

Cook Island Women's Safety, Health, and Wellbeing in the Context of Abortion

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Background:

Abortion is significantly restricted by law throughout Pacific Island countries, including the Cook Islands. This has implications for women's health, wellbeing, and safety. There is little research exploring Pacific Island women's lived experience of abortion.

Method:

We interviewed women who had accessed or tried to access abortion services, support people, health workers, and advocates in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, between February – August 2022. We also conducted three focus groups with women aged 19-22 years, 27-36 years, and 50+ years.

Results:

Cook Island women's health, socioeconomic, relationship, and other concerns related to their unplanned pregnancy meant having an abortion was often a clear decision.

Given the legal restrictions, Cook Island women obtained their abortions overseas; by ordering online and self-administering medications to induce abortion; by attempting traditional remedies such as visiting ta'unga; or drinking excessive amounts of alcohol or strong coffee. Participants navigated social-medical-legal constraints on abortion services, sometimes putting their health and wellbeing at risk where barriers to travel and medication abortion were insurmountable for financial, practical, medical, and other reasons. Experiences of stigma related to participants' sexuality, pregnancies, and abortions were also described.

Despite these structural constraints, participants also reported support within their networks, and some women sought comfort in cultural symbols, food, and people with shared cultural background.

Conclusion:

This research highlights the layers of restriction and stigma participants navigate when seeking abortion services, and these impact concepts of safety and wellbeing, supporting an argument for a more encompassing definition of 'safe abortion'.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

We declare no conflict of interest.