Meeting Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Focus on Preventing Unsafe Abortion

Susheela Singh

Network of African Parliamentary Committees of Health

October 27, 2021
Context

- Sub-Saharan Africa has highest estimated proportion of abortions that are unsafe (77%)

- Contributing about 7% of the region’s very high maternal mortality

- While evidence suggests that some progress has been made to reduce unsafe abortion, the pace is less than satisfactory
92% of women of reproductive age live where abortion is highly or moderately restricted in Sub-Saharan Africa

% of women aged 15–49

Legal continuum grounds for abortion

- **Category 1. None**
- **Category 2. To save woman's life**
- **Category 3. To save woman's life and to preserve her health (but with no explicit mention of mental health)**
- **Category 4. To save woman's life and to preserve her health, with explicit mention of mental health**
- **Category 5. To save woman's life and to preserve her physical/mental health, plus socioeconomic grounds**
- **Category 6. No restriction as to reason**
21 Sub-Saharan countries expanded legal grounds for abortion between 2000 and 2019

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<th>Legal continuum grounds for abortion</th>
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Most common additional legal grounds:

- **1. Rape**
- **2. Incest**
- **3. Fetal anomaly**

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Unmet need for modern contraception is higher among sexually active unmarried women than among married women

% of women with unmet need for modern contraception

Sexually active unmarried
Married

Region and country
Eastern
Middle
Southern
Western

Ethiopia 30 23
Kenya 31 22
Zambia 43 22
Angola 45 39
Chad 58 24
DRC 64 40
Lesotho 22 19
Namibia 15 18
South Africa 24 15
Ghana 55 34
Nigeria 58 24
Senegal 47 23

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Unintended pregnancy is common and about one in three end in abortion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>% of unintended pregnancies ending in abortion</th>
<th>% of unintended pregnancies ending in unplanned birth or miscarriage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>63%</td>
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<td>Eastern Africa</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<td>Middle Africa</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<td>Southern Africa</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>64%</td>
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<td>Western Africa</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
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No. of unintended pregnancies per 1,000 women aged 15–49
Sub-Saharan Africa’s abortion rate has changed little in recent decades
Subregional rates have been relatively stable over the past 25 years.

Abortion rates per 1,000 women
Over three-quarters of abortions in Sub-Saharan Africa are unsafe
Except for the subregion of Southern Africa where it is 26%, the proportion unsafe in the other subregions ranges from 76% to 88%.
In six of nine countries with national data, the majority of abortions are estimated to be done by a non-clinician.
Poor women in rural areas risk the most by having an unsafe abortion, just over half of their abortions are estimated to result in complications needing treatment.
The cost of providing abortion-related care in Africa would decline substantially if all abortions were provided safely

<table>
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<th>Abortion and contraceptive care</th>
<th>Annual cost: abortion care</th>
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<td>• Current levels of coverage</td>
<td>$473 million</td>
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<td>• All contraceptive needs met + abortion provided safely</td>
<td>$ 90 million</td>
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Sexual and Reproductive Health Profiles are now Available for 132 countries

Sexual and Reproductive Health Profiles Now Available for 132 Countries

Commitment to providing essential care for women and adolescents is critical to upholding sexual and reproductive rights—especially in the context of a global pandemic. Guttmacher’s new country profiles highlight country-specific data on the need for and use of contraception and other sexual and reproductive health services from our Adding It Up project.

RELATED
- Adding It Up: Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2019
- Adding It Up: Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2019—Executive Summary
- Provision of Essential Sexual and Reproductive Health Care Would Reduce Unintended Pregnancies, Unsafe Abortions and Maternal Deaths by About Two-Thirds
Recommendations

- Expand the reach of postabortion care services to all women in Sub-Saharan Africa who need them.

- Reduce the need for postabortion care by improving the safety of abortions.

- Fully implement legal reform, so that all women who qualify for a legal abortion are able to obtain one safely.

- Disseminate accurate information on how to use misoprostol alone, as a harm reduction strategy.

- Prevent unintended pregnancy by expanding access to modern contraception.
Additional Resources

- **From Safe to Unsafe abortion in sub-Saharan Africa (Report)**

- **Guttmacher Adding It up fact sheets**

- **Guttmacher SRHR country profiles**
  - [https://www.guttmacher.org/geography/africa](https://www.guttmacher.org/geography/africa)
Acknowledgements

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