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 110 interviews conducted in Zambia.

A fear of having to drop out of school, changing the rest of their lives, was by far the most common reason for their decisions to seek abortions.

Despite access to safe and legal abortion in this community, more than 6 of 10 girls tried to abort on their own first. Most tried a traditional or unsafe method.

Over 1/3 of girls who tried to induce on their own used medical abortion pills in some way but needed to follow up with a visit to a facility.

11% paid unofficial fees at a public facility to access abortion-related care that should be free, most also paid for advice and treatment before getting to the facility.

A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ABORTION RIGHTS AND THE ZAMBIAN ABORTION LAW IS CAUSING UNNECESSARY HARM TO ADOLESCENTS. STOP THE SILENCE.

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.
Misperceptions about contraception and sexuality indicate a need for better sexuality education

Male partner refusal and deception sometimes resulted in a lack of protection, other times it was just a lack of accurate information.

“The same man told me that he will not release the sperms...before having sex he told me that he would not release.” [age 18, student]

“After sleeping with a man, I took Cafemol because he told me I won’t get pregnant.” [age 17, student]

“He told me that I wouldn’t get pregnant if I was far from attending.” [age 19, student]

“According to my knowledge, it is for married people. For someone like me who is not married, what is family planning for?” [age 18]

Delays in abortion-related care-seeking

Often related to gathering funds for private providers, herbalists or transport - seeking resources delayed care-seeking and increased the risk of poor health outcomes.

“That is when I delayed for like 4 days, then I think it became 11 weeks. I came here and they told me to go for a scan. I never had money, the money for a scan, so I just took the medicine the man gave me.” [age 17]

“My Mom put me on her back, then a certain man felt pity on us and asked if I was very sick, and Mom said yes, and that is when he told us to get in his car and he brought us to the hospital.” [age 15]

“I asked around older people and I was advised to go to the clinic. My grandmother knew...it could be a miscarriage and I needed to rush to the clinic. Money was hard to find [long pause]. Money was hard to find. I only managed to find [some] yesterday. [age 19]

Quality of care - room for improvement

Although most girls were satisfied with the care they received, some told us of individual providers who spoke to them disrespectfully.

“They scolded me, they wanted a plastic and they asked if we bought a plastic and we said no...I didn’t pay attention, my stomach was paining. They were scolding me saying I shouldn’t be pregnant.” [age 16, student]

“Here there is only one person who calls you according to the illness you are suffering from...In the presence of people and he tells you, you, go and have your womb cleaned that side. You terminated your pregnancy, like that. [age 19]

“Then he said he cannot give me the medicine because it is more like he is encouraging me to go ahead with what I want to do. He left the room, the person who gave me is someone else.” [age 17, student, raped by 4 men]