

Reproductive Violence: A Dangerous New UN Term

By Rebecca Oas, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The term "reproductive violence" has recently started appearing in the reports of UN agencies and human rights experts, and has been proposed for inclusion in negotiated resolutions. Its proponents argue that it draws attention to specific harmful practices like forced abortion and sterilization or even gestational surrogacy. At the same time, those seeking to define the term also use it to condemn abortion restrictions, framing forced abortion and denial of abortion as equally violent acts. Because of this, the term "reproductive violence" should be avoided in UN policy. This *Definitions* article explains the origins of the term and how it is already being used in the UN system to promote abortion and frame the pro-life position as a source of violence.

A new "reproductive" buzzword

In recent months, there has been a concerted push to introduce the phrase "reproductive violence" into United Nations resolutions. After initially appearing in some reports from UN agencies and human rights experts, it was included in a Human Rights Council resolution in summer 2026. Its appearance in the resolution, which discussed the rights of women and girls in humanitarian situations, was applauded by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF).¹ An article in *Ms. Magazine* immediately proposed how it could be used to attack abortion restrictions in the U.S.²

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the Human Rights Council? This article will attempt to answer this question—and make the case why it should be kept out of further documents at the Human Rights Council and especially at the General Assembly. But first, it is important to understand this new phrase's lineage.

For pro-life groups that follow international institutions like the UN, it is well-understood that, since the 1990s when it first appeared in UN policy, the word "reproductive" is dangerous. While it may be used perfectly innocently in other contexts, like medicine or agriculture, in legal and policy contexts, it has been the favored terminology of those who wish to create an international human right to abortion. The phrases "sexual and reproductive health" and "reproductive rights" were first agreed by consensus at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, but only then with important caveats, including one asserting that the legality of abortion is solely for individual governments to determine—there is no international human rights obligation to legally provide it.³

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Even with those hard-fought caveats, these "reproductive" phrases remain controversial in UN resolutions. Pro-life civil society groups urge delegates to delete it where possible, replace it with other, less problematic language, or, as a last resort, ensure that it is qualified by tying it back to the ICPD consensus.

Predictably, pro-abortion delegations argue that the terms should be included as often as possible, preferably without caveats or references to the ICPD, and that they should be combined together into the joint "sexual and reproductive health and rights." This step, so far unsuccessful, would be a double win for them: first, it would create a new term unburdened by previous agreed definitions or caveats, and second, it would include the novel category of "sexual rights." The political unacceptability of this concept was what led to the two terms being kept separate in the first place.

Of course, the agencies and bureaucracies tasked with implementing the resolutions agreed in the UN's negotiating bodies have a long track record of treating the agreed language as a floor rather than a ceiling. Almost immediately after the ICPD caveats were adopted, some of the UN human rights treaty bodies set about ignoring them and pressuring countries to liberalize their abortion laws.⁴ Other UN agencies followed their lead.

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Euphemism and ambiguity

To return to the Human Rights Council resolution, a casual observer might not immediately see the problem with the way the new term is being used. The Council expresses:

its deep concern that women and girls in humanitarian situations face heightened risks of all forms of violence and discrimination, including multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, stereotypes, stigma and inequality and are disproportionately affected by sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, rape, trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, **reproductive violence such as forced or denial of contraception, forced pregnancy, forced abortion and forced sterilization, including when undertaken with the intent to destroy a group**, as well as forced labour, abduction and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation [emphasis added].⁵

It is notable that the denial of abortion is not included in the list, although the phrase "such as" clearly demonstrates that the list is not meant to be exhaustive. These are the subtleties that create the "constructive ambiguity" that enables consensus to be reached, and then all sides have a way to claim victory.

Undoubtedly, abortion activists would have wanted denial of abortion to be denounced alongside forced abortion in the resolution, but that would have crossed too many countries' negotiating red lines. Yet the entirely new phrase "reproductive violence" should have generated pushback on the basis of its novelty alone. It was obviously strategic to propose inserting the term into a resolution addressing vulnerable women and girls in humanitarian situations facing grievous human rights abuses; pushing back on it might appear callous or paranoid.

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On the other hand, it is entirely possible to condemn abuses like forced abortion, contraception, or sterilization, including with genocidal intent, simply by listing them. This can be done without creating a new category to house them, along with other unspecified entities. This is pointed out in IPPF's press release:

While different acts that constitute reproductive violence, such as forced pregnancy and enforced sterilization have been expressly prohibited under the Rome Statute, this is the first time the terminology as such, which has a broader scope, is coined in a globally agreed outcome.⁶

It is also worth pointing out that the two references in the resolution to "reproductive violence" are not the only problematic elements it includes. There are four references to "sexual and reproductive healthcare services" as well.

The battleground of "forced pregnancy"

One of the terms listed under "reproductive violence" in the Human Rights Council resolution is "forced pregnancy." As IPPF noted, this is already condemned in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and the definition of "forced pregnancy" in that document is written intentionally very narrowly to avoid it being used to imply a right to abortion:

'Forced pregnancy' means the unlawful confinement of a woman forcibly made pregnant, with the intent of affecting the ethnic composition of any population or carrying out other grave violations of international law. This definition shall not in any way be interpreted as affecting national laws relating to pregnancy.⁷

However, there are current efforts underway to replace this carefully crafted definition with a far more dangerous one. Negotiations are proceeding on a proposed treaty on crimes against humanity, and there have been explicit calls from delegations, including the United Kingdom, Cuba, and Canada, to redefine "forced pregnancy" to include the restriction or denial of abortion.⁸ Depending on the outcome of that negotiation, it has the potential to transform a phrase once effectively neutralized into an active weapon against the protection of the unborn.

A poison pill

Some have argued that the term "reproductive violence" can be used for good, such as in the effort to abolish gestational surrogacy. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, Reem Alsalem, described surrogacy as a form of "reproductive violence" in a 2025 report to the General Assembly. She also discussed how "medical professionals commit acts amounting to obstetric and reproductive violence, such as unnecessary or coercive invasive medical interventions" in the context of coercive harvesting of eggs from poor women in China.⁹

Others have argued that it is useful to have a term distinct from "sexual violence" to describe forms of violence that are related to sex, but not technically sexual, like forced abortions and sterilizations.

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These arguments ultimately fail for two reasons. First, the dangers associated with the term are too great to outweigh any possible good uses it could have. And second, there are already many forms of previously-agreed language that are more than adequate to denounce violence in all its various forms. "Reproductive violence" is a poison pill, by design. The most obvious argument for this is to look at how it is used by other UN entities who are not constrained by the need to make it palatable to all the world's governments.

In 2026, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) coauthored a paper with MSI Reproductive Choices, which, like IPPF, has affiliates promoting and providing abortions around the world. The paper sets out a proposed definition for "reproductive violence":

Reproductive violence is a form of [gender-based violence] against women and girls that compromises reproductive autonomy, agency and self-determination; that is, individuals' ability to decide whether, when, how and under what conditions to become pregnant, give birth and raise children, as defined at the ICPD. This includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, psychosocial, economic, normative and symbolic abuse, force, coercion or exploitation within relationships, families, communities, institutions and societies.¹⁰

One aspect of this proposed definition is that it is not limited to acts committed by individuals, but also includes "laws, policies, institutional practices and social and gender norms that restrict choice, deny consent or impose reproductive outcomes." Forced abortion, lawful or otherwise, requires an act by an individual or group. In contrast, by this definition, laws restricting abortion are themselves considered violent, even if no individual actor is being accused.

Even more explicit was a 2024 report by UN Women, coauthored with the pro-abortion Global Justice Center. It included a list of examples of "reproductive violence" that included "forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced contraception, interference with autonomy over breastfeeding, denial of access to abortion or information about sexual and reproductive health, or targeted attacks on reproductive healthcare facilities."¹¹

Bear in mind: the resolutions adopted at the UN create the mandates that are implemented by agencies like UNFPA and UN Women. If a resolution includes "reproductive violence" language, these agencies have already clearly indicated how

they will interpret it.

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Conclusion and recommendation

While it is unfortunate that the term "reproductive violence" has entered UN negotiated outcomes, there is much that can still be done to contain the damage. As the General Assembly conducts its own work, delegations can work to ensure that no reference to the term—or the report that includes it—makes its way into their own resolutions. Similar efforts can be taken at the Human Rights Council going forward.

Efforts to redefine "forced pregnancy" must also be resisted with regard to the treaty on crimes against humanity and elsewhere.

Ultimately, efforts must be taken to ensure that delegates negotiating these important resolutions are not naïve about the dangers embedded within these novel terms when they are proposed, and will turn this new Trojan horse away at the door.

Endnotes

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