

# Against Unsafe Abortion

## Reproductive Health Research Policy Brief

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### SAVING WOMEN'S LIVES

#### **MATERNAL DEATHS FROM UNSAFE ABORTIONS WOULD BE MUCH HIGHER IN NEPAL HAD PRIVATE DOCTORS NOT PROVIDED ABORTION SERVICES ON FEAR OF LEGAL ACTIONS**

In Nepal, induced abortion is a criminal act under any circumstances, even in case of rape or incest, punishable by imprisonment for both the woman undergoing an abortion and the service provider.

The 1997 nationwide prison study of CREHPA reveals that of the total women prisoners serving jail terms, 20% were sentenced for charges of abortion and infanticide. All these women were illiterate, poor and from rural areas and were the victims of exploitation. Although illegal, many women living in major urban towns seek safe abortion services from private medical practitioner and nursing homes.

Unfortunately, most urban towns also have unqualified or unskilled practitioners who risk women's life by attempting abortions through unsafe and unhygienic procedures.

In view of the increasing number of safe pregnancy terminations reported from private clinics and nursing homes, a rapid survey of private medical practitioners was conducted by CREHPA to assess their views on abortion practices and implications of legalizing abortions on such practices. The present Brief covers the key results of the rapid survey of private medical practitioners conducted by CREHPA.

*"Legal restrictions have not eliminated the abortion practices. In fact, repressive abortion legislation does not prevent abortion, it just prevents safe abortion, and turns abortion into a major killer of women"*

*Source: Ketting, 1993*



## Nepal

### Policy Brief

#### Facts and Figures on Abortion

- Nepal has one of the highest maternal deaths (539 per 100,000 live births) among SAARC countries. It is estimated that over half of the maternal deaths are due to unsafe abortions.
- Induced abortion is a criminal act under any circumstances, even in case of rape or incest, punishable by imprisonment for both the woman undergoing an abortion and the service provider.
- The 1997 nationwide prison survey by CREHPA reveals that 20% of women prisoners as against 0.3% men prisoners were there for charges of abortion or infanticide.
- Despite the highly restrictive abortion law, every year thousands of induced abortions are performed illegally in the country.
- As most unsafe abortions lead to serious health complications, treatment of abortion complications in hospital uses a disproportionate share of scarce hospital resources, including hospital beds, blood supply, medication, access to operation theatres, anesthesia and medical specialists.
- Studies show (CREHPA 1998 & 1999) between 20% and 60% of all obstetric and gynecological admissions in six major hospitals of the country are abortion complication cases.
- Women with abortion complications occupy hospital beds for about 3 days to over one week and spend on an average Rs. 3,918 for treatment.
- One-fifth of the women with complications of unsafe abortions admitted at government hospitals are adolescents.

- Majority of the government hospitals lack sufficient manpower, equipment and space to deal with abortion related complications. Hospital beds are overloaded in most cases.

### **About the Organization**

Center for Research on Environment Health and Population Activities (CREHPA) is a not-for-profit research organization (NGO). It is registered under Society's Act 2034 and also with the Social Welfare Council (SWC), Nepal.

Since past five years, CREHPA has been undertaking a series of research studies on abortions in the country. Inspired by the research results and favorable public opinion on abortion rights for women, the organization, in 1999, initiated Public Education and Advocacy Program (PEAP) against unsafe abortion with the funding support of the Ford Foundation. The program is aimed at empowering women to make conscious and timely decisions about their fertility and advocacy for legal reforms that would reduce the unwanted pregnancy and incidences of maternal deaths resulting from unsafe abortions in the country.

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