

ILLEGAL ABORTIONS AMONG YOUNG GIRLS

by Malika Ladjali, Sante Sexuelle et reproductive des jeunes, study carried out for the Independent Commission, April 1994

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One per cent of illegal abortions is estimated to result in the death of the woman. This mortality rate is more than 1,000 times lower when the abortion is done legally and under medical supervision. Five million of the 50 million abortions carried out each year are amongst young girls aged between 15 and 19. Because they are inexperienced, they realise they are pregnant at an advanced stage, frequently after the first three months.

They often consult backstreet abortionists after having tried dangerous drugs, bleach, quinine, detergents or having to tried to stick pointed objects such as knitting needles into their womb. Abortion complications among young girls are often more serious than amongst older women because they are often badly informed about available health service facilities and are afraid of consulting them. In many African countries, as many as 60 per cent of women in hospital due to abortion complications are under 20 years old.

STANDARDIZATION OF ABORTION LAWS DEMANDED IN MEXICO

Source: FEM, feminist monthly, Mexico, Dec 1994; reprinted in Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights Newsletter no. 49, Jan - Mar 1995.

On September 28, 1994 (Day of Action for the Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean), during the ceremony at the Monument to the Mother in Mexico City, Ana Maria Hernandez, of Salud Integral para la Mujer (SIPAM), pointed out that it is necessary to standardize laws specifying the grounds for legal abortion across the different Mexican states. She explained that the Penal Code of Mexico Federal District allows

abortion when the pregnancy is due to carelessness of the woman, result of rape, and when the woman's life is at risk. In Yucatan, Puebla, Veracruz, Oaxaca and Colima, it is allowed for malformation of the fetus. In Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Tlaxcala and Zacatecas, abortion is allowed when continuation of the pregnancy constitutes a risk to the woman's life.

"The decriminalization of abortion is a public health matter, and a question of democracy and social justice," said Hernandez during the ceremony.



YOUNG, VULNERABLE AND FEMALE

Source: Decade Link No. 16, March 1995.

Young women are the group most susceptible to HIV infection. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study on AIDS, 70% of the 3,000 women a day who contract HIV and the 500 women who die daily from AIDS worldwide are between the ages of 15 and 25. The study, which was conducted in three African and two Asian countries found:

- In Thailand, the HIV infection rate is greater among women between the ages of 15 and 25 than among all other women combined.

- In Uganda, there are more than twice as many reported AIDS cases among 15-to-25-year-old women than among men of the same age.

- In Rwanda, more than 25% of women who become pregnant and about 17% of those who engage in intercourse before they are 17 years old will become HIV-positive.

Dr. Michael Merson, Executive Director of the WHO Global Programme on AIDS, has listed three causes for high infection rates in young women.

Women are biologically more vulnerable. As the receptive partner, women have a larger

mucosal surface exposed during sexual intercourse; moreover, semen contains a far higher concentration of HIV than vaginal fluid. Women thus run a bigger risk of acquiring HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Women are epidemiologically vulnerable. Women tend to marry or have sex with older men, who may have more sexual partners and hence be more likely to have become infected. Women are also epidemiologically vulnerable to HIV transmission through blood. In the developing world women frequently require a blood transfusion during pregnancy or childbirth — for example, because of anaemia or hemorrhage.

Women are socially vulnerable to HIV. Men are expected to be assertive and women passive in their sexual relationship. In some cultures, men expect sex with any woman receiving their economic support. Whenever these traditional norms predominate, the result is sexual subordination, and this creates a highly unfavorable atmosphere for AIDS prevention.

When subordination leads to disaster

Women's sexual subordination is a direct result of their lower status in society, lack of independent income and lack of control over their sexual and economic lives. This dependency only heightens women's vulnerability to HIV infection.

In many societies, girls are married at a very early age. They are also the most frequent victims of incest and rape. Non-consensual, hurried or frequent intercourse can inhibit mucus production and cause genital trauma, increasing the likelihood of infection. Young women's lack of control over the circumstances under which intercourse occurs thus puts them at greater risk of HIV infection. Men often prefer to have sexual relations with younger women, who are assumed to be sexually inactive and thereby "safe" from HIV. These also places these girls at high risk of infection.