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# SEEING THE UNSEEN

The case for action in the neglected crisis of unintended pregnancy

HIGHLIGHTS

**Half.**

**That's the share of pregnancies that women and girls do not deliberately choose.**

For these women, the most life-altering reproductive choice – whether to become pregnant or not – is no choice at all.

The State of World Population 2022 raises the uncomfortable question: *what does this say about our values, our priorities – our future?*

## **A CRISIS REVEALED**

An estimated 121 million pregnancies per year take place in the bodies of women who did not choose pregnancy or motherhood, who were not planning to have a child at that time, with that partner, in those circumstances.

This is an unseen crisis, invisible in part because it is so common – nearly everyone knows someone who has experienced an unintended pregnancy – and in part because it is widely stigmatized.

Yet it exacts an unbearable toll on the lives of individuals, societies and the world.

This report brings together the latest evidence and reveals that unintended pregnancy is a personal issue, a health issue, a human rights issue, a development issue, and a humanitarian issue.



## Vast costs

Over 60 per cent of unintended pregnancies will end in abortion. The best available estimates point to 45 per cent of all abortions being unsafe.

Unsafe abortion is a leading cause of maternal death globally and hospitalises millions of women every year.

Once robbed of the chance to choose whether or not to become pregnant, women and girls see other opportunities dwindle. When births are unintended, they often lead to worse physical and mental health. Pregnant girls may be pushed into getting married or leaving school. Many women drop out of the labour force. Those in abusive relationships are twice as at risk of unintended pregnancy, and these pregnancies often make it harder to cut ties with their abuser.

Of the millions of unintended pregnancies that happen each year, many will be met with delight. Others will cause fear or worry, but will ultimately result in children who are deeply loved and a source of great joy. Every child



born from an unintended pregnancy is a person with inherent value, dignity and human rights. Yet none of this is in conflict with the fact that unintended pregnancies can unleash spiralling negative consequences that echo across generations.

There are losses to education and income. The slide into poverty can be steep and swift. The cumulative toll is massive, costing health systems billions.

Original research in this report builds on newly released country-level estimates of unintended pregnancy, comparing them to measures of socioeconomic development, gender inequality, maternal death and availability of abortion. It finds that unintended pregnancy rates are higher in countries with lower development, in countries with less gender equality, in countries with higher rates of maternal death, and in countries with more restrictive abortion laws.

## Turning away from stereotypes

An unmarried woman or girl with an unplanned pregnancy is often seen as having “loose morals”, or dismissed as “irresponsible.” For many the shame attaches not just to her, but to her family as well. What about married women with unintended pregnancies? People too often assume they want to get pregnant, they should get pregnant, or that they are, at least, able to cope with it. This is an erasure of their desires and choices.

It is time to turn away from stereotypes – and towards data. The latest evidence from the Sustainable Development Goals (indicator 5.6.1) shows that, in countries where data are available, nearly a quarter of women are unable to say no to sex and nearly a quarter are unable to make decisions about their own health care. Nearly 10 per cent are unable to make their own decisions about contraception. It is a reminder of how many people, especially women and girls, are limited in exercising their basic rights. And it is a stark reminder that gender discrimination seeps into every corner of our lives.

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In fact, research shows that essentially every fertile woman or girl bears some risk of experiencing an unintended pregnancy – as are some people who do not even identify as women or girls. Every form of contraception has a failure rate. Many women are unable to obtain forms of contraception that work for their bodies and circumstances, if they have access to contraceptives at all. In every corner of the world, social pressures, sexual violence and coercion are disturbingly ubiquitous. LGBTI people face similar, sometimes even greater, risk of unintended pregnancy, as these factors are exacerbated by added stigma and increased barriers to reproductive health care.



# Challenges to choice

Family planning programmes have made a tremendous difference globally: Contraceptive use is increasing in every region in the world, and unmet needs are declining. Still, around 257 million women around the world who want to avoid pregnancy are not using safe, modern methods of contraception. Among them, 172 million are using no method at all. Why?

Counterintuitively, the report shows that lack of access and knowledge are no longer the most commonly cited reasons for non-use and disuse of modern contraceptives. Instead, findings show that fear and experience of side effects, infrequent sex, opposition to contraception, and postpartum/lactational amenorrhea are more common reasons. On top of that, myths and misinformation are everywhere, peddled by all sources, even by teachers or health workers.

All of this indicates that women are not receiving enough accurate information about their bodies and rights, they do not have enough

contraceptive options, and they are not receiving support when they fear or experience side effects.

To reach those left behind, we need to tackle stigma, misinformation, health provider training, comprehensive sexuality education and gender inequality. And women everywhere deserve to have access to a range of contraceptive methods, to be fully informed and supported in their decisions, to receive follow-up care, and to have new options available if they experience side effects or changing life circumstances.



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## Agency is the key

The world must stop viewing unintended pregnancy as acceptable, inevitable or even desirable. The discourse must not remain steeped in blame and shame. The State of World Population 2022 offers both a human rights and a development case for abandoning such notions. It calls for policymakers, communities, leaders and others to reframe the conversation to

