

Six ways to reduce unsafe abortion in India

India adopted a relatively liberal abortion law more than 40 years ago, but millions of women still turn to unqualified providers for abortion services each year and nearly 4,600 Indian women die annually from abortion-related causes. That's one death from unsafe abortion every two hours.

Many factors contribute to this problem. The number of qualified service providers is limited. Bureaucratic requirements for training, certification and other procedures limit access to care. There is little community awareness that abortion is legal and that safe services are available.

Strengthen access to safe abortion services in the current context

The current law allows for abortion on a broad range of conditions. To ensure women's access to safe abortion services, steps need to be taken to disseminate and implement the comprehensive abortion care training and service delivery guidelines and ensure that providers are trained and available at all levels of facilities, equipment and drugs are available to ensure services, communication activities are undertaken to increase awareness about legality and availability of safe abortion services and district level committees for certification of private facilities for safe abortion services as mandated by The MTP Act.

Expand the base of legal abortion providers

India basically has a "physicians only" abortion law. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act currently allows only gynecologists and MBBS doctors who have undergone specific training to provide abortion services. The number of providers could be significantly increased by amending the law to authorize medical practitioners with bachelor's degrees in Unani, Ayurveda or Homeopathy to provide abortion care. Distinguishing between training for medical and surgical methods of abortion also would allow more providers to be appropriately trained.

Increase the upper gestational limit for abortion

In cases where there is a diagnosis of substantial foetal abnormalities, the MTP Act should be amended to allow for later terminations, i.e. beyond 20 weeks of gestation. Technological and medical advancements in recent years have made late abortions safer than ever before.

There are immediate ways to begin reducing the number of deaths from unsafe abortion in India

Make the MTP Act comprehensive and clear

In addition to some other minor changes regarding definitions under the Act, an important issue to be addressed is the need for clearly stating that only the consent of the woman is required for the MTP procedure. This would address the common practice of providers insisting that a woman's husband also consent to the abortion.

Simplify access to legal abortion services

As per the law currently, women must obtain the opinion of one doctor for a first-trimester abortion and the opinion of two doctors for a second-trimester abortion. This is especially difficult for women living in rural areas, where there are far fewer physicians. Amending the MTP Act to simplify and reduce the requirement for a provider's opinion for both first and second trimester abortions would greatly increase women's access. Further, extending the condition of contraceptive failure for unmarried women as well would increase access.

Increase community awareness that abortion is legal and that safe services are available

Step up government-funded efforts to raise public awareness about abortion through mass media, mid media including wall signs, street theater, inter personal communication including the distribution of educational materials in health centers and other communications strategies. Studies in the states of Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh indicate that awareness about legality of abortion among men and women was only 20 percent in Jharkhand and 12 percent in MP. However, it is most significant to note that correct knowledge of abortions being legal till 20 weeks of gestation was as low as 0.3 percent in Jharkhand and 2 percent in MP. Public awareness campaigns on legality and availability of abortion at the national and state level are required to increase knowledge among men & women in the country.