

Regional Conference



The University of Oklahoma

# SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CONFERENCE 2023

*BREAKING STIGMAS, BUILDING FUTURES*



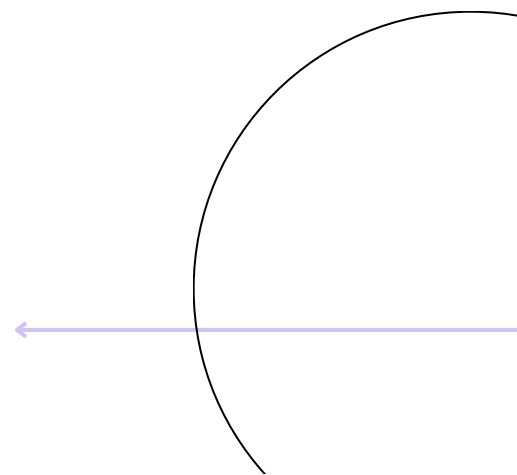
**AMRO GUIDE**

Conference made-easy for you.



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# Regional Introduction

## DEAR PROSPECTIVE DELEGATES AND ESTEEMED COLLEAGUES

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) serves as the regional office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO). The Region of the Americas (AMRO) consists of 35 Member States and four Associate Members [1]. These nations possess a variety of developing and developed economies, population centers, and healthcare systems, which together present a diverse range of concerns regarding sexual and reproductive health.

AMRO can celebrate some progress on this front, but the region has room for improvement in several areas. The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has the highest rates of coverage with antiretroviral treatment for people with HIV of any middle-lower-income region [1]. While the AMRO region has reached 84% sexual and reproductive health service coverage, which is above the global average of 74%, many disparities still exist among countries and within them, and high adolescent pregnancy rates in LAC are of particular concern [2]. There are still many barriers to access for services such as comprehensive education for sexual and reproductive health topics; prevention and treatment methods for unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections; support services for survivors of gender-based violence; and care for gender and sexual minorities.

The following guide outlines four of the complex factors contributing to sexual and reproductive health and how they manifest in different countries throughout the region. It is intended to provide the context necessary for understanding today's issues and evoking discussions of tomorrow's solutions.



# Sexual and Reproductive Health Education

There are significant inequities in Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) across the AMRO region, which has resulted in large gaps in sexual and reproductive health outcomes. The United States and Canada have adolescent fertility rates below the global average that continue to decrease, while Latin America and the Caribbean have the second highest rates in the world. This is the only region in the world where a rising trend has been observed in pregnancies among adolescents younger than 15 years. An estimated 15% of all pregnancies occur annually in girls younger than 20 years in the region, and 2 million children are born to mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 years. Maternal mortality is also a top cause of death for youths aged 15-24 years in this region [1a]. This demonstrates the need for comprehensive sex education and family planning programs to prevent pregnancies among youths.

## Case Study: CSE in Guyana

In the Caribbean, Guyana has one of the highest estimated adolescent fertility rates [1a]. To address this as well as other issues such as the prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission, gender-based violence, and homophobic and transphobic discrimination, the Guyanese Ministry of Education is working to update its current Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) program in secondary schools to be more relevant to the needs of adolescents and provide better access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. Meanwhile, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has pushed CSE as part of its Spotlight Initiative in partnership with the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) since 2017 [1b].



# Reproductive Rights

Reproductive rights have been a contentious issue in the AMRO region, with significant variations in policies and access to essential services across countries. Until 2020, a staggering 97 percent of Latin American women lived in countries with severe abortion restrictions. However, a significant turning point occurred in December 2020 when Argentina legalized abortion, marking the culmination of a years-long grassroots movement advocating for expanded abortion rights. This historic vote sent ripples across Latin America, prompting Mexico's Supreme Court to decriminalize abortion in September 2021 and Colombia's Constitutional Court to follow suit by decriminalizing abortion for up to the first 24 weeks of pregnancy in February 2022. These developments have been lauded as milestones in the fight for reproductive rights. Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that while abortion is now decriminalized in three of the largest countries in Latin America, countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic continue to maintain a total ban on abortions.

## Case Study: Reproductive Rights in Argentina

Argentina serves as a compelling case study to understand the evolving landscape of reproductive rights in the AMRO region. Prior to December 2020, Argentina had stringent abortion laws, severely restricting access to safe and legal abortion services. However, following years of persistent advocacy and mobilization, Argentina's National Congress approved the legalization of abortion up to the 14th week of pregnancy, making it one of the most significant advancements in reproductive rights in Latin America. However, the deeply ingrained opposition from conservative religious beliefs, notably from the Catholic Church and evangelical groups, continues to pose challenges. Healthcare workers, influenced by conscientious objections, often abstain from performing abortions, making it difficult for women to access these services. Social stigma, long waiting times, and a lack of access to safe abortions contribute to women's vulnerability to corrupt practices. While progress has been made, such as a reduction in maternal deaths from abortions and increased access to abortion services, ongoing challenges persist, including legal threats and opposition efforts to declare the abortion law unconstitutional.

# Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

Gender-based violence, particularly femicide, is a pressing issue in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2021, official data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) revealed that 4,473 women were victims of femicide in 29 countries and territories, equating to roughly 12 women losing their lives to gender-based violence daily. Despite legislative advances recognizing the seriousness of femicidal violence, the problem persists, with a concerning focus on adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 29 as victims. Over 4% of these crimes target girls under 14. Gender violence's impact extends to families and communities, necessitating comprehensive policies to safeguard women's and girls' rights. Addressing this issue is vital for autonomy and fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Case Study: Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault in Mexico:

The statistics agency INEGI's recent survey reveals a troubling escalation in gender-based violence against women and girls in Mexico over the past five years, with seven out of ten women experiencing various forms of violence. Notably, femicide rates have soared, leading to approximately ten women killed daily and tens of thousands missing. Reports of sexual violence have increased by eight percentage points, affecting half of the surveyed women, and nearly 35% have experienced physical aggression, while 52% have faced psychological abuse. Alarming, most victims of physical or sexual violence did not formally report the incidents or seek help from public institutions. Despite slight improvement in economic violence, the pervasive issue demands comprehensive action, including legislative reforms, law enforcement improvements, support services enhancement, and efforts to challenge harmful societal norms.

# Queer Health

Gender and sexual minorities face varying levels of discrimination across the region. Several countries have decriminalized homosexual activity over the past decade, but prejudicial attitudes against the LGBT community continue to harm the physical and mental health of LGBT people in other ways. LGBT patients face higher rates of STIs, poor mental health, disordered eating, substance use, and gender-based violence. They also generally do not trust heteronormative healthcare providers to have the expertise necessary to provide culturally competent care, which prevents them from addressing these health risks [5a].

## Case Study: Trans Law in Uruguay

Uruguay is one of the leaders in LGBT rights not only in the AMRO region, but in the world. In 2018, it passed legislation known as the Comprehensive Law for Trans Persons to guarantee protections against workplace and housing discrimination and stigmatization for individuals whose gender identities differ from their biological sex. The goal of this law is to increase the life expectancy of transgender individuals above 35 to 40 years of age. It guarantees that trans individuals have the right to undergo name changes, hormonal treatments, and surgeries to affirm their gender identities, with minors also being able to access these services under the authorization of an adult legal representative. It also provides reparative financial aid as a lifetime pension for qualifying persons who suffered abuse during Uruguayan military dictatorship of the 1970s [5b]. While the acceptance and enforcement of this law has not been equal across the country, it has helped to advance the rights not only to work and housing but also to healthcare.

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