

Mozambique decriminalises abortion to stem maternal deaths

December 19 2014, by Susan Njanji, Adrien Barbier

Mozambique has passed a law permitting women to terminate unwanted pregnancies under specified conditions, a move hailed by activists in a country where clandestine abortions account for a large number of maternal deaths.

President Armando Guebuza on Thursday quietly signed into law a revised penal code bill that eases prohibitions in abortion regulations.

The new law specifies that abortions will have to be carried out in recognised and designated health centres by qualified practitioners.

Termination must be carried out within the first 12 weeks but in case of rape, the period is extended to 16 weeks.

It will also be allowed when the pregnancy poses a serious risk to the health or life of the mother or in case of foetal abnormality.

In Mozambique, the earlier law outlawing abortion, except in cases where the mother's life or health is endangered, dates to the late 19th century, when the mainly Catholic Portuguese controlled the country. The other major creed in Mozambique is Islam, a faith which also does not support abortion.

But the Catholic church said it was not against the legal reform.

"It's not a matter of law but of conscience," said Joao Nunes of the

Episcopal Conference of Mozambique. "We will rather work on raising awareness among our community not to resort to abortion, to choose life."

A fundamental step

The change came after a decade of spirited lobbying by reproductive health advocates in Mozambique, where clandestine abortions are one of the leading causes of deaths among pregnant women and girls.

Abortion accounts for 11 percent of maternal deaths in Mozambique, according to health watchdogs.

The move is a victory for women because it's not so "restrictive" anymore but more should still be done, said Ivone Zilhao, a Maputo-based sexual and reproductive health doctor with Pathfinder, an international NGO that promotes safe and legal abortion services.

Her colleague Estrella Alcalde described the development as "a fundamental step, but we still have challenges ahead of us in terms of implementation."

The law will only be in force after six months. In the meantime, the health ministry will have to work out the details of the regulations.

"The law in itself is not enough," said Muluka Miti-Drummond of the Southern African Litigation Centre, an NGO promoting rights in the region.

"The government of Mozambique must ensure that adequate resources, including infrastructure, sufficient number of duly trained health professionals and appropriate sanitised equipment, are available and accessible to all in all parts of the country," she said.

Many African countries have strict laws that prohibit abortion, leaving women to resort to secret and unsafe methods of termination such as insertion of knitting needles or coat hangers to prick the foetus.

Cape Verde, South Africa and Tunisia are the few countries that allow for therapeutic abortion.

The World Health Organization estimates that one in every five pregnancies worldwide ends in induced abortion and that around 47,000 women die due to complications linked to unsafe abortion.

Treating complications arising from abortion have been draining resources in the impoverished country trying to rebuild its infrastructure after a 16-year civil war.

Hospitalisations following illicit abortions cost five to eight times more than safe abortion or giving birth, said Zilhao.

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