

Title: Provision of abortion for victims of gender-based violence in Rwanda: Challenges due to stigma and lack of evidence

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Objective (limit 100 words): To identify the barriers for accessing safe abortion services within the legal framework in Rwanda since the Penal Code was published in 2012. The Penal Code included exemptions for abortion for pregnancies as a result of rape, incest or forced marriage with the provision of a court order to allow doctors to terminate the pregnancy.

Methods (limit 100 words): A total of 22 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (including health care providers from hospitals and gender based violence centers, administrators, and representatives from the intermediate courts and Ministry of Justice) and three focus group discussions (FGD) with women in the community (urban and rural single women ages 18-24; urban married women ages 25-45) were conducted between June-October 2014. Interviews and FGD were conducted in Kinyarwanda and French, tape recorded, translated to English and summarized for emerging themes.

Results (limit 100 words): Stigma around rape and abortion emerged as a very strong theme preventing victims of sexual violence to speak up and seek care; victims were more likely to arrive at the health facility after they were pregnant. Due to stigma and the challenges to get a court order, legal termination of pregnancy does not appear as an accessible option. The requirement of hard medical evidence by the courts; time required to collect evidence and convict the perpetrator; and inability to admit with the first 72 hours of assault hinders victims of rape, incest or forced marriage to present their cases legally.

Conclusions (limit 100 words): As the Ministry of Health is expanding the program to make abortion safer in Rwanda within the legal framework, addressing stigma and silence around rape and other forms of GBV should be a major objective. The legal grounds for abortion can only be realized to help the victims of GBV in an environment where victims and their families are not further stigmatized or challenged to prove their case to be able to terminate their pregnancies.