

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FACED BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACCESSING ABORTION SERVICES AT HEALTH FACILITIES IN ZAMBIA



Access to safe and legal abortion services is crucial for the reproductive health and rights of young people. In Zambia, however, young individuals face numerous challenges and barriers when attempting to access abortion care at health facilities. This publication aims to examine the socio-cultural and healthcare-related factors that contribute to these difficulties and advocate for improved access to comprehensive reproductive health care services for young people in Zambia.

Socio-cultural Barriers: One significant challenge young people encounter is the pervasive stigma and social norms surrounding abortion. Abortion is often viewed as morally wrong or socially unacceptable, leading to fear of judgment and rejection. Additionally, the lack of support and understanding from family and peers further compounds the difficulties faced by young individuals seeking abortion services. Cultural and religious beliefs also play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards abortion, making it challenging for young people to access the care they need without facing social and cultural barriers.

Healthcare System Barriers: The Zambian healthcare system presents several barriers that impede young people's access to abortion services. One critical challenge is the limited knowledge and training of healthcare providers on provision of comprehensive abortion care. Many providers lack the necessary skills and expertise to offer safe and comprehensive abortion services, leading to a scarcity of trained professionals in this field. Additionally, the lack of youth-friendly services and information further alienates young individuals, preventing them from seeking assistance from healthcare facilities.

Geographic and financial barriers also pose challenges, as young people living in rural areas may face difficulties in accessing healthcare facilities due to distance and associated transportation costs.

The barriers and challenges young people face when trying to access abortion services have significant implications for their physical and mental health. In the absence of safe and legal options, some individuals resort to unsafe abortion practices, leading to severe health consequences and even fatalities. Moreover, the limitations on accessing abortion care can disrupt young people's education and economic prospects. The emotional burden and social stigma experienced by young individuals further exacerbate the negative impact on their overall well-being.

Copper Rose Zambia with support from the Safe Abortion Action Fund (SAAF) is implementing the Safe Reproductive Awareness Project with the focus on increasing the number of women and girls accessing sexual and reproductive health services including safe abortion. Through the project, the organization has been able to train health workers and peer educators in values clarification and attitudes transformation on SRH and safe abortion in 10 health facilities in Lusaka and Kitwe. The aim of the training was to reduce the stigma and discrimination against women

and girls that access safe abortion services which has been a contributing factor to high rates of unsafe abortions.

Additionally, through the trained peer educators, the organization has been conducting community dialogues and outreaches to raise awareness on the access to safe abortion and the legal and policy framework that provides for safe abortion to be accessible at the health facilities. The community dialogues have been used as a platform to increase the knowledge of adolescents' girls and boys as well as young women and men on the consequences of unsafe abortion and the need to seek the correct services from the facility. The dialogues have also provided a platform for the organization to dispel the myths and misconceptions on abortion. For instance, in one of the dialogues conducted with adolescents and young people at Kalingalinga Clinic in Lusaka, the adolescents shared that their knowledge on abortion was that it could be induced and carried out by an individual by consuming a mixture of fizzy drinks and painkillers. Such misconceptions contribute to an increasing number of unsafe abortions.

Despite the organization's effort in raising awareness on access to safe abortion services, a huge bottleneck still remains, the inadequate availability of abortion medication, commodities and health workers to provide the services. Some women and girls are being turned away from accessing services at health facilities because they do not have the abortion medication such as misoprostol. In other instances, some facilities only have one or two trained comprehensive abortion care providers who are overwhelmed with other tasks and are unable to provide the services.

*“A complaint we are constantly getting from people we are referring to the health facility to access safe abortion services is that the unavailability of abortion medication...if requested to come through on another day with the hope of medication being available, some clients do not return to the facility...such challenges may hinder the progress to reduce unsafe abortions in our communities” Martin *(name changed for confidentiality) , peer educator*

In order to fully address the challenge of unsafe abortion, there is a need to couple the efforts on the demand creation and the delivery side of service provision.

Recommendations:

1. Continued Implementation of comprehensive sexuality education and awareness campaigns to dispel myths, reduce stigma, and promote informed decision-making on sexual reproductive health.
2. Training of more health workers in provision of comprehensive abortion care services that are non-judgmental, evidence-based, and youth-friendly.

3. Implement strong monitoring mechanism to ensure constant provision of comprehensive abortion care services by trained health providers
4. Strengthen youth-friendly reproductive healthcare services by improving geographic accessibility and reducing financial barriers.
5. Enhance collaboration between policymakers, healthcare providers, community leaders, religious organizations and civil society organizations to prioritize young people's access to safe and legal abortion services and change negative social norms surrounding abortion.
6. Conduct research and collect data on young people's specific needs and experiences regarding abortion access to inform evidence-based interventions and policy changes.
7. Develop mechanisms for confidential and anonymous reporting of barriers and violations related to safe abortion services at health and ensure accountability.
8. Involve young people in decision-making processes and ensure their voices and perspectives are integrated into policies and programs aimed at improving their sexual and reproductive health including access to safe abortion.
9. Government to address the bottlenecks in the supply chain of commodities to ensure availability of contraceptives and safe abortion medication.