

Disparities in patients' access to benign gynaecological surgery

FIGO calls for global policies to reduce inequality in patients' access to safe, indicated and high-quality gynaecological surgery: the right patient, the right surgery, by the right surgeon and at the right time.

Quality of and access to health services depends largely on patients' biological sex, race, geographical location and socioeconomic level.^{1,2,3} Women around the world face several barriers to accessing essential health services. There is a substantial gap between the need for health care and the level of access, in high-income as well as low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).^{4,5} Global evidence shows that the simple fact of being a woman affects the quality of health care received.^{6,7} This negative effect is more pronounced for women who are violently displaced, belong to vulnerable populations (such as ethnic or religious minorities) and those facing discrimination or labelled as inferior owing to social, cultural or economic factors.^{1,8}

Women around the world have higher barriers to surgical care

Even in high-income countries, women tend to receive lower-quality health care than men. This disparity is more marked for LMICs. When it comes to accessing surgical procedures, the gap is even greater.^{9,10,11}

In general, compared to men, women are less likely to participate in shared decision-making or to choose the type of surgical procedure.¹² The quantity and quality of information available pertaining to surgical procedures and preoperative counselling is less optimal when proposing to perform surgery on women. Gynaecological surgery is significantly worse than other surgical specialties in terms of quality, access, information flow and safety.^{2,5,8}

Patient access to benign gynaecological surgery: the vicious cycle of scarcity

The concept of offering patients only procedures that the doctor "feels comfortable with" has become untenable and unjustifiable. Patients should be offered the appropriate procedure for their condition: the right surgery, by the right professional and at the right time.^{13,14} Both patients and doctors must have in their treatment arsenal all the options, both medical and surgical, and must select the best option for each particular case.

However, due to economic, sociocultural and gender disparities in particular, globally women do not always have timely access, do not receive complete and adequate information and do not always have the capacity to express an opinion about the procedures to which they will submit. This results in women ultimately experiencing medical interventions that negatively affect their quality of life.^{7,8}

When patients have an indication for benign gynaecological surgery, especially in LMICs, they face the so-called "vicious cycle of shortages". This confronts both doctors and patients with the

incongruity between patients' needs, financial access and availability of essential supplies and equipment.^{15,16,17}

FIGO recommendations

- FIGO recognises the negative impact of discrimination against women when accessing benign gynaecological surgery.
- FIGO calls for global gender-mainstreamed and socially inclusive policies to reduce inequality and allow women to have safe, timely and adequate access to surgical care.
- Decisions about benign gynaecological surgical care should be based on individual patient needs and not economic, political, social or religious constraints.
- Patients have the right to receive adequate and complete information about their health conditions and the surgical and non-surgical options available for their management. Education is the basis of decision-making and women must be able to participate actively in the surgical decision-making process.
- It is crucial that patients receive complete and detailed counselling about the risks and benefits of each treatment option, allowing them to make an adequate informed decision regarding management.
- FIGO promotes quality continued medical education that allows professionals to offer patients the best surgical techniques according to individual health conditions. FIGO also discourages the provision of surgical procedures by unqualified personnel in suboptimal settings. Proper training makes it possible to reduce complication rates and decreases the burden that benign gynaecological surgeries exert on society.
- Unrestricted access to benign gynaecological surgical care is vitally important and can translate into a significant decrease in preventable disabilities and deaths among women.
- FIGO recommends that affiliated societies implement local and regional mechanisms that provide visibility to the problem of patients' access to gynaecological surgery and support development of health policies that reduce the access gap for women.
- FIGO is committed to universal health coverage and works as hard on preventive care strategies as it does on access to medical, surgical and emergency care.

References

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About FIGO

FIGO is a professional membership organisation that brings together more than 130 obstetrical and gynaecological associations from all over the world. FIGO's vision is that women of the world achieve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives. Our work to achieve this vision is built on four pillars: education, research implementation, advocacy and capacity building.

FIGO leads on global programme activities, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. We advocate on a global stage, especially in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and wellbeing and non-communicable diseases (SDG3). We also work to raise the status of women and enable their active participation in achieving their reproductive and sexual rights, including through addressing female-genital mutilation (FGM) and gender-based violence (SDG5).

We also provide education and training for our Member Societies and build capacities of those in low-resource countries through strengthening leadership, translating and disseminating good practice and promoting policy dialogues.

FIGO is in official relations with the World Health Organization and a consultative status with the United Nations.

About the language we use

Within our documents, we often use the terms 'woman', 'girl' and 'women and girls'. We recognise that not all people who require access to gynaecological and obstetric services identify as a woman or girl. All individuals, regardless of gender identity, must be provided with access to appropriate, inclusive and sensitive services and care.

We also use the term 'family'. When we do, we are referring to a recognised group (perhaps joined by blood, marriage, partnership, cohabitation or adoption) that forms an emotional connection and serves as a unit of society.

FIGO acknowledges that some of the language we use is not naturally inclusive. We are undertaking a thorough review of the words and phrases we use to describe people, health, wellbeing and rights, to demonstrate our commitment to developing and delivering inclusive policies, programmes and services.

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