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News extra

Conference warns of epidemic of unsafe abortions in Africa

London Peter Moszynski

Twelve per cent of maternal deaths in Africa are caused by unsafe abortions, with 90 women a day dying as a result, a conference in Ethiopia heard last month. The Regional Consultation on Unsafe Abortion in Africa, held at the UN Conference Centre in Addis Ababa, was chaired by the Ghanaian gynaecologist Fred Sai, the former president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. It was organised by reproductive health organisation Ipas and the US based Guttmacher Institute.

Dr Sai warned, "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."

Eunice Brookman-Amissah, vice president of Ipas and former health minister in Ghana, told the *BMJ*, "Last month's conference in Addis [Ababa] proved that unsafe abortion continues to kill and maim women across Africa. Compared [with] women in Europe, African women are more than 100 times more likely to die from abortion. Access to safe abortion is urgently needed to save their lives."

Dr Brookman-Amissah pointed out that only Cape Verde, South Africa, and Tunisia allow unrestricted abortions. "Too many laws in Africa are too restrictive," she complained. "They would only allow abortion to save the life of the mother. This is unethical and not enough." An estimated 4.2 million African women resort to unsafe abortions each year, and 30 000 die as a result, says the World Health Organization.

Although only 10% of the global total of abortions occur in Africa, the continent accounts for almost half of the world's deaths from abortions, with one in 12 women dying from the procedure. For every death, 20 to 30 women have permanent damage to their uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes, intestine, or bladder.

The United Nations Fund for Population Activities says that about 530 000 women die in pregnancy or childbirth every year, nearly half of them—247 000—in sub-Saharan Africa.

A consensus statement issued at the end of the meeting lamented, "Because their most basic health needs are systematically neglected, African women are more likely to die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth than women anywhere else in the world.

"Tens of millions of African women will experience an unsafe abortion in their lifetimes. Especially if they are poor and young, many will suffer serious injuries, lifelong disabilities, or death. Virtually all these deaths can be prevented and complications treated with

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simple, inexpensive medical technologies.”

The conference concluded, “Better access to comprehensive reproductive health care—including contraception, safe abortion and post-abortion care—is essential if African countries are to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of a 75% reduction in maternal mortality by 2015.”

The report, *Linking Research to Action to End Unsafe Abortion in Africa and Save Women’s Lives*, is available from www.ipas.org

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