



Abortion rates are similar in countries where procedure is legal or restricted

Jacqui Wise

London

Abortion rates have declined globally over the past 25 years according to a comprehensive new report, although most of the change has occurred in developed regions with no significant change occurring in developing regions.¹

The report from the Guttmacher Institute—a research organisation that focuses on sexual and reproductive health—shows that abortion rates are similar in countries where abortion is highly restricted and where it is broadly legal.

The abortion rate is 37 per 1000 women in those countries where abortion is banned or permitted only to save the life of the pregnant woman, and 34 per 1000 women in countries where abortion is not restricted as to reason.

In developed regions, the abortion rate fell from 46 per 1000 women of reproductive age in 1990-94 to 27 per 1000 women in 2010-14. In developing regions, the rate dropped only slightly from 39 to 36 per 1000 women over the same time period.

By far the steepest decline occurred in Eastern Europe. The abortion rate also declined significantly in the developing sub region of Central Asia. Both areas are made up of former Soviet states where the availability of modern contraceptives increased sharply after political independence.

The unintended pregnancy rate has also declined globally from 74 unintended pregnancies per 1000 women of reproductive age in 1990-94 to 62 per 1000 women in 2010-14. However, unlike abortion rates, unintended pregnancy rates declined substantially in both developed and developing regions.

“Improved contraceptive use and, in turn, declines in unintended pregnancy rates are the likely driver behind the worldwide decline in abortion rates,” said Susheela Singh, vice president for international research at the Guttmacher Institute. “Most

women who have an abortion do so because they did not intend to become pregnant in the first place. Meeting the need for contraception is critical to bringing down rates even further.”

Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest annual rate of abortion of any world region—44 per 1000 women of reproductive age. This compares with 36 in Asia; 34 in Africa; 29 in Europe; and 17 in North America (per 1000 women).

The report said that of the 56 million induced abortions that occurred annually between 2010 and 2014, 55% were considered safe. Safe abortion is defined as that carried out by a trained person with a method recommended by the World Health Organization. Thirty one percent were less safe, and 14% were least safe. As of 2014, at least 22 800 women still die each year worldwide from complications of unsafe abortion.

The safety of abortions has improved because of improvements to abortion laws and advances in clinical guidelines. In addition, where abortion laws are highly restrictive the increased use of misoprostol, which is widely available and affordable, has improved safety. The report said that even when it is used by an untrained person misoprostol is still safer than traditional methods of clandestine abortion.

The report called for governments and health providers to do more to improve access to safe abortion care and to ensure that women have access to high quality contraceptive services to prevent unintended pregnancies in the first place.

1 Guttmacher Institute. Abortion worldwide 2017: uneven progress and unequal access. March 2018. www.guttmacher.org.

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