

Young People's Abortion Trajectories In Papua New Guinea

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Background:

Access to safe and timely abortion services is a fundamental human right. Young people around the world face a range of social and structural barriers to accessing safe abortions. Unsafe abortion is a leading factor in global maternal mortality and morbidity, particularly affecting young women in settings where legal abortion is restricted, such as Papua New Guinea. Little is known about young men's and women's experiences of abortion in settings where abortion is stigmatised and restricted, or about factors that influence abortion trajectories within the context of restrictive policy and socio-cultural constraints.

Methods:

Data was collected during an NHMRC-funded qualitative study in 2019-2020 on young people's experiences of pregnancy in urban, peri-urban and rural settings in PNG. Interviews were conducted with 72 young people (36 men and 36 women) aged 15-24 years.

Results:

Our findings highlight the complexity of young people's abortion trajectories across key moments in time, from initially learning about pregnancy through to the aftermath of abortion. A range of relational and structural influences shaped abortion decision-making, including: relationship status; pressure from partners and family; social consequences of pregnancy; desire to protect familial reputation; access to affordable abortion care; and legal restrictions to safe abortions. A range of traditional and biomedical abortion practices were identified, some resulted in complications requiring hospital treatment and post-abortion care. Young women and men described varied emotional responses to abortion, including relief, guilt, shame and grief.

Conclusion:

Young people's abortion decision-making is highly constrained in PNG and influenced by familial and community expectations and a highly restrictive legal environment that limits young women's access to safe abortion services. Ensuring young people's sexual and reproductive rights through access to safe abortion care

and contraception to prevent pregnancy is urgently needed in PNG to address the high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity.

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