

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND ABORTION ACCESS

HISTORY

A year before the Vancouver Women's Caucus (VWC) launched the 1970 Abortion Caravan, they started [The Pedestal](#) - Canada's first feminist periodical. In almost every issue, the VWC worked to stand in solidarity with women around the world. They did this by publishing articles that raised awareness on [Israel's occupation of Palestine](#), women workers' strikes in Poland and Great Britain, and the [impact of the Vietnam War on women](#). The VWC also [helped organize and fundraise for the Indochinese Women's Conference](#), which was held in Vancouver in 1971. This undertaking brought together more than 600 women together from around the world, facilitating discussion and cultural exchange between activist groups.

In recognition of the important work second-wave feminists around the world had done to promote gender equality since the late 1960s, the United Nations designated 1975 as International Women's Year, which [culminated in the first world conference on the status of women in Mexico City](#). A parallel conference for grassroots activists—referred to as the Tribune—also occurred, which Canadian feminists participated in and which [Indigenous feminists used as a platform to draw attention to gender discrimination embedded in the Indian Act](#). Attending this conference led feminists from Toronto, such as Ontario Coalition of Abortion Clinics co-founder Carolyn Egan, to [establish the International Women's Day Coalition in 1977](#). 8 March continues to be a significant day for our movement, where members take to the streets to highlight key issues in the ongoing struggle for women's equality - domestically and abroad.

International discussions of support for abortion and maternal health, however, did not occur on a broad scale until the mid-1990s. The [1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo](#) brought together 179 governments, as well as representatives from women's health organizations and advocates from the Global South



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to establish a global maternal health agenda. This conference marked a turning point in international advocacy for reproductive rights, which were formally acknowledged as central to women's health and well-being. While the [Cairo Programme of Action](#) that emerged from the conference began to consider the consequences of unsafe abortion on women's health globally, [direct interference from the Vatican](#) kept reproductive rights from being formally recognized by the international community in any meaningful way.

The Cairo Programme of Action acknowledged that family planning efforts should cater to the needs of individual communities. This marked a significant shift away from the paternalistic family planning policies of previous decades, which saw access to contraception and policies such as forced sterilization as means of limiting fertility and population growth in the Global South. The concept of "reproductive justice"—developed by African American feminists in the 1980s—also pushed conference attendees to be intersectional in their approach. Reproductive justice activists also pushed the Cairo Programme of Action to highlight the important connection between reproductive rights and issues of poverty and racism.

In response to these global maternal health initiatives, Canadian feminists established Action Canada for Population and Development (ACPD) in 1997—an offshoot organization of the Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada (PPFC)—with the explicit purpose of lobbying the Canadian government to increase their international assistance for sexual and reproductive rights. ACPD merged with the Canadian Federation for Sexual Health (formerly PPFC) and Canadians for Choice (formerly CARAL) to form [Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights](#) in 2014.

CURRENT ISSUES

[Today, only 52 countries](#) allow abortion on request without the need for justification. This means most women around the world do not have access to safe and legal abortion, leading to [25 million unsafe abortions](#) annually. More than 7 million women and girls are injured each year as a result, and more than 22,000 are known to die – though realistically the numbers are probably much higher.

The Toronto-based non-profit [Women on Web \(WOW\)](#)—an offshoot of the radically influential Dutch organization [Women on Waves](#)—has been working with feminist collectives around the world to provide women with medically-accurate information



PHOTO CREDIT: [Women on Waves](#)

about self-managed abortion care in countries where terminations are illegal or severely restricted. WOW connects women with medical professionals who then mail them medication so they can safely self-induce at home. Solidarity in this context is demonstrated by supporting activists who work to improve abortion access in their own countries, not attempting to fix things from the outside. The need to respect the autonomy and capability of reproductive health activists abroad is as important today, as it was in the 1970s.



PHOTO CREDITS:
[Jaime Nikolaou](#)



OUR DEMANDS

- It is crucial for Canada to support the efforts of women and gender minorities globally to control their own bodies by supporting grassroots initiatives which advocate for reproductive justice in their own communities.
- Canada must accelerate and expand foreign aid for sexual and reproductive health and rights, including safe abortion.
- Canada should be an ally to non-governmental organizations worldwide that are working to legalize abortion and improve reproductive health outcomes for everyone.

SUPPORT OUR WORK

- [Send a letter](#) to the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs asking them to expand reproductive health funding in the Global South.
- Support [Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights](#) and the [Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights](#) by learning about global advocacy work.
- Raise awareness about and support reliable long distance providers of abortion care such as [Women on Web](#), [Aid Access](#), and [Women on Waves](#).

LEARN MORE

- Read the World Health Organization's fact sheet about [Preventing Unsafe Abortion](#).
- Read about Canada's [Feminist International Assistance Policy to learn more about what Canada is currently doing abroad](#).

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