



Reducing Unsafe Abortions in Sub-Saharan Africa - Linking Research to Action

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It is estimated that over 23,000 women die from unsafe abortion complications in sub-Saharan Africa each year. The figure represents approximately 680 deaths per every 100,000 abortions carried out.

Despite the scale of women losing their lives or suffering permanent damage to their health, there remains an ignoring or complete silence on the magnitude of the loss of lives in many parts of the region.

Several research reports have shown that a large number of the maternal mortalities and injuries are preventable if women have adequate Reproductive Health (RH) care and post abortion that can be accessed easily and quickly.

Last week over 150 delegates from the sub-Saharan region and from abroad gathered in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa for a regional consultation and presented findings that focused on the dangers of unsafe abortions and the consequences.

Participants made up of policy makers, health care providers and researchers who are committed to seeing an end to the preventable deaths and injuries of unsafe abortions presented supporting research evidence on neglected women's health issues.

The research findings will strengthen the need for greater political will needed for urgent action to address the issue of unsafe abortion.

A repeated question asked during the consultation was "why are women still having unsafe abortions and risking their lives?" Lack of comprehensive affordable RH care, information on what RH care can be accessed have contributed much to women having unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.

Delegates agreed that there was need to collaborate efforts to ensure that the findings are used more effectively to help change policies and programs on RH.

Many women in Malawi continue to have unsafe abortions that result in death or permanent injuries. Post abortion care for women who have had abortions that went wrong has been acknowledged to add more financial pressure on the already ailing health systems in the country.

The laws of Malawi do not allow a woman to have an abortion unless for reasons provided for by law. According to the law anyone having an abortion or providing the service can be punished with imprisonment.

Although this is the case, women continue to seek termination of pregnancies from providers who carry out the procedure using herbs, detergents or sharp objects in unhygienic conditions that put a woman's life at risk. Because of the criminality of abortion, it is difficult to have proper statistics on the number of unsafe abortions taking place in the country.

The clandestine nature of the procedure means information on abortions is captured from referral hospitals and family planning services that provide post-abortion care for women who need help after undergoing an unsafe abortion.

The source of collecting statistics is permitting many cases to slip through the net and go unrecorded thus giving no clear picture or exposing the real magnitude of unsafe abortions taking place.

Statistics that are available may not be sufficient to make people sit up on unsafe abortions so as to make it a serious concern that needs to be addressed urgently by government, policy makers, NGOs and other stakeholders who are interested in promoting the well being, not only of women but also the entire nation.

Malawi is a signatory to several protocols and agreements that aim to ensure that women have better access to health facilities including RH.

Action needs to be taken to discover the causes of unsafe abortions and what measures are needed to address the problem.

Malawi stands to benefit from the agreement made by the consultation meeting; to carry out new research on unsafe abortions within the region in the next few years.

Over 52% of the population in Malawi are women. This makes the participation of women in development essential to the future progress of the country.

The Addis Ababa meeting held from 20 - 23 March at the United Nations Conference Centre was co-organised by African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), Ethiopian Society of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists (ESOG), Guttmacher Institute, IPAS, Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit (RHRU) and Women's Health and Action Research Centre (WHARC).

Dr. Eunice Brook-Brookman Amissah, head of the IPAS Africa Alliance for Women's Reproductive Health and Rights, Dr. Sharon Camp, President of Guttmacher Institute and Dr. Fred Sai of Ghana former President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation led the consultation.

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