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# Research report

Forum: Commission on the status of women

Issue: Examining the impact of male influence on women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights

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## Introduction

Bodily autonomy and reproductive rights are two things that women around the world still structurally lack. Only 64 years ago the first oral contraceptive was invented and approved by the US's FDA (Mlaba, 2023). After many decades of women pushing for this essential ability to control their own reproductive cycle this was the first step that would transform women's rights as a collective. The following step, which is still ongoing in many countries around the world is the equal protection of the law and recognition of autonomy for women on the same basis as men. Where many (western) countries were pioneers in this field, a worrying shift in the political landscape now calls for a reversal of these previous implemented laws. Examples such as the possible overturning of the Roe v Wade case, which has been in place since 1973, which highlights abortion as a constitutional right in the United States of America, are stark reminders of how fragile this right to bodily autonomy is. This right is often taken away by men, or the issue is not resolved by them. These cases show how women are in many cases still not equal to men, also due to the fact that women's rights are quite a 'new' thing. As shown in a study from 2019 by Jörg Baten, which highlights that when places that afforded women more autonomy by enabling them to put off marriage until comfortably into adulthood, like the United Kingdom on the eve of the Industrial Revolution, thrived economically. (Which is very recent considering the long timeline of history itself.) Those that did not fell behind. This Research Report aims to inform all it's readers of this global political issue, it highlights countries that are exceptional both in creating opportunities for women or restricting them. It also outlines efforts taken to improve the situation and a timeline of relevant events. This all concludes into various possible solutions to this pressing issue.

## Definitions of key terms

### Roe v Wade

This specific legal case happened in 1969, a 25-year-old woman, Norma McCorvey, also referred to as "Jane Roe", challenged the criminal abortion laws in Texas. The ruling in Texas at the time was that abortion was unconstitutional, except in cases where the mother's life was in danger. Defending this anti-abortion law was Henry Wade – The district attorney for Dallas County – hence why "Roe v Wade". In 1973 her appeal made it to the US Supreme Court, whereby a vote of seven to two, the court ruled that governments lacked the power to prohibit abortions. They ruled that a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy was protected by the US constitution. (BBC News, 2022)

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### **Bodily autonomy**

The right to make decisions about your own body, life, and future, without coercion or violence. (Casey, 2023)

### **The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) is a landmark international agreement aimed at advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality. It was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in September 1995, with the participation of 189 countries.

### **Statista - Gender equality worldwide - statistics & facts**

This report by statista is one that gets renewed nearly every year for all countries in the world with a few exceptions where research is not possible, due to these countries being authoritarian island states. These studies are done by various NGO's and are a very good guideline to which countries can improve their equality and where they rank on a global scale.

### **Child marriage**

In many countries marriage between an adult and (often female) child is not prohibited, or rules are not enforced. Many reports take some of these cases in mind and report on women's rights from 15 years of age. It is of great importance to also look into the younger ages since in these cases various laws and rights are disregarded, and these statistics can be quickly overlooked unless specifically researched.

### **Male Influence**

Male influence on women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights refers to the ways in which men, either individually or collectively through societal norms, laws, and institutions, exert control over women's bodies and reproductive choices.

## **General overview**

### **Historical Background**

Historically, most societies have been patriarchal, where men held dominant roles in both the public and private spaces and communities. This dominance extended to control over women's bodies, often being the sole decision maker regarding women's roles in reproduction and marriage. In the modern world men also decide on issues such as abortion in various cultures.

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Following this, Religious and Cultural Norms describe specific roles for women, which is mostly related to reproduction and motherhood, but also to their place in the social hierarchy compared to men. These norms frequently justified male control over women's reproductive choices, such as through forced marriages (also with underage females), restrictions on contraception, and the criminalization of abortion. Adding to these issues, laws in many countries have restricted women's reproductive rights. For example, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Western countries criminalized abortion and restricted access to contraception, reflecting societal beliefs that women's primary role was to bear children.

The Problem at hand now has various aspects, such as the impact on health and well-being: Male influence over reproductive rights can severely impact women's health, leading to forced pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and limited access to necessary healthcare. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that unsafe abortions are one of the leading causes of maternal mortality worldwide, particularly in regions where reproductive rights are heavily restricted. This also progresses into violence and coercion. Male control often starts as coercion or violence, including intimate partner violence. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has highlighted how these forms of violence are used to control women's reproductive choices.

Legal and institutional barriers are also a big problem in many countries, legal systems and institutions still reflect patriarchal norms. For example, laws that require spousal consent for abortion or sterilization give men direct control over women's reproductive choices.

The current situation has a few key points, starting with,

1. **Global disparities:** The situation varies significantly across different regions. In many Western countries, there has been progress in recognizing and protecting women's reproductive rights, but challenges remain, especially in the face of political opposition. For instance, the U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* highlighted ongoing debates over abortion rights and male-dominated political influence and displayed the fragile balance upon which the reproductive rights of women balance.
2. **International Efforts:** The United Nations has made significant efforts to address these issues. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, is a key international treaty that calls for the elimination of discrimination against women, including in matters related to reproduction. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) also emphasizes the importance of women's autonomy in reproductive health and builds further on the narrative proposed in the CEDAW agreement.
3. **Continued Challenges:** Despite these efforts, male influence remains a significant barrier to women's full autonomy over their bodies. Cultural norms, religious beliefs, and political opposition continue to block and/or hinder progress in many regions. For example, in some Middle Eastern and North African countries, legal frameworks still

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heavily restrict women's reproductive rights, often requiring male consent for medical procedures.

To conclude, the impact of male influence on women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights is a complex issue that is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and legal traditions. While significant progress has been made in some regions, the struggle for full autonomy and rights continues, particularly in areas where patriarchal norms remain strong. Resolving these issues requires sustained political action, both at the national and international levels. This includes passing protective laws, challenging harmful norms, and ensuring that women have the resources and support they need to make autonomous decisions about their bodies and reproductive health.

This overview provides an extensive and detailed understanding of the historical and current challenges related to male influence on women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, laying the groundwork for a nuanced and informed debate.

## Major parties involved

### *United States of America*

With the highest rate of maternal mortality (21 out of 100.000) compared to modern western countries the United States of America is a jarring example of the possible dangers of the regression of reproductive rights. Furthermore, the USA has outlawed abortion in 14 of its 52 states. According to a study done by Statista in 2023 the USA also ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> in the world for women equality and rights, with a score of 0.74 which is also quite a bit lower than its western counter parts, and therefore of importance in this debate.

### *War stricken countries*

Around the world and within this committee there are many countries who have been notorious for the disregard of women's rights, proven by various UN documents (posted in the further reading segment of this paper) let alone reproductive rights. Due to the fact that many of these countries are at war or have been for many years, many statistics are unavailable or seriously outdated. Conflict also makes it virtually impossible to update these statistics or prevent getting faulty statistics as a way of propaganda. Though data might be difficult to find and obtain the UN focuses heavily on various missions to find out and map these statistics.

### *Norway*

Norway is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most gender equal country in the world according to a survey done by Statista in 2023 with a score of 0.87. Norway was also one of the leaders in electing women into politics, electing Brundtland in 1981 just 2 years after the first ever female prime minister was elected worldwide. Norway's social norms are also quite different in comparison to other western countries, where men are considered stronger when showing emotions, taking on more household tasks and much more socially regarded "Female roles". This social difference is credited as one of the main pillars in achieving such a

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high global ranking for women equality by various famous feminist figures within the country. Due to Norway being such a leader in the field Norway is a key player in this debate.

#### *Yemen*

Yemen is globally considered the most gender unequal country, when scoring the 50 most unequal countries Yemen ranks first with a score of 0.82, the second most unequal country, Nigeria, scored 0.68. Though efforts have been made to resolve this major disparity by both the government of Yemen, many NGOs and the UN itself, due to the frequent change and unrest of the government due to conflicts, any efforts to improve the situation have been unfruitful. At the moment Houthis are in power, an insurgency group known for its heavy restrictions on women, travel and abortion. All these factors taken into account Yemen is therefore of high importance to this debate to make change starting with the worst offending country.

### **Timeline of Key Events**

1954	The first world population conference is hosted in Rome, Italy.
1960	The first oral contraceptive was invented and approved by the US's FDA.
1967	The UNFPA is created as a trust fund, with the goal of dealing with resolving population issues as its main goal.
1975	The United Nations decade for women begins.
1976	CEDAW is drafted and approved, an essential step in the process of getting equal rights for men and women.
1977	First international women and health meeting in Rome, Italy, is held and women reproductive rights are discussed as a main topic.
1979	CEDAW is accepted by the general assembly and written into international law.
1994	The ICPD is held in Cairo, Egypt. During this event, a new <a href="#">Programme of Action</a> was adopted as a guide for national and international action in the field of population and development for twenty years.
2000	The Millenium Declaration is adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, followed by the Millenium Development Goals.
2019	Nairobi summit on ICPD+25 takes place.

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## **Previous attempts to solve the issue**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) is considered the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights and has put in place various highly important frameworks to help governments better the lives of women. Though this is a very well written resolution many governments still lack parts or the complete list of established goals that were expected to be achieved. This resolution is essential, but only on paper until it gets properly enforced by the appropriate NGO's and the UN itself.

The Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (2000) has been partly successful in resolving posted issues. This resolution emphasizes the role of women in peace and security, touching on issues of autonomy and rights within conflict zones, where male dominance often plays a critical role. Though awareness has been brought to the issue via this resolution (which is already a big step regarding women's rights) the systemic anti-feminism and anti-women's rights are still very prevalent in these addressed countries and have not changed much if anything for the women in this situation.

Sustainable Development Goal number 5, which is "to offer a framework for understanding the global commitment to addressing gender inequality", which includes male influence on women's rights, has been one of 17 goals set by the UN. Though a very good goal, it is very broad and set in a perfect world. This goal is a point in the political field where the UN would like to be eventually, but it creates high expectations which are quickly regarded as not possible at this time, which often results in governments pulling out of plans or not putting in the effort required. Therefore, this broad resolution is often

## **Possible solutions**

Addressing the impact of male influence on women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights requires political solutions that improve gender equality and empower women as to prevent the previously discussed regression to not take place. The following 3 proposals could be a solution to the proposed issue but are in no means tested and/or proven to be possible in practice

### **1. The UN protects and expands Reproductive Rights**

Governments can, with frameworks designed and planned out by the UN's various divisions such as this committee, the CSW, write laws that explicitly protect women's bodily autonomy and reproductive

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rights. The laws would have various notions on ensuring that women have the legal right to make decisions about their own bodies without coercion or influence from others, including male partners or family members. This will also give women the opportunity in a set country to then continue the initiative, which makes it possible for the UN to pull out of an area where they are keeping watch of rights and for these countries to be fully functioning without intervention according to UN standards and laws.

#### 2. Gender-Responsive Education and Promotion Campaigns

Governments and NGOs, along with the UN itself, can launch nationwide education and advocacy campaigns aimed at promoting gender equality and challenging harmful gender norms that perpetuate male control over women's bodies. A way to implement such ideas can be through educational lesson plans, that should include in-depth sex education that highly emphasizes consent, reproductive rights, and gender equality. Public awareness campaigns can target both men and women, promoting shared decision-making in reproductive health and encouraging men to support women's autonomy. Over time, these initiatives can shift cultural and social norms, decreasing the societal acceptance of male dominance in reproductive matters and creating a culture of respect for women's rights and their bodily autonomy.

#### 3. Quotas in Political and Decision-Making

Introduce gender quotas in political institutions and decision-making bodies to ensure that women are commonly represented in the creation and implementation of policies related to reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. This could start with the UN itself ensuring a minimum of \*x\* percentage of people in such committees to be female, which would set an example for all other presidents and such, eventually becoming an international law to ensure strict adherence to quotas.

### Further reading

Comments made by trump on reproductive rights, possible relevance for resolutions with the upcoming elections -

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Extensive explanation of the CSW, CEDAW and ICDP -

*Rights to sexual and reproductive health*. (n.d.). <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/shalev.htm>

Data bank of many resolutions regarding womens rights in the UN -

*Progress of the world's women*. (n.d.). UN Women – Headquarters. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/progress-of-the-worlds-women>



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