

Perceptions of Policymakers towards Unsafe Abortion and Maternal Mortality in Nigeria

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Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to explore the perceptions of key policymakers towards maternal mortality and unsafe abortion in Nigeria. A total of 49 policymakers were interviewed in the six geo-political zones of the country, with an open-ended interview guide that solicited information on their knowledge of the causes of abortion-related maternal mortality and their perceptions of the policies and action-plans needed to address the problem. The results showed poor knowledge by the participants regarding the magnitude of maternal mortality and abortion-related deaths in Nigeria, though they gave vivid narratives on specific women who had died or nearly died from unsafe abortion. Policymakers were guided by moral and religious considerations rather than by current evidence-based considerations. Only four participants recognized the fact that abortion will go on regardless of the law. One-third of key informants were opposed to liberalizing the laws on abortion in Nigeria, while one-fifth supported liberalization, at least on "medical grounds", and to deal with unwanted pregnancies due to rape and incest. Participants strongly recommended increased access to contraception, sexuality education, improvement of the health care system, free medical services for pregnant women, and women's empowerment as ways to reduce the high rate of maternal mortality in Nigeria. The results suggest the need for an intense public health education

and advocacy targeting policymakers as ways to increase political will for reducing abortion-related maternal deaths in Nigeria. We conclude that indirect approaches consisting of presentation of a mix of statistics on unsafe abortion with compelling personal stories will more likely resonate with policymakers in Nigeria, rather than a direct approach about abortion law reform.

Method

Forty-nine in-depth interviews conducted with key policymakers in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. Interviews were conducted with policymakers in the States and the Federal level consisting of Federal Ministry of Health officials, Speakers and members of Federal and State legislative Assemblies, Commissioners of Health and Women Affairs, Permanent Secretaries, Ministries of Health, Physician to a top Government functionary, and Directors of Planning and Research in States Ministries of Health. Respondents were pre-selected to ensure a wide representation of the various categories of policymakers, but only those who accepted to be interviewed and could be reached after repeated visits were finally interviewed. Within each zone, interview respondents were selected to represent the different six States in the zone. Thus, as an example, when six respondents are interviewed within a zone, each respondent will be from a different state within the zone. This was to ensure wide representation of all the States, and to cover the entire country. A team comprising a medical practitioner/reproductive health expert, a sociologist/social worker and a local contact person were constituted to organize the interviews in each Zone.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. You are probably aware that a large number of women die during pregnancy in Nigeria. In your opinion, what are the causes of these deaths?
 - *Probe for all causes of maternal deaths*
2. To what extent does abortion contribute to these deaths?
 - *Probe for cases of maternal deaths due to abortion that the respondent may be aware of*
3. What factors do you think are responsible for maternal deaths in Nigeria?
 - *Encourage respondent to list as many social, cultural, religious and other factors as possible*
4. What kinds of situations do you think make women resort to abortion in Nigeria?
 - *Probe further even if the respondent says abortion is illegal*
 - *Probe for as many reasons as possible, and if possible ask for examples of real cases*
5. In your opinion, how can the number of abortions be reduced in Nigeria?
6. Sexuality education for young people has been advocated as a method to reduce the need for abortion. What do you think about this?
7. What of contraception, and family planning? Some women do not use contraception, but rather resort to abortion. Why do you think this is the case? What do think should be done?
8. What do you think about the abortion law in Nigeria? What kinds of changes, if any, do you think should be made?
 - *Probe for incest, rape, health of the woman, etc*
9. What do you think government and policymakers should do to reduce the number of maternal deaths in Nigeria?
 - *Probe for as many recommendations as possible*
10. What do you think government and policymakers should do to reduce the number of abortion-related deaths?
 - *Probe for as many recommendations as possible*

Thank you