



DRUK YOUTH INITIATIVE FOR
SEXUAL ADVOCACY

UNDERSTANDING SAFE ABORTION, FEMINISM AND ALL THINGS THAT MATTER



KHESAR GYALPO UNIVERSITY
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TIMPHU, BHUTAN

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September 28th, the Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, now the International Safe Abortion Day, took shape in Latin America and the Caribbean where women's groups have been mobilizing around September 28 for the last two decades. The purpose behind setting aside a particular day is to concentrate and commemorate the global effort that goes into demanding that governments decriminalize abortion, provide access to safe and affordable abortion services, and actively work to end stigma and discrimination towards women who choose to have an abortion.

This year, to mark the International Day of Safe Abortion, the Druk Youth Initiative for Sexual Advocacy (D-YISA) organized a lecture at the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Studies in Timphu, Bhutan. The session was attended by 300 students from the Nursing and Health Assistant departments, as well as some lecturers and ran for close to two hours. The purpose of the event was to create awareness about the socio-cultural issues that impact access to safe abortion and the importance of legalizing abortion, as opposed to sharing medical information and technical updates, given that the crowd was already well-versed with this aspect of the abortion discourse. It was the first time that the Institute had someone talk on such a taboo subject. The range of topics covered during the conversation and the quality of the discussion made it a valuable event, and demonstrated how well the lecture was received despite a few doubtful voices.



A quick poll at the beginning of the talk revealed that despite being healthcare providers many people in the audience were not aware that abortion is legal in Bhutan. It came as a surprise to no one that most people thought it was completely illegal. It was an opportunity to clarify the legal status of abortion in Bhutan, and also acknowledge the support that the government extends towards safe abortion. However, it was equally important to recognize that this is not enough, and that it is critical for safe abortion to be completely legalized and recognized as a right in the country.



The lecture then addressed the many myths around abortion, women’s right to choose, and feminism that hinder access to safe abortion. This also wove in issues such as the links between patriarchy and violence against women, autonomy and reproductive justice and so forth. Many in the audience found these ideas quite eye-opening.

The session also included a Question and Answer session to give the audience space to ask questions and clarify any doubts they might have. To make it interesting, there was a give-away! The first one to give comments, or ask a question was promised ASAP pen-drive which got the crowd quite excited.

A lot of the questions were considered and demonstrated a willingness to engage with the topic at hand. A young girl asked if there has been research that looks at the links between religion and abortion. Dema pointed out that there is, in fact, a lot of research on abortion globally that specifically looks at the links between abortion and religion. She also talked about how many studies have attempted to clarify whether abortion is considered a sin by religion or not, but a consensus remains unclear. However, she also pointed out that from a scientific and rational point of view, life does not start until the birth of the baby. And therefore, abortion cannot be categorized as a sin.

More information to this debate was brought to light by a lecturer who offered a few clarifications. She called attention to how Bhutanese law allows for IUDs to be used as contraception, despite it being against Buddhist principles that do not allow for contraception that prevents the further development of a fertilized egg. Drawing parallels between the use of contraception and abortion in the context of Buddhist thought, she argued that if the former could be legal, why couldn’t abortion be completely legalised?



She then shared information on the links between septic abortion and infertility. Although useful information to keep in mind, Dema pointed out that abortion if done correctly with trained health personnel, clean facilities and at the appropriate gestation period, could terminate unwanted pregnancies without causing infertility. It is precisely examples such as this that make the need for safe abortion more evident.



Another question related to why there are more unsafe abortions in developing countries as compared to developed countries. In response, we posited that it could have to do with fairer abortion laws in developed countries, and access to advanced quality of care. She went on to clarify that if access to safe abortion is a human right, then is the state of Bhutan not in violation of a woman's right by not making abortions completely legal? Although a tricky question to answer given the political nature of the question, it was a useful moment to reiterate that, unlike a number of other countries, Bhutan has legalized conditional access to abortion services. Nonetheless, as long as access to abortion is linked to certain conditions, it remains in violation of a woman's right to choose to have a safe and legal abortion. Dema went on to point out that this was where, all of us, as civil society, play a crucial role, in lobbying, and convincing the state that it is of importance that they understand the need to completely legalize abortion in order to save women and girls from unsafe abortions.

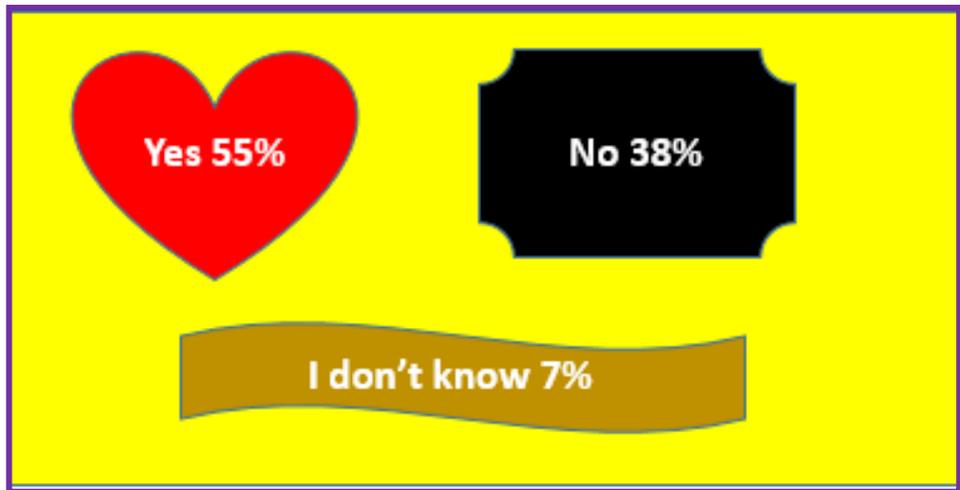
A doctor from Europe, suggested that it would have been useful to have separate data on spontaneous abortion, and what the various components of the abortion trends in Bhutan are. However, the data collected and presented was unofficial, and sourced from different newspapers over time, since there was no formal data collection mechanism as relates to abortion, and this made it hard to estimate whether these abortions were legal/illegal and safe/unsafe. This made obvious how critical the dearth of published evidence on abortion in the country limits the scope of rationalization of abortion scenario in the country.

One of the last comment, was a lecturer saying that it would have been prudent to limit the talk only on the status of legal abortions, with focus on safe abortions. Dema pointed out that given that it was her intention to sensitize the students on the issues that relate to safe abortion at large, the existing law and the limits to legal abortions were critical to that conversation.

Despite it being a very useful and expansive conversation, topics such as the need to provide abortion as a right, and the crucial role that healthcare providers can play in advocating for the right to safe abortion were touched upon to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Dema took advantage of such a big crowd to conduct a quick and exciting exercise. To begin with, she presented an online survey conducted in 2011 by DASHO Tshering Tobgay, then Opposition Leader, and ex-Prime Minister, which sought to understand public opinion on whether abortion should be completely legalized in the country. The findings were interesting as follows are summarized in the image.

Figure 1: DASHO Tshering Tobgay's survey results



After the lecture, the same question was asked of everyone in the room, and they were asked to respond with either a 'yes' or a 'no' on a piece of paper. Of the three hundred participants, 212 responded. It remains unclear whether the talk and the presentation impacted the decisions of the students and the lecturers, but the results of the survey gave us hope! 68.8% (146 of them) of the respondents said that abortion should be completely legalized in the country, and 27.8% (57 of them) said it should not be completely legalized, and while it was not an option offered, 3.3% (7 of them) chose to remain neutral.

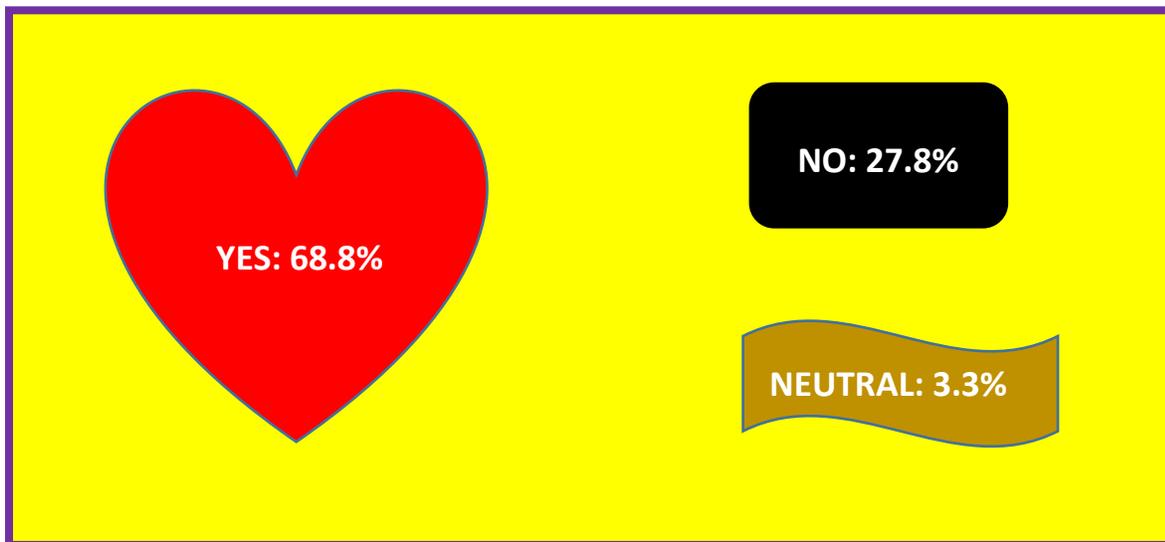


Figure 2: Dema Wangchuk's survey results!

