

Against Unsafe Abortion

Reproductive Health Research Policy Brief
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SAVING WOMEN'S LIVES

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR PREVENTING UNSAFE ABORTION IN NEPAL

"A WOMAN'S HEALTH IS ALREADY CRIPPLED BY FREQUENT PREGNANCIES AND CHILD-BIRTHS. LET US NOT CRIPPLE IT ANY FURTHER BY RESORTING TO UNSAFE ABORTIONS"

Nepal has one of the highest maternal mortality rates among the SAARC countries. It is estimated that deaths due to unsafe abortions account for over half of all maternal deaths in the country.

A woman living in a developing country faces a risk of death up to 250 times greater if she has to seek abortion services from an untrained, unskilled abortionist than if she has access to a skilled provider and hygienic conditions. The risk of death is significantly reduced when women have access to safe and legal abortion services.

PRESSURE ON HOSPITAL RESOURCES

Women with complications of unsafe abortions admitted in government hospitals for treatment continue to be high. Studies (CREHPA 1998 & 1999) showed, between 20% to 48% of women admitted as obstetric and gynecological patients in major hospitals of the country are those with complications of unsafe abortions. These women are hospitalized for 3-7 days and spent as high as Rs. 10,000 (average Rs. 3,918) for treatment of the complications of unsafe abortions. The nature of treatment required high doses of antibiotics, blood transfusions, IV fluids and sometimes hysterectomy operations. Almost all women admitted in the hospitals are married and from poor economic backgrounds.

WHAT IS UNSAFE ABORTION ?

World Health Organization (WHO, 1995) defines unsafe abortion, as "a procedure for terminating unwanted pregnancy either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking the minimal medical standards or both"

Abortion becomes unsafe if it is induced by the woman herself, by non medical or unskilled persons in unhygienic conditions. Such abortions are attempted by administering abortifacient preparations either orally or by inserting the preparations into the uterus, or by an improperly performed dilation and curettage procedure, ingestion of harmful substances, or exertion of external force.

WHAT IS SAFE ABORTION?

Any pregnancy terminated within 12 weeks (less than 3 months) of gestation by a medical practitioner under clinic situation (approved government or private health clinics] can be termed as "Safe Abortion".

Abortions can be generally unsafe if any of the three conditions mentioned above is unfulfilled.

RISKS OF UNWANTED PREGNANCIES AND UNSAFE ABORTIONS

In our country, although almost all married couples (98%) have heard about family planning, less than 30% of them actually use a family planning method. The rest, about 70%, do not practice family planning due to various reasons. The large majority of women who do not practice family planning are at risk of unwanted pregnancies. Many women are even prepared to take great risks to terminate their unwanted pregnancies illegally, and in a most barbarous manner.

HOW CAN WE PREVENT UNSAFE ABORTIONS

Legal restrictions have not eliminated the abortion practices. Instead, it has prevented safe abortions, and has turned unsafe abortion into a major killer of women. The safety and legality of abortion are matters of life and death for women. Contraception, no matter how widely it is used can reduce but not eliminate the need for abortion.

Liberalization of the abortion law should be the First *Step* towards preventing unsafe abortions and saving women's lives. Other Steps should include:

- Increase public awareness about the danger of unsafe abortions
- Promote post partum family planning services
- Discourage unskilled practitioners from performing abortions through public vigilance
- Provide necessary skills and equipment in the hospitals for medical terminations of pregnancies.

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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