Brazil

In Rio de Janeiro, the experiences of women seeking abortion services are as varied as its diverse culture. In the Complexo da Mare, one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in the city, women without other options resort to homes remedies ranging from ineffective to dangerous — one teenage girl described drinking "newspaper tea" to induce an abortion.

"You get the dirtiest newspapers, boil them in a pan of water and drink it," she said. "Sometimes you just vomit, but sometimes you get lucky."

Experiences are vastly different for Rio's women with money. Twenty-nine-year-old Carmen sought out a clinic in a respectable area that was recommended to her by word of mouth.

"Everybody knows where these clinics are," she said. "You phone up, ask for an appointment, then hand over the money. The later in pregnancy you are, the more you pay."

But even wealthy women run the risk of damaging their health or losing their lives.

"If anything goes wrong, they don't want to know," Carmen said. "The doctors are just as afraid of the law as you are" (Rimmer 2003).

Background

Since 1994, Ipas Brazil has worked to improve awareness and care for women victims of sexual violence and women suffering from unsafe abortion-related complications. During the past decade, Ipas Brazil has emerged as a national leader on women's reproductive health and rights in Brazil, specializing in directly training and equipping health systems and providers to carry out high-quality abortion services and postabortion care (PAC). Building on the pioneering work of Brazilian women's organizations and the obstetrics-gynecology community, Ipas Brazil has expanded its efforts to increase rape victims' access to comprehensive treatment and services, including abortion.

Although Brazilian law only permits abortion in cases of rape and danger to the woman's life, an estimated 1 million abortions are performed in the country each year (Ipas Brasil et al. 2007). The majority of abortions are clandestine and performed under dangerous conditions — making unsafe abortion the fourth-leading cause of maternal death in Brazil (Human Rights Watch 2006). Marginalized populations, especially adolescents, are at a particularly high risk for unplanned pregnancy and unsafe abortion.

Since 2003, the Brazilian government has strengthened its commitment to protecting women's health and rights, including the launching of new national norms for abortion care and the revision of norms for care for victims of sexual violence. In 2006, Brazil enacted the Maria de Penha law, which strengthens penalties for domestic abuse and mandates resources and information for survivors of domestic violence. The Maria de Penha law also recognizes rape within a domestic relationship as a crime and affords women in unions all of the medical and legal resources provided to women sexual violence outside of a domestic relationship, including the right to a legal abortion.

Statistic	Data
National population	189,300,000
Total fertility rate for women aged 15–49	2.3
Maternal mortality ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births)	110
Percent age of married women married aged 15–49 using modern contraception	70*

*data prior to 2001

Key accomplishments

- Ipas Brazil held 30 training events focusing on postabortion care (PAC) and comprehensive abortion care (CAC) in 2007; 26 of these events had financial and logistical support from state and municipal Secretariats of Health.
- Ipas Brazil completed a values-clarification manual, *Dealing with values and promoting access to legal and safe abortions*, which will be used to train health professionals.
- Ipas Brazil worked with a local public-relations firm to develop a media campaign titled "Sexual Violence, Know Your Rights." In the three months following the launch of this campaign, calls to the state sexual violence hotline tripled.
- Ipas Brazil disseminated findings from *The national study on the magnitude of abortion in Brazil* by Ipas and the State University of Rio de Janeiro's Institute of Social Medicine through media workshops held in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Brasília.
- Ipas Brazil and partners – Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir (Catholics for Choice), Jornadas, Centro Feminista de Estudos e Assessoria (CFEMEA) and SOS Corpo — organized events in Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre to advance debates and strategies for abortion decriminalization. These events brought together health providers, parliamentarians and reproductive and sexual rights activists.
- Working with the Brazilian Federation of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (FEBRASGO), Ipas Brazil published an electronic book containing case studies on reproductive and sexual health and rights, focusing on the most common problems regarding abortion and sexual violence in medical practice.

What Ipas's work means for women

Brazil's lack of safe abortion services and postabortion care translates to countless preventable injuries and deaths. Even when women meet the requirements for legal abortion services, access to reproductive health care is heavily restricted. Referral services intended to assist women victims of sexual violence after they have been raped or when their lives are endangered often obstruct women's abilities to access abortion services. Health professionals, as well as other professional groups within Brazil, need to be further sensitized to the specific circumstances of these women.

Ipas Brazil works to increase women's access to legal abortion services. Ipas Brazil trains health-care providers in manual vacuum aspiration (MVA), a safe and effective method for uterine evacuation; works to increase public awareness of the need for less restrictive laws; and combats sexual violence, a major factor in the need for abortion services. Together, these efforts will significantly improve the health of women throughout Brazil.

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Ipas *Protecting women's health*
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