ABORTION IN AFRICA: THE CAMEROON MODEL
POLICY BRIEF
Professor Hasna Zaeria,
Human sciences and Social Psychology applied to the fields of Health

Abstract:
The performance of illegal abortion remains one of the biggest issues in Cameroon today, making the Cameroonian government stick with the 2007 Penalty code. Similar to other abortion laws, the 2007 Penalty code stipulates that the performance of abortions is illegal unless the mother is proven to be under health danger, or when the pregnancy has been a product of rape. Furthermore, the difference in social classes creates a gap between women who can afford medical services and poorer ones who attempt abortion by self-medication or unsafe methods. Remarkably, the lack of information, the ignorance of the law, the scarce knowledge on processes for the obtention of legal abortion and the implication of heavy social and economic factors, has led to the increase of unsafe abortions.

Résumé:
La pratique de l’avortement illégal demeure l’un des plus gros problèmes du Cameroun obligant le gouvernement du pays à s’en tenir au code pénal de 2007. Semblable à d’autres lois sur l’avortement, le code pénal de 2007 stipule que la pratique d’avortements est illégale à moins qu’il ne soit prouvé que la santé de la mère est en danger ou que la grossesse est le résultat d’un viol. En outre, la différence entre les classes sociales crée un fossé entre les femmes qui peuvent se permettre de payer des services médicaux, et les plus pauvres qui tentent l'avortement par automédication ou par des méthodes dangereuses. Remarquablement, le manque d'information, l'ignorance de la loi, la rareté des connaissances sur les processus d'obtention d'un avortement légal et l'implication de lourds facteurs sociaux et économiques, ont conduit à l'augmentation des avortements à risque.

Background: Overview of Current Policy

According to The World Health Organization, unsafe abortion is defined as an unsafe procedure for terminating an unwanted pregnancy either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking the minimal medical standards or both.

This topic has created a sense of controversy, in developing countries in Africa, such as Cameroon. As a consequence of the unawareness of abortion laws, women doubt upon “the situations where abortion is allowed and hence some still undertake illegal abortions even when they find themselves in situations deserving a legal abortion.” In addition, when women become pregnant their decision to abort revolves around the
imposing of heavy social and economic consequences. Amongst these; losing educational opportunities, fear of parental disapproval and finally not wanting a pregnancy before marriage. As in every other country, violation of the law leads to consequences. This is why the performing of an illegal abortion in Cameroon leads to a total of fifteen days to one year of imprisonment, one to five years of imprisonment, a fine of 100,00 to two million CFA francs, or a fine of 5,000 to 200,000 CFA francs. Furthermore, Cameroon is believed to hold a 25% of induced abortions, with an increase of 90 to 100,00 in the mortality ratio of the country.

Understanding that the socio-cultural values of Cameroon may differ from those of another country, it is understood that young children have access to sexual education and information. Amongst this teaching, children are taught about contraception. Even though this method is intended to prevent childbirth, it is still largely restricted because of the fear of augmenting sexual behaviour.

This situation can also be looked at through the lenses of the African woman, who’s fear comes from the opinion of public knowledge. Moreover, women have shown preoccupation towards social control and public shaming. People such as neighbours, classmates, husbands and family are believed to have a greater impact on the ultimate decision on whether the abortion should remain forward or not. It can be inferred that women became more anxious about their abortion when it became “a matter of public knowledge than about the police or the courts. “As a result, the liberalization of Abortion in Africa has become a popular debating topic, especially in Cameroon.
This topic reaches many different areas, amongst which health, human rights (especially women’s rights) and education stand out.

Although pregnancy is a beautiful opportunity that women can experience, an unwanted pregnancy can be a burden. And at times it puts the life of the mother at risk. Abortion is not only a matter of physical health, but also of mental health. Abortion is a very hard decision that women face, and it can lead to permanent mental damage. That is why, if in addition to all these risks, you add the risk they have of going to jail or maybe even worse, and all the stress provoked by this, the danger is multiplied.

Moreover, abortion is considered, often in the West, as a basic human right to women. The popular opinion remains that the choice about what happens to women and their bodies should remain in their hands. Officially, Cameroon has a legal abortion in some cases, such as rape or danger to the life of the mother, but it could be considered as scarce. And, it’s true that completely legalizing abortion is complicated due to different values that we must respect. Nonetheless, in matters of general health, values aren’t always the most important factor. They must be put in perspective so that the lives of a great number of women can be saved. As you can see in the graph, the maternal mortality is very high in this country. Though the numbers have gone down significantly, the rate is much higher than in most countries.

And finally, the last area very important is education. Education is a process through which people receive instruction about certain topics. And a topic that is as important as math or English is sexual education and how to be healthy in relationships you might have. It is important that all doubts regarding contraception be addressed at an appropriate time for young people to be informed. Especially on topics that might be life threatening. There is also a need to eradicate all thoughts of shame and stigma around sexuality.

For all these different reasons, this topic is crucial.

![Maternal mortality rate in Cameroon from 2008 to 2015](image-url)
In order to solve this problem we need to suggest feasible solutions, that is why it is primordial to estimate the political, social and economic costs.

According to International Law, the organisational principle of Sovereignty states that every country has the right to protect unborn life. Therefore, it is not legally imposed on a State to legalise abortion as the Law respects the integrity, cultural norms and traditions of a self-governing people. It is up to the government to decide its own laws when it comes to this issue.

Concerning the social impact that legalising abortion would have on the Cameroonian people, it is impossible to make drastic modifications to the law as it would clash with the culture and traditions of society. In consequence, any change should be made gradually and with the consent of a majority so that it doesn’t backlash and lead to a crisis that would only worsen women’s health situation and create a fracture between written law and its application. If the citizens are not convinced by the legislation, it is therefore not applicable and useless.

Finally, any measures taken would involve an economical contribution on multiple scales. This means that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Arts and Culture will need to allocate a budget to mobilise health professionals, to ameliorate structures and lead sensibilisation campaigns. On that account, it would be wise that the solutions proposed are not costly to encourage the government to adopt them, and even better if we involve third parties like Associations and NGOs.

What should Policy Makers Do

As a means to target this issue, the surveillance on the maternal mortality system must be more exigent, with the purpose of understanding that the situation in Cameroon is more severe than what is believed. It must be highlighted that the following methods must be modified depending on the country’s legal system. For this to change, it is important to target a correct political system and government for the ruling of the country which takes into consideration the topic of abortion as it does with other social, political and economic situations.

The government should extend the conditions which make abortion legal, for instance integrating the mental health and socio-economic factors which play a huge part in the decision-making process of pregnant women. The procedure which determines if a woman is in fact able to take care of a baby should be more rigorous and take into account the conditions a child should live in to have a normal and healthy life.

Furthermore, the education provided to Cameroonian citizens must have access to birth control techniques followed by sexual course lessons that will enrich individual’s knowledge on the seriousness of abortion. Throughout this process, we can expect an increase in contraceptive use, a fall in fertility, and the rate of abortion to fall.

Considering that Cameroon is a country undergoing a developmental process in which the economic levels differ from person to person, unreliable forms of birth control tend to be used. Amongst these, drinking saltwater after intercourse. Thus, easy access of
modern technologies (such as condoms) should be replaced and if necessary, they shall be given for free. For instance, it is the job of Abortive organizations in Cameroon to create strong reliable Public Health organizations.

Formal and harsh restrictions must be imposed on abortion clinics in order to make the procedure safer. Abortion will be performed by legalized doctors, and not by anyone. If this were to be violated, penalties shall be implemented in order to combat misbehaving citizens.

Legal abortive mothers shall be provided with mandatory waiting periods before having an abortion, with the means of preventing regret.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the cultural aspect of this issue. The Cameroonian society, unlike most occidental countries is not as liberal and open on the subjects of sexuality, therefore, we should take this into consideration when tackling the topic of abortion and be aware that this should be presented as a matter of security and health rather than a moral fight.

One of the factors that keep Cameroonians from taking steps concerning contraceptives or abortions is shame, especially for women who are judged by the society and their surroundings. Consequently, we should take measures which will provide a safe environment for women whether it is regarding protection or abortion. One of these measures could be an SMS program that would give its users counselling regarding their sexuality and even provide them with contraceptives in all discretion. The program Gifted Mom that keeps women updated on their pregnancy has known a lot of success in Cameroon and has already impacted maternal behaviour when it comes to prenatal follow-up.

Important percentages:

- Global VIA (Voluntary Induced Abortion) in Cameroon: 26.3%
- VIA in urban areas: 25.6%
- VIA in rural areas: 27.1%
- 83% of them are carried out in health facilities and 17% in private homes.
- In 2015, 29% of Cameroonian women were using any kind of contraception with 17% of them using modern ones.

It is also primordial to take steps in order to normalize healthy sexual behaviour by starting campaigns, particularly in the media where Cameroonian channels could broadcast interventions from women who have suffered from abortion related issues and
even pay them to encourage sharing such sensitive matters. It might come as a shock to the viewers at first but it’s a necessary step to undertake in order to push towards a more accepting society.

Bibliography

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