

Unsafe Abortions on the Rise Across Africa

Amid increasing calls for legalization of abortion in Africa, botched cases among young women are on the rise, according to recent reports.

Governments are responding by distributing contraceptives, but the Roman Catholic Church, some Muslim groups and anti-abortion groups are waging their own campaigns against contraception, warning it will further escalate the problem.

More than 6 million unsafe abortions take place each year in Africa, resulting in 29,000 maternal deaths, according to the World Health Organization. Another 1.7 million women are hospitalized annually for complications from unsafe abortions.

Abortion is restricted in most African countries, except in South Africa, Cape Verde, Tunisia and Zambia. Abortion is strictly illegal in 14 countries.

The increase in the number of abortions is due largely to the rising number of women of reproductive age, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights.

According to the institute, only 3 percent of African abortions were performed under safe conditions.

In most of Africa, women seeking abortions have little recourse. Some go to traditional healers, many of whom employ unsafe techniques, or to nurses, who generally provide safer services. Some women try to induce abortion themselves, while others purchase abortion-inducing drugs from pharmacists.

A report last month by the African Population and Health Research Center showed the number of illegal abortions in

Kenya increased to more than 460,000 in 2012, a 48 percent jump from the estimated 300,000 abortions in previous years.

According to the report, 64 percent of married Kenyan women had an abortion at least once in their lifetime. More than 70 percent of those women said they did not use contraception.

Since its release, churches, mosques and anti-abortion groups have strongly criticized the report, describing its findings as inflated. Kenyan Roman Catholic bishops called the figures "disturbing," and said people should guard against questionable statistics that may scare them to accepting legalization of abortion. Abortion is outlawed in Kenya, except when the life of the woman is in danger.

"We reaffirm that life is sacred from conception until natural death," said Bishop Philip Anyolo, vice chairman of the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a statement. "We insist it is deceptive to treat abortion as a panacea to health, happiness and prosperity of a woman."

In Uganda, Imam Idi Kasozi, the secretary general of the Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly, warned against any government attempt to decriminalize abortion.

"We also need to look at our religions and cultures to bring out the good values that encourage sexual purity and abstinence," Kasozi said.

Dr. Jean Kagia, an OB-GYN in Nairobi who heads the Protecting Life Movement Trust, said abortion and unplanned pregnancies are a social problem.

"Many women fear after using the contraceptives they will not be able to have babies in future," she said. People here value babies and those who don't have their own are stigmatized. I think this is an African mind-set that must be well understood."

Women are having abortions because it has been readily made available to them, even where it's illegal, said Akech Aimba, a 33-year-old Kenyan woman who heads the Pearls and Treasures Trust, an anti-abortion organization that cares for women who have had an abortion.

Aimba had two abortions herself before being counseled by a Christian crisis pregnancy.

"I cried a lot," she said. "I started feeling ashamed of myself. There was deep-seated grief and emptiness I could not explain."

She is now convinced contraceptives are not the answer, either.

Distributing condoms freely, without giving information encourages risky sexual behavior leading to more abortions, she said.

"We are not solving the problem," she added. "We are not giving them life skills, but with the condoms people are pushed deeper into sexual addiction."

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