



COVID-19 and adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Africa

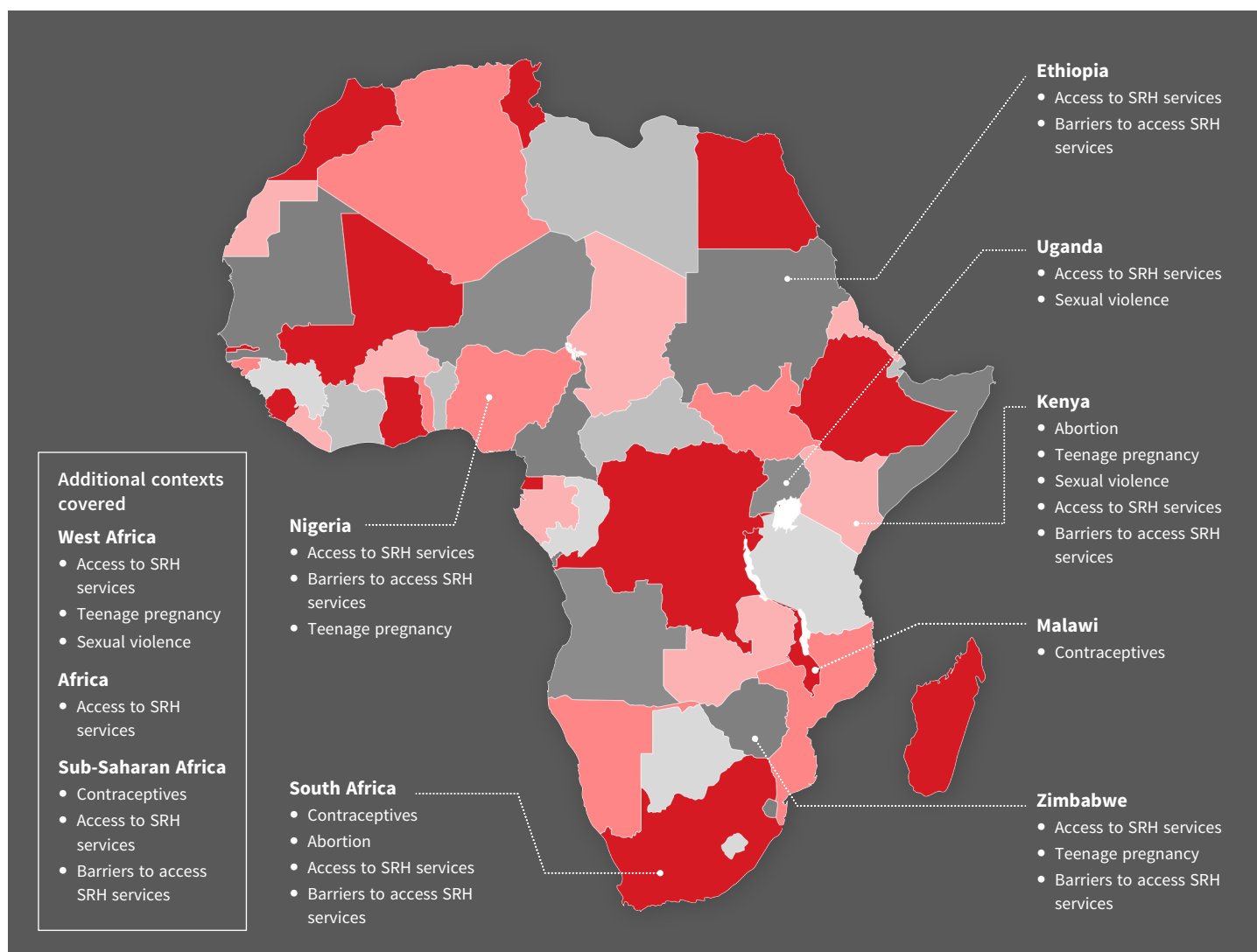
The COVID-19 pandemic significantly compromised the health and wellbeing of the youth population globally, where experts have called attention to the detrimental impact of the lockdown restrictions on the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents.

Adolescent sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is an important human rights issue. It relates to young people's freedom and rights to access supportive information, programmes and services that prevent and address various factors that may compromise their SRH. This includes individual, collective and systemic practices that place young people at increased risk for unwanted sex, sexual violence, unwanted or unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions or transmission of sexual infections and diseases. Over the past few decades, there has been remarkable global gains in the promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights and improving access to SRH services. However, the gains have been inequitable, particularly within developing countries where services have often fallen short in coverage and quality. The COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly compromised the health and wellbeing of the youth population globally, where experts have called attention to the detrimental impact of the lockdown restrictions on the SRH of adolescents. Thus, to understand the implications of the pandemic on the SRH of adolescents in Africa, this study conducted a systematic rapid review of the literature published between January 2020 and August 2021 within three databases namely EBSCO-host web, SAGE journals and Google Scholar. The intention was to

understand how the pandemic has impacted the lives of young people in Africa and to identify solutions to prevent SRH challenges and promote adolescent SRH during the pandemic and beyond.

Key findings

The literature revealed the various SRH challenges that adolescents had to contend with during the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, it projected and observed increases in teenage pregnancies and child marriage, increased reports of child sexual abuse and violence, and heightened risks of unsafe abortions due to the inaccessibility of SRH services which were diverted towards the COVID-19 response. The review also highlighted the implications that barriers to accessing SRH services had on adolescent SRH. For example, given the restricted access to healthcare facilities, women were unable to adequately access antenatal care or contraceptives. Women also experienced difficulties in accessing feminine hygiene products due to lockdown restrictions and the financial implications of the lockdown. Consequently, limited access to contraceptives leads to increased likelihood of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.



Key conclusions

In light of the short- and long-term implications that the pandemic had, and will have, for adolescent SRH and SRH of women more generally, a human rights perspective to address the needs of adolescent girls and young women becomes imperative. When SRH is approached as a human rights issue, “it will emphasize the importance of SRH and significantly improve the response of policy makers and government and access to related services during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Groenewald et al., 2022, p.5). Further, innovative solutions to both identify at risk adolescent girls and young women and generate knowledge sharing and awareness raising on key issues that implicate adolescent SRH is required. Similarly, alternative ways of creating access to SRH services and healthcare providers is necessary, considering also the intersectional implications

of various approaches for adolescents in diverse communities. While the significance of policies and laws to protect adolescents is also extremely important, it is not enough to ensure adolescents health and safety within communities.

Reference:

Adolescent sexual and reproductive health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a mini review

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