Adolescent Contraceptive and Abortion-related Care-seeking in Malawi

This study explored how adolescent access to contraception and abortion-related care is perceived and experienced by adolescents in urban Ethiopia (ET), Malawi (MW) and Zambia (ZM). Interviews were conducted with 313 adolescents (10-19 years) who sought safe abortions or care for complications of an unsafe abortion. Interviews were done in one health center and hospital in each country over almost two years in 2018-19. This is a summary of the key findings from 104 interviews conducted in Malawi.

**Unplanned pregnancy can happen to anyone, but 70% of these girls lived in homes with no electricity indicative of their poverty**

**Girls were young, 60% were under 18, and 1/3 decided to end their pregnancy because they were afraid they would have to leave school**

“**I MADE UP MY MIND TO ABORT, SO I WAS READY TO RISK IT ALL WHETHER IT MEANT DYING.**”

[age 18, student, inserted sticks and herbs vaginally]

**Abortion Safety is Strongly Linked to Abortion Legality**

**CONTEXT MATTERS**

Seeking an abortion in a facility, or care for complications due to a less safe out-of-facility abortion, is strongly influenced by the legal and service provision setting.

**Ethiopia:** Safe abortion services are freely available without justification for adolescents. Abortion services are widely available in the public health sector.

**Malawi:** A highly restrictive abortion law combined with very limited service availability means most adolescent abortions are unsafe.

**Zambia:** Despite longstanding legal grounds for abortion, there is low knowledge of the law and patchy service availability, greatly affecting access for adolescents.

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**Percentage of adolescent abortions in the study induced safely in health facilities by country**

- **Ethiopia:** 98% (n=99)
- **Malawi:** 4% (n=104)
- **Zambia:** 34% (n=110)

Unplanned pregnancy can happen to anyone, but 70% of these girls lived in homes with no electricity indicative of their poverty.

Only 1 in 5 girls had heard anything about emergency contraception, none had ever used it – a lost opportunity to prevent these unsafe abortions.

Over 2/3 of girls delayed seeking care increasing their health risks, most said they were “afraid”, “did not know what to do” or “where to go”.

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Misperceptions about contraception & sexuality Indicate a need for better sexuality education

“...in secondary school they were giving some advice and people were saying that when you use condoms, don’t you know they have some holes?”
[age 17, student, drank sticks and herbs]

“He told me that when you are using a condom during sex.....after the first phase if you remove the condom, you don’t fall pregnant.”
[age 16, student, boyfriend drank medicine to cause the abortion and she believe he may have put some in her food or drink]

“I also thought that getting contraceptives whilst you are young is not right, I heard when you use contraceptives before giving birth, you struggle to do it in the future”
[age 19, took 10 unknown pills to cause an abortion]

“People who know these things say so. They say family planning is not good for young girls. Because in your future you can end up not giving birth because your uterus will have been destroyed with the injections.”
[age 19, student, given one unknown pill after trying to raise funds for 3 months for an abortion at private clinic]

Girls perceive themselves to not have power to negotiate contraceptive use

“The guy is responsible for decision-making about it since he’s powerful, even if you don’t want it, it happens.”
[age 16, student, took overdose of aspirin and Panadol to cause the abortion]

Int: So where were you getting these condoms?
Res: I don’t know. He would always have them with him when we meet.
Int: So what happened this time...?
Res: He said he had enough of them.
[age 17, student, taking pain killers for “contraception” and unidentified tablets to start the abortion]

Even unsafe abortions were a relief as girls are able to realize their aspirations

“I had made up my mind because I wanted to go back to school.”
[age 19, dropped out of school when she married but was left by her husband due to her pregnancy]

“I felt like a weight had been lifted off me.”
[age 19, student, took unknown pills from a private clinic]

A lack of legal abortions means that adolescents use unsafe abortion methods, including the least safe methods

Int: “Where did you hear Termik [rat poison] can be used for abortion?”
Res: “I did not hear it from anyone. I was just trying because I know they are dangerous.”
[age 18, decided to abort after being told to leave both her husband and parents’ houses]

Poverty contributes to delayed care, even when services are free
“My mother pleaded that they treat us, and we pay later, but they refused.” [age 18]