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**UNPLANNED PREGNANCY COMMON WORLDWIDE
Neither Legal Status of Abortion nor Health Risk
Deters Women from Terminating Pregnancies**

Four in 10 Pregnancies Unplanned—Half of Which End in Abortion

Each year, about 35 of every 1,000 women of childbearing age in the world have an induced abortion. Despite variations in the legal status of abortion, when women living in more and in less developed regions are compared, their overall abortion rates are strikingly similar (39 abortions per 1,000 and 34 abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age, respectively). The slightly higher level in the *developed* than in the *developing* world largely reflects that the *developed* world includes Eastern Europe, the area with the highest rate of abortion (90 per 1,000 women).

Of the estimated 210 million pregnancies that occur throughout the world each year, about 38% are unplanned, and 22% end in abortion, according to a new report by The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI)

- In *developed* countries (where average desired family size is small), of the 28 million pregnancies occurring every year, an estimated 49% are unplanned, and 36% end in abortion.
- In *developing* countries (where average desired family size is still relatively large), of the 182 million pregnancies occurring every year, an estimated 36% are unplanned, and 20% end in abortion.

“It is clear that women the world over go to great lengths to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. It is not only our responsibility but our duty to respect that decision. We must do our best to ensure that abortion takes place only under safe conditions and to see that women

have the means to prevent pregnancy in the first place,” comments Jeannie I. Rosoff, AGI’s president.

The new report, *Sharing Responsibility: Women, Society and Abortion Worldwide*, examines the major factors that contribute to unplanned pregnancy and the reasons women give for choosing to terminate pregnancies. It provides the most up-to-date information on abortion in both legal and illegal circumstances around the world.

About 26 million women have legal abortions each year, and an estimated 20 million have illegal abortions. The conditions women face when they choose to have an abortion differ enormously from one part of the world to another:

- 25% of the world’s women live in parts of the world where abortion is permitted only to save a woman’s life or is prohibited altogether.
- 10% reside in countries where abortion is allowed when it is necessary to protect a woman’s physical health or her life.
- 4% live in places where abortion is permitted for these reasons or to protect a woman’s mental health.
- 61% of women live under more liberal laws: 20% in countries that permit abortion for socioeconomic reasons, as well as for the narrower grounds described above, and 41% in countries where women may obtain the procedure without being required to give a specific reason (at least in the early months of pregnancy).

Millions of women who live in countries that place severe restrictions on abortion nevertheless attempt to end their pregnancies by unauthorized and often unsafe means. The World Health Organization defines an unsafe abortion as a “procedure for terminating an unwanted pregnancy [carried out] either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking the minimal medical standards, or both.”

Abortions carried out under such conditions place women’s health and lives at risk. For example, of the estimated 600,000 annual pregnancy-related deaths worldwide, about 13% (or 78,000) are related to complications of unsafe abortion. In *developing* regions (excluding China), where abortion is often illegal or highly restricted, abortion mortality is hundreds of times higher than in *developed* countries (330 deaths per 100,000 abortions compared with 0.2-1.2 per 100,000). Mortality due to abortion is highest in Africa—an estimated 680 deaths per 100,000 procedures.

Based on analyses of government data and other research, the information in the Institute’s new comprehensive study on abortion worldwide comes mainly from countries in

which pregnancy termination is legal and the number of abortions is collected by the government. However, some regional estimates and some estimates for countries in which abortion is illegal are also included.

Jeannie Rosoff comments further, “In the poorest countries, women are exposed to the highest risks of death and disability from unsafe, usually illegal abortion—often leaving whole families bereft of mothers and wives. The major victims are women living on the edges of survival, with few prospects that their governments can or will do much to improve their lot.”

The findings from *Sharing Responsibility: Women, Society and Abortion Worldwide* point to several possible policy responses to reproductive health and social problems faced by individual countries or regions. In addition to providing sexuality and family life education, introducing contraceptive services where these are nonexistent, and expanding and improving them where they are inadequate, the report suggests that

- where abortion services are of high quality and easily accessible, governments need to give priority to maintaining them; and
- where abortion is provided predominantly in unsafe conditions, governments must try to create a consensus in favor of addressing the harmful social and health consequences of this situation.

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The Alan Guttmacher Institute is a not-for-profit organization focused on reproductive health research, policy analysis and public education, with offices in New York City and Washington, D.C.

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Abortion

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SHARING RESPONSIBILITY WOMEN SOCIETY & ABORTION WORLDWIDE