of coercion, we can set up programs to avoid coercion, identify instances of abuse quickly and address them appropriately. Defining coercion in terms of both violations and vulnerabilities is a start. The human rights principles and programming and the monitoring and accountability mechanisms that need to be in place to avoid coercion are clear. Many tools exist to establish family planning programs that use a human rights approach.20,84–88 A number of donors have adopted human rights–based approaches in their funding, and some governments have acknowledged human rights in their constitutions and national policies.

Monitoring and accountability mechanisms are crucial to ensuring that human rights are upheld. Policy and program safeguards must be put in place to prevent coercion and other rights abuses. Any act of coercion warrants attention; when there is widespread coercion in policy or program implementation, the remedy requires action by donors, governments and civil society to make systematic change. With an increased awareness of the vulnerabilities programs face, it may be easier to monitor family planning users’ experience. Routine program monitoring should be included as part of regular program activities, but useful monitoring data may also come from a variety of places—including outside watchdogs, ad hoc reporting of cases, civil society organizations, individuals or reports in the press. A simple investigation algorithm is suggested to show a complete investigation process including redress and reporting findings (Figure 1).

Accountability systems serve programs and individuals best when they are constructive rather than adversarial.89 When donors, international governing bodies and governments focus on program improvement rather than on punitive processes that penalize programs when coercion is uncovered, they help programs respect, protect and fulfill people’s right to family planning. USAID’s use of the Tiahrt Amendment to ensure voluntarism is an example of a donor accountability system, although the provisions in the amendment have been noted to be necessary but not sufficient to guarantee full, free and informed choice in family planning programs.90 FP2020 as a global movement also has a role to play in ensuring voluntary, rights-based family planning. The working groups that contribute to the implementation of FP2020 are emphasizing development of tools and indicators that can be used to identify potential problems with coercion, although there is still a need for funding the use of these tools and indicators in routine data collection. The media, including social media, can also help to spread awareness rapidly regarding human rights violations and coercive practices. In contexts such as Myanmar, the childbearing-limitation policy for Muslim Rohingyas attracted attention from media outlets such as Al Jazeera and Reuters, and the situation is being closely monitored. Furthermore, the spread of social media ensures that instances of coercion can be identified and called out more quickly and responses mobilized among stakeholders globally.

Legal mechanisms, national human rights commissions, and linking to human rights treaty bodies, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, can be important tools for addressing rights violations. Regional human rights commissions are also important, as seen by the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights, which received an inquiry from the Federation of Women Lawyers–Kenya and the Center for Reproductive Rights regarding the systemic problems with the reproductive health services in the country.91 This inquiry resulted in recommendations to ensure expanded availability and accessibility of information, supplies and services by increasing allocation of funds for family planning from government budgets and by addressing sociocultural barriers to access, including gender dynamics.92

Civil society groups also play a significant role in the follow-through and remediation of coercive family planning practices and human rights violations. For example, in Peru, legal organizations, the Public Ombudsman on Women’s Rights, the media and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights were involved in identifying, publicizing and prosecuting the cases of forced sterilization under the Fujimori regime.93,94 In Guatemala, efforts to hold the government accountable for the implementation of reproductive health policies led the government and the Multisectoral Monitoring Group to create the Reproductive Health Policy Implementation Board (OSAR).94 OSAR not only serves as a monitoring and accountability mechanism in the country, but also offers the opportunity for civil society groups, women’s groups and researchers to contribute to the monitoring process.95