



Working together for safe abortion care

Young women
deserve safe
choices – see
how we make it
possible

safe abortion

Rutgers

Millions of women and girls worldwide die from unsafe abortions each year. Many others suffer preventable, life-changing injuries.

We can change this.

This case study from West and Central Africa shows how we are building support for safe abortion care and increasing young women's access to reproductive healthcare and information. And fewer young women are risking their life due to unintended pregnancies.

"They didn't know that they had the right to ask for a safe abortion and were forced to have an abortion in secret. This lack of information cost them their lives."

– Mounaya, midwife in Tchaourou, north Benin



They didn't know they had the right to ask for a safe abortion and were forced to have an abortion in secret. This lack of information cost them their lives.

The reality of unsafe abortions for young women

When a young woman in West or Central Africa gets pregnant and does not want to be, it is scary and isolating. The fear of being punished or shamed forces many young women to take unsafe measures to end the pregnancy with sometimes fatal or lifechanging consequences.

Behind every unsafe abortion is a decision shaped by fear, pressure or a lack of alternatives.

Young women deserve compassion and the ability to make a safe choice.

"We have testimonies from women and girls who, after being raped, tried to end their pregnancies on their own. These situations are frequent and have serious consequences."

– Mena Agbodjavou, lead researcher of the Maze Women Face: between rights and reality, CERRHUD, Benin

Every nine seconds, an unsafe abortion puts a woman's life at risk in West and Central Africa

Every year there are:

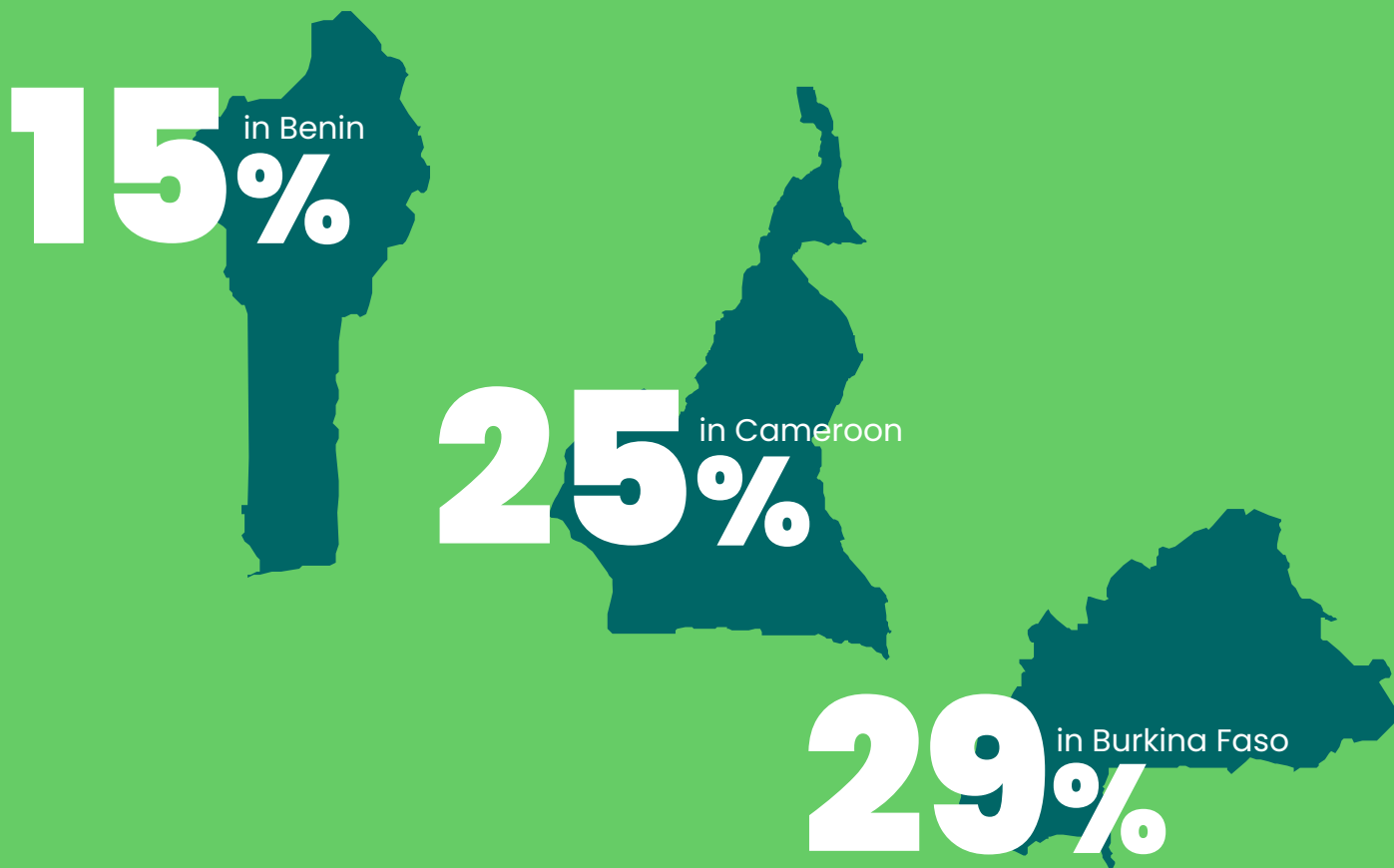
- **2.3 million** unsafe abortions in West Africa
- **1.1 million** unsafe abortions in Central Africa

In West and Central Africa, **85%** of abortions are unsafe or less safe than they should be.

Central Africa has the highest rate of abortion-related deaths in sub-Saharan Africa (**260 deaths** per 100,000 abortions), followed by West Africa (**225 deaths** per 100,000 abortions).



Of the women dying from a maternal cause...



...die from an **unsafe abortion**.

Bankole, A. et al., (2020), [*Unsafe to Safe Abortion in Sub-Saharan Africa: Slow but steady progress*](#), Guttmacher Institute, NY.

Abortion laws in West and Central Africa

All countries in the West and Central Africa region allow abortion in cases of sexual violence or if the pregnant woman's life or health is at risk. But there is a large gap between what laws say and what actually happens.

For example, in 2022 Benin expanded access to safe abortion care for women in 'material, educational, professional or moral distress'. But our research found many public health workers in Benin refuse to provide abortion care due to their beliefs or the fear of being judged by others. This means safe abortion care is often unavailable or hard to access.

Many African governments want to remove the barriers to safe abortion care. But political will alone is not enough: sustained funding and support is needed.

"When a young person visits a clinic, healthcare workers often treat them with hesitation. There is a belief that they are too young to receive reproductive care, especially without their parents present."

– Méola Odilonne Yahouedeou, ABPF, Benin

Global anti-rights networks

Global opposition to sexual and reproductive health and rights is growing, and access to safe abortion is under attack. The reinstated Mexico City Policy (the Global Gag Rule) is just one example of the regressive policies that are emboldening anti-rights actors everywhere.

In this complex environment, Rutgers and our partners are working to ensure young women's lives are not threatened due to unsafe abortion.

When young people step by step

Making her safe choice a reality

If a young woman does not know how to prevent an unintended pregnancy or about safe abortion methods, she far is more likely to resort to an unsafe procedure. Even when she has that knowledge, barriers such as limited supplies or bias from healthcare providers can still stand in her way.

Stigma around abortion and sexuality, judgmental media narratives, and restrictive laws are deepening these challenges, making it even harder for her to make a safe choice.

To stop women and girls dying from unsafe abortions, we must tackle all of these barriers together. This is how Rutgers and our partners are making safe choices possible.

Between 2021–2025, in West and Central Africa we:

- prevented **207,000** unsafe abortions
- stopped **533** women dying after an unsafe abortion
- trained **4,000** healthcare providers on safe abortion care
- trained **26,000** health providers to provide judgement-free reproductive health services and information to young people
- supplied **844,000** safe abortion pills and **2,300** Manual Vacuum Aspiration kits
- provided **350,000 women and girls** with confidential, accurate digital guidance on reproductive health and self-managed care
- worked with **150,000** parents, religious leaders and other key influencers to build support for sexual health and rights, including safe abortion care
- trained **6,000** young people as peer educators.

accurate
information

available services
and medical
supplies

non-judgemental
healthcare
providers

addressing social
taboos and stigma

challenging
judgmental media
narratives

changing
restrictive
legislation

creating
awareness on
safe options



How we help young women stay safe

We stop unsafe abortions and increase access to safe abortion care

Our partner DKT International has made medical abortion pills and other safe abortion methods available in clinics and pharmacies. We (as in: the programme) provided young women with direct, confidential, accurate, non-judgmental information and, if needed, referred them to safe abortion providers.

"We guide young people step by step. Often, they don't know that safe abortion medication is available at pharmacies. We explain how to get there, what to say and what to expect."

– Yasmine, hotline operator at the Lydia Conseil (Advice) Centre, Dakar, Senegal

We build support for safe abortion care

In online spaces

With young people, influencers and creators, we have produced online content on safe abortion care that young women trust and respond to. Our online campaigns explain the dangers of unsafe abortion, what abortion options are safe and where to find them.

In communities

Through community dialogues, village circles and national caravans, we have sensitively raised the issue with parents and religious leaders, and created thousands of allies.

Young people are central here. Our partners support young people to be peer educators and advocates by listening to them, boosting their confidence and knowledge and strengthening their skills. Diverse young women have raised their voices and presented research to show the need for safe abortion care in their communities.

In policymaking spaces

We support young people and civil society organisations to build alliances that advocate for safe abortion care with national policymakers.

In 2025, Cameroon's National Assembly voted to align national laws with the Maputo Protocol, recognising women's right to safe abortion care in cases of sexual violence and when their physical or mental health is at risk.

This progress was driven by our partner CAMNAFAW, whose sustained efforts included coordinating a parliamentary taskforce, convening high-level national workshops and engaging MPs, ministers and civil society in dialogue.

Together these efforts, have helped embed women's reproductive rights in national legislation and advance policies on sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexual and gender-based violence and safe abortion care.



We must tackle all of these barriers together

In Benin, our partner ABPF led a civil society coalition that successfully advocated for reform of a 2003 law on sexual health and reproduction. As a result, abortion is now permitted under certain conditions—making it one of the most progressive legal frameworks on the continent.

ABPF achieved this by training young advocates and amplifying young people's testimonies, helping mobilise 40 parliamentarians to support the reform. They also worked with journalists to generate supportive media coverage.

We also collaborate with regional movements such as ODAS, which unites international and national partners to advocate for access to safe abortion care across francophone Africa by supporting advocates and leading regional campaigns on abortion and gender justice.

With our partner SheDecides we work to keep safe abortion care on international agendas, including the World Health Assembly, the Summit of the Future, the Commission on Population and Development and the Global Youth Dialogue. We also run engaging digital campaigns around key moments such as International Safe Abortion Day.



How can we keep this progress going

The progress we've seen shows what's possible but for many young women, a safe choice is still out of reach. To change that, we must:



1



Make unsafe abortion visible by supporting trusted organisations to gather evidence and bring young women's realities to policy makers.

2



Turn legal progress into real access by ensuring services, supplies and trained providers are in place.



3



Strengthen the movements driving change, including feminist and youth-led networks across the region.

4



Expand access to trusted information and care, including safe self-managed abortion options for the most marginalised.

By working across all of these areas, we can ensure that more women and girls are able to make a safe choice—without fear, without stigma, and without risking their lives.

5



Support comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights initiatives.



Together,
we can
make safe
choices
a reality
for every
woman
and girl.

Rutgers is the Dutch centre of knowledge and expertise for the sexual health, safety and wellbeing of young people. We provide reliable information and resources, and support young people in making informed decisions about their bodies, lives and futures. Our work spans the Netherlands, Europe and globally.

We can ensure
that more women
and girls are
able to make a s