

# Unwanted Pregnancy and Associated Factors Among Nigerian Women

**CONTEXT:** Many Nigerian women experience unwanted pregnancies. To prevent associated health problems, it is important to understand the factors related to unwanted pregnancy in Nigeria.

**METHODS:** A community-based survey of 2,978 women aged 15–49 was conducted in eight Nigerian states. Univariate analyses and multivariate logistic regression analyses were used to determine the incidence of unwanted pregnancy, the incidence of seeking an abortion among women with unwanted pregnancies and the factors associated with unwanted pregnancy and abortion-seeking behavior. Additional analyses examined the prevalence of contraceptive use and women's reasons for seeking to terminate unwanted pregnancies and for not practicing contraception at the time their unwanted pregnancies were conceived.

**RESULTS:** Twenty-eight percent of respondents reported ever having had an unwanted pregnancy; of those, half reported having attempted to end their last unwanted pregnancy. Forty-three percent of women who sought an abortion did so because they were not married, were too young or were still in school. Of the women who were not practicing contraception when they had the unwanted pregnancy, 44% said that they were unaware of family planning, and 22% that they either did not have access to contraceptive services, services were too expensive or they were afraid of side effects. At the time of the survey, 27% of all respondents were at risk of an unwanted pregnancy. Almost half were unaware of contraceptive methods.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Nigerian women often turn to abortion to avoid unwanted births. The provision of family planning counseling and information could substantially reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion in Nigeria.

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Studies have consistently indicated that large numbers of Nigerian women experience unwanted or mistimed pregnancies and births. According to a 1997 survey of women in southwestern Nigeria, at least 27% of women had ever been pregnant when they did not want to be.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in a survey conducted in southwestern and northern Nigeria in the mid-1990s, 20% of women reported ever having experienced an unwanted pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> The 2003 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found that of live births to women in the previous three years, 15% were reported to be unplanned.<sup>3</sup> It has been estimated that about 12% of all pregnancies in Nigeria (not including those that result in spontaneous abortion) end in induced abortion, and another 9% result in unplanned births.<sup>4</sup>

Unintended pregnancy poses significant public health risks. One consequence of unwanted pregnancy is induced abortion. In the mid-1990s, the abortion rate in Nigeria was estimated at 25 per 1,000 women.<sup>5</sup> At this rate, approximately 760,000 abortions will occur in 2006. Because abortion is illegal in Nigeria except to save a woman's life, many procedures are conducted under unsafe conditions and carry a substantial risk of maternal morbidity<sup>6</sup> and mortality.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that about 25% of women who have abortions in Nigeria experience serious complications.<sup>8</sup>

According to national surveys, Nigerian women and couples want fewer children than they once did: Between 1990 and 2003, the mean desired number of children declined from 5.8 to 5.3.<sup>9</sup> Even so, levels of contraceptive use remain low: In 2003, only 7% of married women used a modern contraceptive method and another 6% relied on a traditional or folk method.<sup>10</sup> The combination of low contraceptive use and smaller desired family size implies high levels of unmet need for family planning in Nigeria. Indeed, among married women of reproductive age, 32% do not want to have a child in the near future but are not using a modern contraceptive method, and are therefore at risk of an unwanted pregnancy.<sup>11</sup>

Research on reasons for family planning nonuse in Nigeria generally points to women's perceived lack of need for contraception, fear of side effects and opposition to contraception on personal or religious grounds.<sup>12</sup> Less is known about the circumstances surrounding women's unwanted pregnancies and their reasons for seeking to terminate some of these pregnancies. The limited evidence available from small studies in various parts of Nigeria generally points to such reasons as a wish to space births, economic constraints, the desire to remain in school and not being married.<sup>13</sup>