

## From unwanted pregnancy to safe abortion: Sharing information about abortion in Asia through animation

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**Abstract:** *Although unsafe abortion continues to be a leading cause of maternal mortality in many countries in Asia, the right to safe abortion remains highly stigmatized across the region. The Asia Safe Abortion Partnership, a regional network advocating for safe abortion, produced an animated short film entitled From Unwanted Pregnancy to Safe Abortion to show in conferences, schools and meetings in order to share knowledge about the barriers to safe abortion in Asia and to facilitate conversations on the right to safe abortion. This paper describes the making of this film, its objectives, content, dissemination and how it has been used. Our experience highlights the advantages of using animated films in addressing highly politicized and sensitive issues like abortion. Animation helped to create powerful advocacy material that does not homogenize the experiences of women across a diverse region, and at the same time emphasize the need for joint activities that express solidarity. © 2015 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.*

**Keywords:** safe abortion, abortion stigma, animated film, advocacy, Asia

### Introduction

Asia is the most highly populated region in the world, and records a high rate of unsafe abortions. Studies show that while fertility rates in Asia have declined in the last ten years,<sup>1</sup> the rate of unintended pregnancy continues to be as high as 49 per 1,000 women aged 15–44.<sup>2</sup> The rate of induced abortion in Asia is 28 per 1,000 women aged 15–44<sup>3</sup> and around a third of these women (10.8 million) have unsafe abortions annually.<sup>4</sup> These rates are highest in South Central Asia (65% of abortions are unsafe),<sup>5</sup> while in East Asia, almost all abortions are safe.<sup>6</sup> Studies show that two out of five Asian women with an unmet need for safe abortion are under 25 years of age (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

Although unsafe abortion continues to be a leading cause of maternal mortality in many countries in Asia, the right to safe abortion remains highly stigmatized across the region. This stigma is reflected in restrictive laws, the lack of trained providers and the general lack of awareness of the laws on abortion, which drives large numbers of women to unsafe abortion.<sup>8</sup> As a regional network promoting the right to safe abortion, the Asia Safe Abortion Partnership

(ASAP) has to address the lack of access to safe abortion both as a transnational phenomenon and as a highly localized experience. In order to increase knowledge about specific barriers to safe abortion through educational materials for its regional advocacy, ASAP funded the making of an animated short film entitled *From Unwanted Pregnancy to Safe Abortion*.

This film addresses the various barriers to safe abortion that the Partnership and its partner organizations in 20 countries across the Asia-Pacific and Middle East encounter in their everyday work. These countries have extremely diverse abortion laws. While a greater number of safe abortions occur in countries where abortion is legal, abortion stigma and negative attitudes towards abortion can still drive women to unsafe abortion even in these countries. India is a good example of a country where abortion access has suffered from conservative interpretations of an otherwise liberal law.<sup>9</sup> In fact, studies show that only two-fifths of abortions in India are safe and legal.<sup>10</sup> To understand this phenomenon better, ASAP conducted a study in seven countries across Asia to assess attitudes to abortion and knowledge of the abortion law among those who act as gatekeepers

**Figure 1. Clip from *From Unwanted Pregnancy to Safe Abortion* showing women using back alley abortions when barriers are erected in their path. The image shows women from various countries to emphasise that the issue of unsafe abortion happens all over Asia.**



to the law and its implementation. The study<sup>11</sup> found misconceptions and a dearth of information even among these key stakeholders,\* as well as limited recognition of the importance of international covenants and the understanding of safe abortion as a right. ASAP recognized the need to create a self-contained message that could provide essential knowledge about abortion and facilitate conversations around the need to understand a rights-based approach.

The idea for creating such a film also grew from the Partnership's advocacy and capacity-building

workshops. ASAP is committed to improving knowledge about safe surgical and medical abortion, and has conducted trainings and workshops since 2008 for various stakeholders, ranging from the media and policymakers to health care providers, such as doctors, nurses and midwives. Since 2012, it has also conducted an annual Advocacy Institute for young activists across Asia. ASAP is also a co-founder and promoter of the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion and has supported activities conducted under the umbrella of the Campaign across Asia. Through its advocacy and training work, ASAP aims to highlight that the lack of access to safe abortion is both a public health and social justice concern and a human rights violation. In order to address the lack of awareness about the laws on abortion in the region, the Partnership has also curated legal information in its member countries, which can be found on our website.<sup>†</sup> Through the film, ASAP sought to enhance its work and create a tool that would introduce the context within which abortion in Asia must be understood, both in its trainings and in its advocacy work. This paper examines the making of this film, its objectives and distribution and how it has been used, in order to high-

\*The study was conducted in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka. While a majority of the stakeholders across the region did not seem to be fully aware of the abortion laws and policies in their countries, their attitudes and misconceptions depended to a large extent on the country they came from and local attitudes towards abortion in that country. Stakeholders in India, Indonesia and Nepal largely supported the view that abortion was a woman's right. However, in Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka, a majority of the stakeholders held the view that abortion was in conflict with their religious beliefs. While a number of them agreed that abortion could be permitted for public health reasons, they were not of the view that it could be considered a woman's right.<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>†</sup><http://asap-asia.org/country-profiles/> .

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