Correspondence

Increasing incidence of unsafe abortions among female Pakistani university students: Lack of awareness and social stigma proves to be fatal

Dear Editor,

The right to abortion is considered a major milestone in ensuring the reproductive autonomy and safety of women; unfortunately, in some underdeveloped regions around the globe, safe abortion is a privilege not granted to many. Pakistan is one such example. Citizens do not have access to cheap contraceptives and a lack of awareness about contraceptives means that the unwanted pregnancy rate is shockingly high, accounting for 37% of all pregnancies. This eventually contributes to a high abortion rate with 890,000 abortions carried out every year in women aged 15–49 [1]. While abortion is legal in Pakistan, it is only allowed under circumstances in which the mother’s health is at risk or as a necessary treatment in early pregnancy [2]. Since the law does not exactly specify who’s eligible for abortion, many women have to resort to unsafe or criminal abortions which lead to painful consequences or in most cases, death.

In countries like Pakistan, there is a considerable stigma associated with abortions as most people believe that children are a gift and all lives deserve to be brought into the world. This mindset is not only prevalent among the general population but also heavily influences healthcare workers. Hence, most healthcare services or hospitals refuse to perform abortions unless absolutely necessary. Some doctors and midwives are also of the opinion that abortion is unreligious thus their refusal in performing it [3].

While the situation is bleak for married women looking for safe abortion practices, it is even worse for females who get pregnant out of wedlock. Unmarried pregnant women are heavily shamed by society and are in most cases shunned even by their own friends and family. Hospitals also do not cater to such women hence the last resort for them is illegal, criminal abortion. Lately, there has been a rise in the incidence of unsafe abortions among unmarried Pakistani university students which has led to their painful demise.

One such case is of a female university student whose dead body was left outside a hospital in Lahore; the post mortem report showing that the woman had died due to heavy bleeding during an unsafe abortion [4]. Despite being educated, the shame and stigma associated with her pregnancy prevented her from seeking professional help which could have prevented her death. Another 18-year-old university student from Gujrat met a similar fate when she died due to complications from an unsafe abortion, according to police reports [5]. A similar case was reported from Lahore where a university student was raped and was then forced to illegally abort by her abuser [6]. This increasing trend of unsafe abortions among female university students is extremely concerning and brings to light the ugly reality of abortion practices in Pakistan and the scarcity of resources available for safe abortion.

It is high time that the healthcare sector takes measures to prevent more incidences like these. Since abortion is a basic healthcare right, the procedure should be provided to every female in need of it, regardless of her marital status. The first step to eliminating criminal abortions is to reduce the stigma around abortion by educating the masses on safe abortion practices, and making resources for this available to the general public. Hotlines should be created by the government to guide people regarding abortion and provide information as to where they can get such procedures in a safe and professional environment. Since doctors also show hesitancy towards performing abortions, seminars on safe abortion practices and their importance in a country like Pakistan should be conducted in order for more healthcare professionals to start offering these services. Most importantly, doctors and healthcare workers need to keep their prejudice aside and treat all patients in need of abortion the same, whether married or unmarried. Inculcating the topic of sexual health and abortion in the curriculum taught to university students can also be of great benefit considering that lately multiple university students have fallen victim to criminal abortions. Unless hospitals and clinics are willing to entertain such patients, more young women will continue to die a death that could have been easily prevented by professional care.

Ethics statement

The present study includes printed and published information; therefore, the formal ethical clearance was not applicable for this study.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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