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HEADLINE: Brazil Abortions: Illegal in Name Only

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BODY:

In a hillside shantytown here, Selma, a 46-year-old cleaner, has a personal reproductive history that seems out of character for Brazil -- three children and 13 abortions.

On paper, abortion is illegal in Brazil, Latin America's most populous country. In March, a Brasilia jury convicted a woman of having an abortion. In June, the Sao Paulo police raided a succession of underground clinics.

Yet in a startling example of a gulf between law and reality, new estimates indicate that Brazilian women have abortions at a rate equal to or greater than women in the United States, where abortion is legal.

Each year, the United States records roughly 3.9 million live births and 1.6 million abortions. Brazil records about four million births annually and somewhere between 1.4 million and 2.4 million abortions, researchers for the Alan Guttmacher Institute say.

"Although abortion is illegal in every Latin American country except Cuba, induced abortion is being widely practiced throughout the region," Susheela Singh and Deirdre Wulf wrote recently in *International Family Planning Perspectives*, a publication of the New York-based institute. "For every 10 women giving birth, three to four in Colombia and Brazil and two in Peru terminate their pregnancies."

On a recent afternoon at a state hospital serving Rio's shantytowns, a third of the women in the maternity ward were admitted for complications resulting from abortions.

"The poor woman is alone, and she sees herself as without a way to avoid pregnancy," said the director, who asked not to be identified by name. "When she gets pregnant, she resorts to what she sees as the easiest way to solve her problem: abortion."

Even with underreporting of complication cases by hospitals, an estimated 400,000 women are admitted each year to recuperate from abortion attempts. Of these, hundreds die. In contrast, in the United States, about 10,000 women are admitted each year because of abortion complications.

"Complications from abortion are identified as the second largest cause for admission in state hospitals -- and yet society pretends it doesn't happen," said Jose Genoio, a member of the Brazilian Congress from the left-wing Workers Party. Seeking to break the silence, Mr. Genoio has proposed a bill that would allow abortion on request in Brazil during the first 90 days of pregnancy -- the first trimester.

But in a nation that claims to have the world's largest population of Roman Catholics, few politicians are willing to risk the wrath of the church hierarchy by advocating expanded access to abortion.

Technically, abortion is permitted in Brazil in cases of rape or danger to the mother's health.

But judges usually delay issuing orders until it is too late. At the Rainha Silvia Maternity in nearby Itaboraí, a 12-year-old who asked to be identified only as Renata recently became a mother. First, she was raped by her stepfather. Then, she was a victim of the slow-moving court system.

In interviews, health professionals here could only recall two legal abortions performed in this city of six million in the last three years.

"Doctors are terrified of performing an abortion without written judicial permission -- no one will do it," said a prosecutor, Branca Moreira Alves.

Jaqueline Pitanguy, a feminist leader, said, "In the case of rape, the great majority of women have clandestine abortions."

Until a recession hit last year, surveys showed that abortions in Brazil were divided roughly evenly between back-alley abortions and clinic procedures.

"Less women are using clinic services now; more are using the dangerous self-induced methods," said Sarah Hawker Costa, who researches women's health issues at the National School of Public Health.

Although there are sporadic crackdowns, like the one in Sao Paulo last month, Rio's affluent beachfront neighborhoods have an estimated 100 full-time abortion clinics.

"There is a silent acceptance of these clinics, and everyone knows where they are located," said Katherine D. LaGuardia, who studied complications from illegal abortions in Rio de Janeiro in 1988.

"It appears that part of the population uses abortion as a means of fertility regulation," said Ms. LaGuardia, who noted that the women she surveyed in the middle-class clinics had had an average of four to five abortions. Presenting a barrier to poor Brazilian women, the cost of clinical abortions is around \$150 -- roughly double the nation's minimum monthly salary.

Traditionally, poor women turned to neighborhood midwives who attempted to induce abortions with knitting needles, coat hangers or sticks. Rosangela Novaes dos Santos, the Brasilia woman convicted of having an abortion in March, was admitted to a hospital suffering from a hemorrhage caused by a piece of wire left in her uterus.

Without any action expected to allow safe, legal abortions, health experts predict that the abortion rate will remain high until birth-control information and supplies are universally accessible.

Surveys show that 90 percent of Brazilian women who use birth-control pills buy them over the counter at pharmacies, with little or no instruction. Ms. Costa's surveys of women recovering from abortion complications found that 40 percent became pregnant while trying to use some form of contraception, largely the pill.

Some Can't Afford Condoms

In addition, condoms sell for 50 cents apiece -- a luxury item for poor people in this country. A new study by the Population Crisis Committee, a private Washington group, says that condoms in Brazil are six times as expensive as in the United States, as a percentage of per-capita income.

A Government family-planning effort, the Program of Integral Assistance to Women's Health, suffers from national budget constraints. Still, Education Minister Carlos Chiarelli recently announced that sex education would start next year in primary schools.

But at the state-run slum clinic where Selma works as a cleaner, neither birth-control devices nor counseling are available.

"Women don't abort because they don't love their children; they do it because of necessity," said Selma, who underwent a sterilization operation after her 13th abortion.