

10 Things You Need to Know About the Social Costs of Unequal Access to Safe Abortions

1.



Abortion is illegal in Jamaica, but women still obtain them. An estimated 6,000 – 22,000 abortions are performed in the country every year.

2.



The illegality of abortion only affects poor women. Safe abortions are available to well-off women who can afford them. Poor women attempt to terminate their pregnancies by taking pills bought from the black market without medical supervision, or concoctions; or they go to unlicensed, untrained abortion providers, in unregulated settings. Many of these abortions are unsafe and present a high risk of complications or even death.

3.



Complications from abortion is the third leading cause of maternal death, and the second leading cause of adolescent maternal death, in Jamaica. Up to 43 percent of women who present at hospital with complications in early pregnancy may be due to attempted abortion.

4.



Treating botched abortions comes at a cost to the Jamaican public health system. There are rarely serious complications from safe abortions, done by trained providers, according to WHO standards.

5.



Most women who suffer from unsafe abortion-related complications in Jamaica are poor. Women who have had botched abortions can be pushed further into poverty by the expenses of treating the complications, and lost income when they are unable to work.

6.



The families, especially the children, of women who have had botched abortions, or worse die, bear a huge cost, as the family's income is affected by treating the complications, and by lost income, which has effects on the children's nutrition, education, and well-being.

7.



Being unwanted during pregnancy can have long-term negative consequences on children's lives—both the unwanted, and their siblings. An estimated 5,000 children are born each year from unwanted pregnancies in Jamaica, most to single women from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Children of an unwanted pregnancy are more likely to have poorer health, suffer from violent parental behaviour, experience socioeconomic hardship, and are more prone to mental illness. Maternal rejection, unstable or harsh behaviour, lack of parental supervision, and exposure to violence in childhood are among the best predictors of juvenile delinquency and violent youth behaviour. The siblings of children unwanted in pregnancy have worse developmental outcomes than the siblings of children who were wanted.

8.



Legal access to abortion services is positively related with women's increased human capital accumulation. In Jamaica, pregnancy is the number one reason girls drop out of school. When young women are excluded from education their opportunities to form human capital are diminished. Human capital development affects a country's economic growth through increased labour productivity and wages. Investment in women's education has a positive effect on macroeconomic growth.

9.



Removing legal restrictions on abortion increases women's labour force participation and career development, which benefits economic output, growth, and development. An additional US\$248 million could be added to Jamaica's annual economic output only due to an increase in innovation, and in the size of labour force, if women were legally able to choose whether or not to carry an unintended pregnancy to term.

10.



There is a positive association between abortion legalization and decreased crime rates in North America and Europe. It has been posited that children born after legalization of abortion are less likely to engage in criminal behaviour because access to legal abortion reduces the number of unwanted pregnancies among adolescents and economically disadvantaged women, and so fewer children were born in circumstances that would put them at a higher risk of engaging in criminal activity. We estimate that, absent any other changes, access to legal abortion might reduce Jamaica's crime rates in 15 to 20 years by 20 percent.

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