

AFRICA: Unsafe abortion the scourge of African women - experts

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NAIROBI, 24 March (IRIN) - Ignorance and archaic laws fuel unsafe abortions in Africa, which kill an estimated 90 women on the continent every day, said health professionals in the Ethiopian capital this week.

At the closing session of a three-day conference on unsafe abortion in Africa on Thursday, researchers criticised what they described as "medical apartheid" and double standards that allowed abortion only under specific circumstances. "A lot of people are not aware of the disaster unsafe abortion provokes," said Eunice Brookman-Amisshah, vice-president of Ipas, a reproductive health organisation. "Too many laws in Africa are too restrictive. They would only allow abortion to save the life of the mother - this is unethical and not enough."

"By continuing to adhere to archaic colonial laws, by failing to implement international agreements, and by failing to act on growing evidence, we have allowed abortion to become the killing field for women in Africa," said Ghanaian gynaecologist Fred Sai. "This is the worst case of medical apartheid that exists. There is no law forbidding men to decide on their own body."

Sai denounced "double standards" in which wealthy people could afford safer abortions even if they were illegal, while the poor had to resort to unsafe procedures.

Unsafe abortion includes inserting sharp objects into the uterus, flushing the vagina with caustic liquids, throwing oneself from high places or repeated blows to the abdomen. These methods are responsible for 90 percent of the abortions carried out in Africa, where only Cape Verde, South Africa and Tunisia allow unrestricted abortion.

An estimated 4.2 million African women resort to these dangerous practices each year, and 30,000 die as a result, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Although only 10 percent of the global total of abortions happen in Africa, the continent accounts for almost half of the world's deaths from unsafe abortions, with one in 12 women dying, according to WHO. For every death, 20 to 30 women suffer permanent damage to their uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes, intestines or bladder.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, about 530,000 women die in pregnancy or childbirth every year, nearly half of them - 247,000 - in sub-Saharan Africa.

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