

# Fact Sheet

Q&A: ABORTION RISKS COMPARED WITH PREGNANCY

ABORTION  
LAW  
REFORM  
ASSOCIATION  
NEW ZEALAND

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## **Question**

*Is pregnancy safer than abortion?*

## **Answer**

*No. Abortions performed by trained providers under hygienic conditions are much safer than pregnancy and childbirth.*

## **Facts**

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in 2008 approximately 358,000 women worldwide died from pregnancy and childbirth-related issues such as hemorrhage, hypertensive disorders, sepsis and infections, anemia and obstructed labour (WHO 2010). Earlier WHO estimates, reflecting data for 2003, indicate 66,500 deaths from complications related to unsafe abortion (WHO 2007A). According to WHO, an unsafe abortion is the termination of a pregnancy carried out by someone without the skills or training to perform the procedure safely, or that takes place in an environment that does not meet minimal medical standards, or both (WHO 2003).

Context matters: 87 percent of women who die annually from pregnancy and childbirth live in poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These women face enormous social, legal and economic barriers to obtaining prenatal care, emergency obstetric care and safe abortion services. As a result, they suffer from pregnancy complications that are preventable or treatable. These complications often result in death or long-term health problems. In developing countries, 59 women per 100,000 live births die from unsafe abortion complications (Hill et al. 2007, Shah and Say 2007, WHO 2007A), while an estimated 260 women die for every 100,000 live births due to pregnancy and childbirth (WHO 2010).

In developed countries where abortion is legally permitted and health-care providers are trained to offer safe services, abortion mortality is low – 0.2-2.0 deaths per 100,000 abortions (WHO 2007A, WHO 2007B). However, pregnancy-related deaths are approximately nine times higher, at nine deaths per 100,000 live births (Hill et al. 2007). In New Zealand, since reliable abortion statistics began being collected in 1980, there has not been a single recorded death from abortion.

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***Background***

Global campaigns to reduce death related to pregnancy and childbirth include the Safe Motherhood Initiative and The White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood. One of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted at the Millennium Summit is improving maternal health (MDG5) (United Nations Development Programme 2010).

These initiatives all recognize that pregnancy and childbirth present serious risks to women's health and lives, particularly those women whose access to health services and education is limited. Unsafe abortion also is recognized by global health experts as an important risk factor for women's health and lives. Efforts to make safe abortion services available and accessible to women and to decrease the incidence of unsafe abortion are important so that their health and lives are preserved.