SRHR from political and community leaders, alongside regressive policies and laws, mean greater hostility directed against those who provide, protect and promote SRHR for us all. Facing discrimination, belittlement, harassment and even violence not only against themselves, but their places of work, and even their families, frontline SRHR workers and advocates, across the globe, must draw on their own reserves of courage, commitment and resilience just to continue their daily work.

Dr. Franka Cadée, President of the International Confederation of Midwives, said: *“ICM is in regular communication with many of its more than 140 midwives’ associations located in over 120 countries. We know that every day, midwives suffer from gender-based abuse and harassment on the job and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this type of discriminatory treatment in new ways. When midwives’ rights are abused or taken advantage of, women and girls everywhere suffer. Robust investments are needed in policies, pay and protections that allow midwives to perform their full scope of practice.”*

Designed to help strengthen support and protection for the human rights of those on the frontlines, providing and advocating for sexual and reproductive health services and the needed policy and legal reforms, this new joint initiative aims to:

- Establish better standards for workplace response to hostility against workers and advocates in recognition of their human rights to work without stigma, discrimination, threat, attack etc.;
- Initiate closer global monitoring of the incidence and prevalence of such threats and attacks;

and,

- Raise public awareness of the consequences of unchecked public hostility against SRHR for frontline workers and advocates

Dr. Anu Kumar, Ipas President and CEO, said: *"Around the world, abortion providers and advocates bring dedication, compassion and courage to their work--often in the face of harassment, stigma, and even violence. Just as sexual and reproductive health and rights are essential, the people who care for us are essential. Frontline SRHR defenders are our partners for reproductive justice, and at Ipas we are committed to ensuring their human rights are respected and protected."*

This new joint initiative - [\*"Defend the Frontline Defenders of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights"\*](#) - will also undertake ground-breaking research to establish better understanding of what public hostility to SRHR means for those on the frontlines. While there is anecdotal evidence across the sector, to date little data has been gathered on the extent of the hostility faced, and none on its direct causes and consequences. Nor has there been benchmarking against which to assess global trends over time.

Dr. Alvaro Bermejo, Director General of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, said: *"IPPF sexual and reproductive health service providers around the world are regularly subjected to threats and abuse as they tirelessly work to deliver life-saving services. This is an unacceptable situation that must stop. Anti-rights and anti-gender perpetrators should not prevent people from accessing essential care or from making decisions about their sexuality and reproduction. All human beings should enjoy bodily autonomy to the full. As a major service provider and leading advocate of SRHR with members in over 120 countries, IPPF joins this call to action and urges Governments to ensure the safety of all health care providers and advocates as human rights defenders, without harassment, discrimination and abuse"*

Frontline workers provide services essential for us all, explained the five organizations, recalling how vital health workers were shown to be throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Ensuring SRHR workers and advocates are safe, treated with respect, and are able to go about their work with dignity, means respecting their fundamental human rights, including their labour rights and their rights to redress when attacked. It also means challenging the impunity more often enjoyed by those who incite such attacks.

The five organizations issued a [Call To Action](#), published by BMJ Global Health, urging the wider health sector to join them in stepping up attention and focus on the dignity of their staff, particularly in circumstances and contexts of hostility to SRHR. It is past time for our sector to also tackle directly the impunity enjoyed by those who, through speech and action, fester hostility to SRHR and thus to frontline workers, the organizations said.

Kate Austen, MSI Reproductive Choices' Institutional Resilience Lead, said: *"At MSI, we are committed to expanding access to reproductive choice because we believe in every woman's right to make choices about her body and her life. This work is only possible because of the courage of our frontline healthcare workers who work tirelessly to protect sexual and reproductive rights despite facing daily harassment, stigma and abuse. It's time to say enough is enough. Alongside our partners, we pledge to do everything we can to step up, respect and protect the rights of our colleagues to work and advocate free from fear, threat, and intimidation."*

Further information can be obtained by contacting xxx

