

More progress needed on access to safe abortions: new report

by Jo Spratt
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Every year 22 million women experience the trauma of an unsafe abortion: 47,000 die as a result. For five million more the outcome is a disability. An overwhelming 98 per cent of all unsafe abortions occur in developing countries ([WHO statistics](#)). These deaths are entirely preventable. Where abortion is restricted by law, it tends to be unsafe for women. Where abortion is supported on broad legal grounds, it is generally safe. Yet broad legal grounds for abortion are the legislative exception [across the world](#). This means women who make the agonising decision to undergo an abortion often experience severe rights violations.

To promote the lifting of restrictive legislation, September 28 is the Global Day of Action for Safe and Legal Abortion. This year, to mark the day, the [International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion](#) has launched a report detailing how criminalising abortion leads to gross human rights violations. '[Abortion in the criminal law](#)' is a preliminary report, summarising the available research on the role justice and prison systems, health professionals and governments play in enforcing criminal law on abortion, and the impacts this has on women. The report illustrates how women have experienced "degrading and humiliating treatment" and multiple civil, political and legal rights violations, simply because they have needed to seek an abortion. Many abortion providers have risked "their professional careers and the lives to help women", while others have reported women to the justice system.

Here in the Pacific, there is little research available regarding the impact of generally highly restrictive laws. In discussions with health professionals, there is little doubt abortion is occurring. Yet more detail is absent, although we know abortion providers have been imprisoned. While all of the report's recommendations are relevant to the Pacific, such as decriminalizing abortion and ensuring access to safe abortion, perhaps the best place to start is with the first – more research into the impacts of restrictive legislation.

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