

## **New Zealand decriminalises abortion in the context of COVID-19, saaac urges South Australia to do the same**

Last Wednesday the New Zealand Parliament voted to decriminalise abortion, shelving a plan for a referendum on the question. In the context of COVID-19 New Zealand has granted women reproductive autonomy in the eyes of the law and will proceed to treat abortion care as health care. saaac welcomes this development and urges the South Australian government to move to decriminalise abortion as soon as possible to ameliorate threats to women's reproductive autonomy exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Isolation is a key risk factor for women experiencing domestic violence. Currently 1 in 3 women experience some form of Domestic Violence and abuse and the World Health Organization reports that in times of crisis the risk rapidly escalates.<sup>1</sup> Chinese police saw the rate of Domestic Violence reports triple during February, at the height of their COVID-19 crisis, compared to the same time last year. Social isolation will mean women in abusive relationships will lose further control over their movements and are likely to face an increased risk of sexual and reproductive coercion, and unwanted pregnancy.

Abortion services anticipate increased pressure as the pandemic leaves pregnant women facing uncertain futures. Coupled with this, women who are following public-health directions to self-isolate will struggle to access emergency contraception or attend a 'prescribed hospital' where an abortion must take place according to SA law, and may struggle to access abortion within legal gestational limits. Those living in rural and remote South Australia will continue to face the greatest challenges to accessing abortion care.

In other Australian jurisdictions Early Medication Abortion is available to pregnant women up to nine weeks' gestation without requiring them to attend a 'prescribed hospital'. In these jurisdictions women can seek EMA from a GP, or via telehealth, which will relieve pressure on health services during the pandemic. South Australian law prevents women having the same level of access to abortion care as other Australian women.

### **Quotes attributable to Associate Professor Barbara Baird (spokesperson for saaac):**

'It is unacceptable that reproductive autonomy remains limited by the law in South Australia. This becomes even clearer in the COVID-19 crisis when women face increased risks to their health and safety.'

'The range of sexual and reproductive health issues that arise with COVID-19 and social isolation compound the existing urgency to follow New Zealand's example and decriminalise abortion in South Australia.'

'The COVID-19 crisis means that the need for women in South Australia to access to Early Medication Abortion from local GPs and via telehealth is even more urgent than previously.'