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Full length article

## The United States Supreme Court ruling and women's reproductive rights – A position statement issued by The European Board and College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (EBCOG)

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## ABSTRACT

The judicial review by the Supreme Court of the United States on Roe v. Wade has fundamentally limited the ability of women to exercise choice and control of their sexual and reproductive rights in the United States. The global organisations are concerned that there remains a risk that women's rights will be diminished globally in future.

The European Board and College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (EBCOG), the professional representative body of obstetricians and gynaecologists in 32 European countries, firmly believes the United States Supreme Court's judicial decision on Roe v. Wade directly undermines women's human rights and autonomy. The ability of women to exercise choice and control of their sexual and reproductive rights in the US is now reduced. The danger that women's rights are diminished remains ever present, not only in the United States, but globally [1].

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Resolution 217 A (III), adopted by the UN General Assembly at Paris in 1948 clearly lays out the principles of promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Cairo ICPD declaration, "that reproductive health and rights are basic human rights and all people should have full access to comprehensive reproductive care, including voluntary family planning, the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, access to safe abortion care and safe childbirth". This commitment was reiterated by global UN partners in Nairobi in 2019 [2,3]. Yet these fundamental principles and

commitments are at stake after the ruling of US Supreme Court on the 24th June 2022. It has fundamentally removed from women the constitutional right to have an abortion. America's most senior judges may have acted to limit the rights of their own countrywomen but regrettably there is significant concern that this ruling and its effects will be reverberated in every corner of the world [4]. This decision is a stark reminder that women continue to be discriminated against, and that we all need to continue to tackle this inequality. In an even more divided America, the implications of this regulation will create more inequalities in reproductive health care [4]. Hillary Clinton, a former US Secretary of State, quoted "You cannot have maternal health without reproductive health. And reproductive health includes contraception and family planning and access to legal, safe abortion". Women should have the right to make decisions about their body, health and indeed Margaret Sanger the founder of the Planned Parenthood once said that "no women can call herself free who cannot control her body".

Historically, the world has looked to established democracies such as the United States as a global leader of human rights and a protagonist of

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democracy; however the United States has failed to show global leadership in upholding women's rights [5]. This is deplorable as health policies should be based on high quality evidence and respect for human rights and autonomy. This ruling will certainly put women in a highly disadvantageous positions in seeking help for safe abortion and contraception services, and potentially leads to poor reproductive health outcomes. It is well recognised that restrictive laws do not reduce the need for abortion care but in fact increases the risk of women accessing unsafe and illegal abortion which is associated with significant serious maternal morbidity and mortality. It is regrettable that even in the 21st century over 47,000 women and girls globally die each year from unsafe abortion related complications [2,3]. Unsafe abortion remains one of the five main causes of maternal mortality worldwide, accounting for 13 % of maternal deaths [2,4]. The decision of the Supreme Court of the USA is a retrograde step which can also lead to further polarisation of political debates in some European countries thereby preventing women to access safe sexual and reproductive health care.

The European Board and College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology is committed to promoting the rights of girls and women to equitable access to quality assured, integrated and comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and services to achieve zero unmet need for family planning, zero gender violence and full access to abortion care [6]. We firmly believe in upholding reproductive rights for women and express our concerns for women who may suffer from consequences of unsafe abortion services and ability to access contraception.

EBCOG stands shoulder to shoulder with FIGO, ACOG, RCOG and whole of medical professions [7] and commit to policies which advocate women's rights free from political and religious interference.

The power of the Universal Declaration is the power of ideas to change the world. It inspires us to continue working to ensure all people can gain freedom, equality, and dignity. EBCOG joins FIGO's call for global action to help millions of women who may experience a reduction

in their reproductive and general health as a fall out of the United States Supreme Court ruling. This is a reminder that the issue of women's reproductive rights is up for debate and it is a wakeup call for women's rights groups and professional organisations to define a unified agenda and action plan.

### Approval

This position statement was approved by the Council of the EBCOG electronically on 14th July 2022.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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