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'Healthcare providers don't know abortion is not illegal'

Ikram Junaidi | December 06, 2018

ISLAMABAD: Healthcare providers are unaware that abortions in Pakistan are not illegal and are instead restricted, owing to flexibility in the law, a health expert revealed on Wednesday.

Speaking at an event on 'Family Planning Beyond PDHS', Dr Ghulam Shabbir said:

“Many health practitioners deny abortions as they do not have complete knowledge of the law. A provider can refuse, but it is her responsibility to send the client to a safe service provider and safe facility.”

He said that there are 2.2 million abortions in Pakistan every year, with the majority of women turning to unsafe service providers and thereby facing post-abortion complications. Post-abortion care is again provided by untrained service providers, increasing the mortality rate.

Dr Shabbir explained that the 1860s abortion law in Pakistan stated that it was permitted to save the life of the mother. In 1990, the law was relaxed further, he added.

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Currently 69pc of service providers use unsafe abortion methods. Post-abortion family planning is also very important, Dr Shabbir said, and clients should be convinced to start family planning. Ehsanullah, another public health expert, said his organisation trains lady health workers to give awareness to the public about family planning.

“Currently, 35pc of women use contraceptives but the needs of around 20pc are unset,” he said.

A representative of an organisation that works on family planning, Dr Khurram Azmat said the private sector provides services to more than half the population because public health facilities are over-burdened.

He said 43 million of Pakistan’s population consists of the youth, and they need to be given awareness. “Social media should also be used to sensitise the youth,” he said.

Dr Mohammad Ahmed Siddiqui, a representative of another organisation, said

Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world and will soon become the fifth most populous.

“In Pakistan 39pc of women do not participate in household decision-making, including about their own health. So men should also be contacted to convince them on family planning,” he said.

Hina Najmi, who also spoke at the event, said the last three demographic and health surveys have shown slow progress in the reduction of the growth rate.

“Males are also potential family planning users and we need to contact them for it,” she said.

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