

# Shadow in a woman's journey

Special thanks to Jean Berchmans UWIMANA, Medical Doctor For Choice, for leading the work of putting together this story contest in an anonymous way for the confidentiality purpose. MSFC at the University of Rwanda believes that stories give a clear color and depth to otherwise blurred messages and allow people to connect with the message in a more meaningful way.

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[2] MINISTRY OF HEALTH-RWANDA, "Ministerial order on safe abortion"



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## Introduction

### History of Medical Students For Choice -Rwandan Chapter.

Medical Students For choice (MSFC)-Rwanda is affiliated to MSFC international, a US born and based organization. University of Rwanda hosted its first ever MSFC chapter in 2012 after a short visit in the US by one of its students.

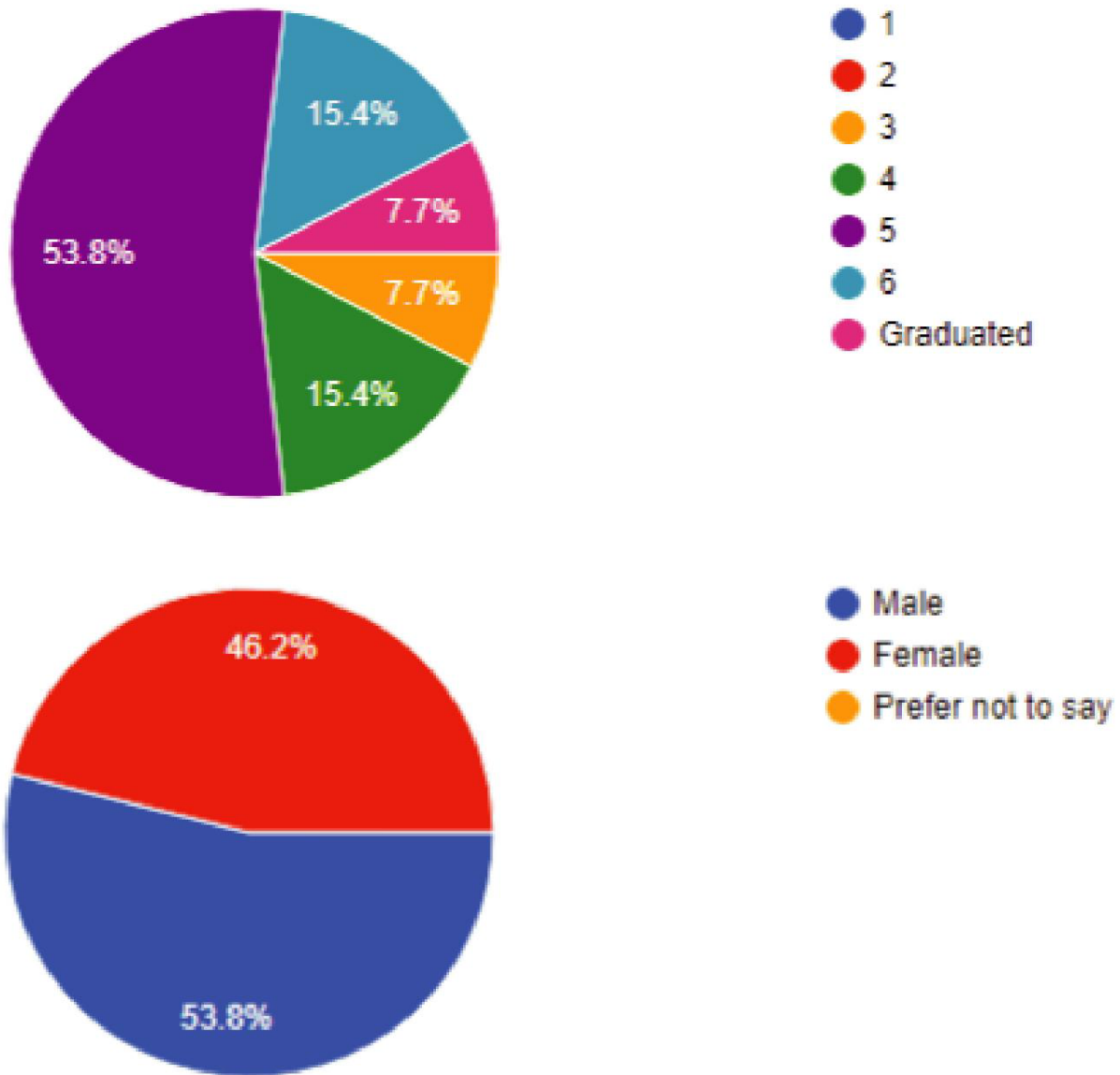
For the last 7 years, MSFC- Rwanda has been actively promoting sexual and reproductive health literacy among medical students at the university Rwanda. Through MSFC, medical students receive a comprehensive family planning including abortion education that they wouldn't get in formal schooling. Students get observational opportunities in world class clinics across the world and training on family planning counseling.

MSFC-Rwanda enjoys diversity of gender, ages and year of study within the organization. Students from different levels of study ranging from the 1<sup>st</sup> year to the last year and recent was born an alumnus of graduates "Medical Doctors For Choice (MDFC)" who are now practicing medical doctors within the Rwandan hospitals.

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As the first ever African chapter, MSFC- Rwanda has hosted 2 Africa Regional Meetings (ARM) in 2017 and in 2019. Through these meetings, Medical students' representatives across Africa meet, discuss and learn from each other's experience.

MSFC- Rwanda has been officially represented at the International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP) in 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda. MSFC- Rwanda is a permanent member of the International Network for the Reduction Of Abortion Discrimination and Stigma (INROADS).

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## Abortion in Rwanda: Legal Standpoint.

Access to safe abortion in Rwanda has been a restrictive process for years. Before 1977, saving a pregnant woman's life was the only permissible reason to carry out an abortion. In 1977, the Rwandan criminal code stipulated that for a pregnant woman whose life is in danger, she would need two medical opinions and approval from a state physician for her to have an abortion.

In June 2012, a new penal code was amended and allowed legal abortion under 4 exemptions:

- Rape
- Incest
- Forced marriage
- Medical reasons (maternal or fetal health is in danger)

Despite these changes, legal abortion remained largely inaccessible to women. For instance, 1 to 3 women required a court order annexed to consent by 2 medical doctors for the procedure.

On April 8<sup>th</sup> 2019 the Minister of Health signed a ministerial order, which, by most of the civil right activists, was considered an important step towards making safe abortion fully accessible. The ministerial order[2] stipulates that abortion is allowed if:

- The pregnant person is a child
- The pregnancy resulted from rape
- The pregnancy is a result of a forced marriage
- There is incest to the person of second degree of kinship
- The health of the mother or fetus are endangered

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In contrast to the previous law, this ministerial order allows safe and accessible abortion under 5 grounds. With this ministerial order, a woman or a girl seeking an abortion will only have to visit the nearest accredited health facility (a Hospital or a polyclinic) and then she can have access to abortion services as long as the pregnancy is not dated beyond 22 weeks of gestation and she fits within the existing legal grounds.

## Author's note

In the most humane way a medical doctor is, by the code of professionalism, obliged to conceal a patient's privacy, especially when publishing stories related to trauma.

In this endeavor, the stories produced in this publication are true. However, there was a need to conceal people's privacy and in this regard it was decided to use pseudo names especially for patients, their families and a few healthcare providers and health facilities.

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## STORIES FROM VICTIMS OF UNSAFE ABORTION

### MUGENI, 19 years old

"I once never wished to live again. The despair I endured was beyond wanting to ever live life again. I was living with my stepmother, the time I had unprotected sexual intercourse with a man who was older than me. When I got pregnant, my stepmother chased me from home saying that I should go live with the man who impregnated me. She refused to feed me and I was kicked out of the house.

I turned to the man whom I thought would take care of me but unfortunately, he mistreated me. One morning, he moved to another place and I never saw him again.

My friends recommended me to an old woman who is known for providing abortion services. The price of this clandestine procedure was thirty thousand Rwandan francs (Rwf 30, 000). For someone who didn't even have any money for even a piece of bread, I couldn't that money for abortion service. I made a deal with the old woman that I was going to cultivate her farm for 30 days with a return of Rwf1000 per day to pay the service.

30 days later, she brought a set of sharp wood and started the procedure. Soon after I started bleeding profusely. I lost consciousness for a couple of hours and when I woke up I found myself in the hospital."

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## KALIZA

KALIZA is a bright and beautiful primary school student in her fourth year. She is known for her nice voice whenever she would sing in class.

Despite her beautiful voice in singing, unwanted pregnancy ruined her dreams. She fell pregnant while still in primary school. She turned to the only trustworthy person she knew – her sister. The two young girls decided to terminate the pregnancy using cassava stalks. After a few minutes of struggling to find the fetus, KALIZA started to bleed profusely. Her sister panicked and feared to go to jail if ever anyone could find out what happened.

Tragically, KALIZA died at home.

## DUKUNDANE

This 19-year-old young woman, a 4th-year medical student presents her, comes from the rural area in the Eastern Province, where she lives in a poor family with her single mother. She dropped out of high school to work as a housemaid, hoping to find some money to help her mother.

DUKUNDANE describes this part of her life as the worst experience she ever encountered in her short life. In pain and crying, she says she was raped by a cowherd. I will never forget that evening, she says. "I felt worthless, good for nothing." With shame and depression, she chose to keep it for herself.

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Two weeks later, she noticed changes and had episodes of nausea with sporadic vomiting.

She talked to the only friend she could trust, who turned her down. She tried to hide the pregnancy while she was still at home with her mother, but at a certain point she could no longer hide. I couldn't understand how I could possibly live with a child born from rape. The child was going to remind me of that bad experience for the rest of my life, she explained. She was afraid of how she will be considered in her neighborhood, since a pregnant girl is a shame to the community. Who would ever marry me? she asks. On top of being desperate, she felt she had no means to raising a baby since she was so poor.

By the 7th week of pregnancy she decided to terminate the pregnancy. "I didn't know there was any abortion service at my nearest health center, so I decided to do it on own," she says. She was recommended an old woman in the Northern Province who would help her get rid of the child.

Once everything was arranged, she was assured that everything would be alright. "For the first time in weeks I felt some relief," she said.

The old lady made her drink to numb the pain and introduced sharp sticks inside her. She saw blood coming out, but the old lady told her not to worry, promising that things were going as planned. A few hours later, she was told that the procedure went well that she just needed to use some herbal medications for a few days. A week after the procedure, she started having feverish episodes and noticed blood and foul-smelling discharge from her vagina. She consulted the nearest health center and was immediately transferred to the nearest district hospital.

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Incomplete abortion and necrotized uterus following untreated ulceration was the final diagnosis made at the district hospital. Later the same day, she was referred to a referral hospital for better treatment. Pelvic peritonitis was the working diagnosis which led to a surgical operation called laparotomy and hysterectomy.

In this procedure, the patient's abdomen is cut open and the uterus removed. She spent 20 days in the intensive care unit (ICU) after respiratory failure.

DUKUNDANE died on the 20th day of her stay in the ICU.

## KANYANGE

A 20-years-old university student in her first year. Kanyange's story started at a birthday party, where she had unprotected sexual intercourse with a boy (KAMANZI for identification purpose). She became frustrated when she missed her periods, and immediately she went to the pharmacy for a pregnancy kit which turned positive.

It was a nightmare and I cried, I couldn't believe it had happened to me, Kanyange said. After explaining the whole story to her roommate, the latter advised visiting an advanced health facility for confirmation of the test.

Laboratory exams done at a private clinic confirmed that she was pregnant. She tried to talk with the boy with whom she had sex, but the boy denied having sexual intercourse with her. He even ignored my calls and my messages, she said.

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Kamanzi and Kanyange were classmates. He was 22 years old and had another girlfriend. After a discussion with Kamanzi, Kanyange's roommate successfully brought KANYANGE and KAMANZI together for a discussion. They decided to terminate the pregnancy since they didn't want this pregnancy to interrupt their studies.

With help from a friend, they finally found a doctor who was willing to perform the abortion. They paid the doctor Rwf150,000 (170\$). After explaining the abortion procedure, the doctor handed her some pills to be inserted into her vagina. 2 hours later the doctor inserted tools which he explained were to remove the pregnancy. Kanyange experienced substantial bleeding but she assured things will be alright after some time.

After 3 days, Kanyange started having foul-smelling discharge from her vagina accompanied with high fever. She consulted the same doctor and was prescribed some unknown medications.

After 2 days with no improvement, Kanyange went to a referral hospital complaining of foul-smelling vaginal discharge, abdominal pain and pain associated with high fever. She was found with an infection that had spread around her abdomen (peritonitis) due to the unsafe abortion procedure. After close follow-up by the medical team, she was discharged from hospital, with a package education on reproductive health and all forms of contraceptive methods.

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## UWIMANA

Uwimana is an 18 years old high school student. She has been living with her grandmother since she lost her biological parents. She had unprotected sex with a 32 years old man, who later rejected her saying that he did not recognize himself as the father. At that point, my head was full of questions, why me? Why did I have sex with that man? What can I do? I was full of regrets, she explains.

Without parents, only her poor grandmother, she had nowhere to go. She went to one of the traditional healers who asked Rwf 20,000 for the service, which she paid. After hours of painful treatment, the traditional healer told her that the pregnancy was completely removed that she could go home.

A few days later, she developed a fever, general weakness and foul-smelling discharge from the vagina. Fortunately, her grandmother brought her to the hospital where she received appropriate treatment and 2 weeks later she was discharged and went back home.

## KEZA

Keza is an 19 years old young woman and a high school student from the rural Eastern Province. Keza was brave enough to share her story with us. KEZA is from a very practicing Christian family. Since childhood, she was taught that sex is a sin in all its forms, except for married people. Though she was from a poor family, she dreamt of becoming a doctor. Her story started when she had unprotected sex with her boyfriend in high school.

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"It was the first time I had sex in my life," says KEZA. The week after she started feeling nauseous and weak but thought it was just a malaise. She took some time to rest at home, hoping it would fade away.

"I never thought of being pregnant," she said. My girlfriend came to me and asked why I was staying home without going to class and I told her that I was not feeling well." "Are you pregnant?" she asked KEZA.

I didn't understand why she would ask that, but I denied it, KEZA says. As time passed, she kept on feeling unwell. She visited the nurse at school who gave her paracetamol and other medications with no improvements. KEZA called her parents and told them she was sick. They brought her to a clinic and was given some other medications but no one thought of doing a pregnancy test.

Two days later, Keza went back to school still not feeling well. "The question from my girlfriend kept coming popping up in my mind, what if I was pregnant?"

On her way to school, she bought 2 pregnancy test kits but was not brave enough to use them and was not sure how she would react if she was pregnant. The next weekend, she opened one kit which turned out positive. She didn't believe it was true until she used a second kit, which also tested positive.

From that moment I felt hopeless and depressed, I cried a lot. I thought that this was the end of my life. "I was not ready to carry that baby to birth and raise her," she said. She felt sad and decided to tell somebody her story.

From that day, KEZA's life changed. She couldn't talk to anyone and her interactions with others became close to none. She tried to talk with her boyfriend who vehemently denied any allegiance to her. Her only friend was her girlfriend from school who told her that her only option

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was abortion, but they were afraid of the legal penalties associated with this act.

Luckily, the trimester ended and Keza went on holiday. She told her parents that she wanted to visit her aunt, but didn't utter a word about her pregnancy. They accepted her request and sent her to her aunt.

"I didn't want to bring shame and trouble to my family and added, my father would lose his church position as a deacon if it came out." After a brief discussion with her aunt, the latter agreed to help her find a place to have her abortion done. She took her to a traditional healer where she was given herbs to end her pregnancy.

The traditional healer recommended to go home and come back the next morning after she had seen blood flowing. When they arrived, the traditional healer brought other old women to hold her and she introduced sharp objects into Keza's vagina.

"It was so painful that I screamed for the total duration of the procedure," she said. In the middle of the procedure, she started to bleed profusely, she became dizzy and her aunt decided to take her to the hospital.

After stabilizing her, a pregnancy test was done and a safe abortion was conducted after a medical decision. Her parents heard about it and came but they were disappointed and angry with her aunt for having a bad influence on their daughter. KEZA was lucky to survive this and went home after a few days in the hospital.

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## INEZA

INEZA 24 years old is a primary school teacher in the Western Province in Nyamasheke district. Her nightmare started when she went to Kigali for her friend's wedding ceremony. At the wedding she met an old male friend from her Nyamasheke district who had moved to Kigali. The wedding ended late and INEZA couldn't find a bus to Nyamasheke. Her male friend proposed her a place to stay for the night, but that they would have to share the bed since his house was small. Fearfully, she accepted the offer and the man promised that it would be an uneventful night.

Despite the agreement made, she ended up having unprotected sex with the man. She became worried when she missed her periods, and she became weak and had vomiting episodes. She decided to do a pregnancy test which turned out positive.

I couldn't believe I was pregnant, she said. She locked herself in her room and tried to terminate the pregnancy by herself. By doing so, she inserted a stick in her vagina hoping to terminate pregnancy. By doing so, she saw some blood and thought the pregnancy was terminated.

The next morning, her coworker came to visit as always and found her unresponsive. INEZA was taken to a hospital which later transferred her to a referral hospital for an infection due to an attempted abortion. INEZA spent weeks in the intensive care unit for what was called septic shock following an unsafe abortion. A few weeks later Ineza was sent home.

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Jura is a 20 years old university student. It's all started one morning when she realized that her period was a week overdue. She couldn't believe what was happening. She thought that perhaps it was her diet or a hormonal imbalance that was causing the delay, but remembered that she has been having unprotected sex with her new boyfriend. She ran to the pharmacy to request a pregnancy test.

She couldn't believe what was happening, the pregnancy test was positive. She tried again but the result was still positive. Juru was very scared and started to look for a way to disclose it to the boyfriend. "I had no choice but to tell him, though asking myself if I would keep the baby, how life was going to be for me" she said.

The question was how she was going to tell her parents that she was pregnant. "My parents had sent me to school to study thinking it would avoid early possible pregnancy" she said. Juru felt crazy but decided to be courageous and tell her boyfriend. One afternoon, she invited him to a well-known coffee shop and they were having a good time until she explained him that she was pregnant. Suddenly, the boyfriend became very angry and aggressive and left the coffee shop.

Juru realized that he was not going to assume any responsibilities as a father to the child, even if she would decide to keep the baby. She started looking for a place for abortion. A lady advised her about someone she knows who would help her. She paid Rwf 60, 000 for the service. She was given unspecified pills to take for 2 days. She started having pain all over the abdomen and was bleeding profusely. Later on, she developed fever and couldn't attend class or do anything. She was ashamed even to consult the hospital. But the more she stayed in the dormitory, the worse she felt. Finally, she consulted the

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hospital where she received all the necessary medical care. By the end of the 2nd week, she once again was able to attend classes.

## CHANTAL

A 17 year old female who couldn't continue her studies due to lack of school fees. Her parents are very poor that they can't afford even the school uniform. They always struggled to get food for her 5 siblings. She decided to come to the city of Kigali to look for a job.

By chance, she got a job as a house girl. But her boss was not an easy one to live with. The man started treating Chantal very well and she thought that it was the good thing, one day, when everyone was not at home, the man she called her boss raped her. Suffering from the trauma, she couldn't tell his wife of the ordeal.

She kept quiet but one month later, it was obvious that Chantal was pregnant because of lack of her periods.

She later tried to tell the boss that she was pregnant, hoping that she will make her the 2nd wife. But the man became so angry to the extent of telling her that if she says anything to the wife, he would kick her out of the house and report to his wife that he has captured Chantal trying to intoxicate the food.

Chantal couldn't risk being fired or being accused to be a sorcerer. She also feared what she would tell her parents. She left home telling the parents that she is going to look for a job in order to help them. There was no way to go back to the village while pregnant.

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The boss proposed to her a solution which was abortion. The idea scared her but there was no choice other than accepting. The man took her to traditional healers, where they inserted sharp metal objects inside her vagina that removed some blood-like products. She was told that the fetus is out. Because she was bleeding, they told her that it will disappear within a day or two.

The pain was so intense and when she reached home, bleeding couldn't stop. Her boss's wife decided to take her to the hospital.

The doctor discovered immediately what was happening. He isolated the patient and asked her what was going on and Chantal explained everything to the doctor. When they conducted ultrasound, there was a retained placenta and the uterus was perforated.

They were obliged to open the abdomen and found that the uterus can't be saved and decided to perform a hysterectomy procedure. Chantal couldn't believe what was happening to her. The fact that she will never have a child in her life, she became traumatized and it was too late and the man's wife after knowing the history between her husband and the house girl, she decided to not keep her anymore. Chantal was fired, amid traumatic disorders.

What would Chantal become? She tearfully returned home and shameful. The place she hoped to help change her life, rather destroyed it forever.

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## DUHUZE

A 30-years-old married woman tells her story as follow. When I was 19 year-old studying, I had a boyfriend who was older than me, I trusted him enough to let him have unprotected sex with me since I took him as my future husband. At that time, he was a university student and I was in my final year in high school. Some months later I found him cheating on me and I felt very sad and upset but I was ready to accept his apologies because I loved him so much.” To my surprise, he didn’t bother to apologize, this broke my heart and I decided to break up. Two weeks later, I received his call and he told me that I should go to the hospital and do the HIV test and I was shocked because I had never thought about that before.

I immediately went to the hospital and the result was positive, it was a very scary moment of my life and also found that I was pregnant at the end of my final year in secondary school, the time I was busy preparing for National exam and, was only supported by my mother and I was halfway through my degree so was not ready to have a child.

I decided to call my ex-boyfriend and ask him to help me out with the problems, but he denied any responsibility for both the pregnancy and our HIV/AIDS status. I felt like dying, hopeless. I imagined a 19-year-old girl with HIV, pregnant and I was kind of worried about my mother especially how she will get the news, what my family members, neighbor’s and colleagues would think of me, about my studies and I was a choir member in my church. I was worried about them, I thought that they would get me out after knowing my story, many questions at once.

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All those reasons pushed me to think of an abortion. A supportive friend of mine helped me find some traditional medicine which instead of helping me terminate the pregnancy, they caused me a lot of pain and vaginal bleeding. After days of agonizing pain, I started passing foul-smelling vaginal discharge and had a high fever. I felt so bad that despite all the effort I put in hiding it, everyone including my ended up knowing what I did. Like any loving mother, she took me to the hospital and thank GOD I gave birth to a very handsome boy unfortunately he has some leg disability owing to the medication that I took.

In addition to my son's health problems, I have a problem with secondary infertility because I passed 11 years without getting pregnant again and I thought it could be due to the crime I committed. I never stopped feeling guilty and it's hard for me to forgive myself.

## SOLANGE

At 20 years, she was staying with her mother after the loss of her father at the age of 14. Her mother later remarried. Strong intimacy started to grow between Solange and her mother's husband that, at some point, she was free to him.

However, everything one night when the mother was out for a wedding. Solange's stepfather raped her. She couldn't report this to her mother. She was in a terrible situation. Traumatic, to be precise. She remained silent, but that didn't last long. Her body started showing changes. She very well knew that she was pregnant.

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According to Solange, she couldn't have that baby because it could immediately cause divorce within her mother's family. She couldn't risk that because this man was the family's breadwinner.

She started the process of abortion and consulted a traditional healer for help, the traditional healer inserted some herbal objects in her vagina to terminate pregnancy, but it didn't stop there.

Bleeding started and became so severe that she consulted the hospital in very terrible conditions, they transfused her units of blood and the laboratory tests results showed that she was pregnant and was HIV positive. More than that, her uterus had been severely damaged to the point they did a hysterectomy.

Her life was completely devastated and the family and neighbors came to know what happened, they started stigmatizing her because she has committed abortion and was HIV positive. She reached to the point that she couldn't bear the pain anymore and she committed suicide.

## IRIBAGIZA

IRIBAGIZA is a 16-years-old young lady in the high school of a rural village of the northern province. Her nightmare started when she was raped and impregnated by her biological father. At first, she thought of committing suicide but was too weak to do it. She wondered how she will tell the child that the man who happens to be his/her/other grandfather is also his/ her/other father. After seeing that her daughter was pregnant, her father forced her to terminate the pregnancy using some herbs which she completely denied. Her father threatened to kill her if she ever tells either the local authorities or her mother about what happened. After weeks of silence, she decided to disclose the secret

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to her mother who then became angry after her husband. The latter decided to kill his wife and daughter by forcing them to eat poisoned food but in vain. One evening when IRIGABIZA was sitting in the living room with her mother, his father entered the house and started to beat them, her mother managed to run away but unfortunately IRIBAGIZA didn't make it because she felt weak. Her father beat her to death and attempted to cut her womb open for him to kill the unborn baby.

## TETA

TETA is a 21-years-old 2<sup>nd</sup> year university student shared her story on a hospital bed after attempting to abort with use of herbal medications.

TETA is a first born in a family of 9 children. She was born in a poor family but her parents did all their best to send their children to school. Despite all the hardships, she successfully got an admission to the university. In the middle of her second year, TETA's parents died in a sudden car accident and from that day she became the breadwinner for the 8 siblings. They tried to survive with the little money their parents left but it was not getting anywhere since TETA needed more to sustain her studies at the university and at the same time take care of her siblings. Things worsened as time passed and nothing better happened in her life. Her only comforter was a boyfriend she had met at the university but he couldn't also help her financially.

One evening while she was sitting and crying, her classmate and best friend told her that she can show her an easy way to find money. She introduced TETA to a married man (REBERO for identification purpose) who was willing to give her enough money if she could sleep with her. TETA rejected his offer but after seeing how much she was suffering at the university; she chose to accept the offer. On their first date, she went back home with money and was able to pay for

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meals, accommodation at the university and save some for her siblings. She started seeing and sleeping with the REBERO but she made sure she used a condom to protect herself, but one day he proposed her to leave the condom so they can enjoy more, she accepted.

After missing my period for 2 months, I remembered that night when I ignored a condom and my heart started racing, I wondered what would happen if I was pregnant.

She went to the pharmacy and bought 2 pregnancy test kits which later tested positive. After a long discussion with REBERO, the latter advised her to abort since he didn't want his wife to know he was in extramarital affairs.

I accepted the offer since I didn't want to fail my siblings. What would my boyfriend think of me? What would my friends at the university say? And most importantly, I didn't want to lose my scholarship or even put my studies on hold, she explained.

One of her female friends brought her to a place where she could have her pregnancy terminated, they gave her some medicine to drink and others to put in the vagina and reassured her to go home and things will be alright. Late at night when she was at the university hostel, she started to have unusual vaginal bleeding and she was feeling weak. Ofcourse, she first lied to her roommates that she was having troubles with her menses. Seeing that she was not getting any better, her roommates called her boyfriend who immediately took her to hospital. After one day of admission and medical treatment, TETA was sent back home in good health.

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[1] Health Development Initiative, "Understanding the causes, practices and consequences of terminating pregnancies: Experience of women incarcerated for illegal abortion in Rwanda."

[2] MINISTRY OF HEALTH-RWANDA, "Ministerial order on safe abortion"

## The voice of medical students.

Medical students are the future leaders in healthcare, among their services are pre and post abortion care services. They were asked to describe abortion in one way and the following are their thoughts

### About abortion

- Is a human right
- Should be fully accessible
- Should be legalized
- It happens anyways
- Unsafe = risky
- Should be safe
- Public awareness is necessary
- Should be non-discriminatory
- Women should be aware of their choice

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[1] Health Development Initiative, "Understanding the causes, practices and consequences of terminating pregnancies: Experience of women incarcerated for illegal abortion in Rwanda."

[2] MINISTRY OF HEALTH-RWANDA, "Ministerial order on safe abortion"



Medical Students For Choice - Rwanda ensures that medical students get a strong intellectual package in different aspects affecting their daily life as future healthcare providers. They are trained on medic-legal aspect of family planning, research methodology, right based advocacy to name few.

In a survey conducted among medical students on what they think would be the longer benefit of knowledge and skills they get from MSFC-RWANDA, the following were their responses.

- To provide with my fellow youth will adequate SRH information.
- It is my passion.
- It is my responsibility as a future healthcare provider
- Reproductive health is a human right, I have to respect it for the benefit of the patients.
- To empower my community on the danger of unsafe abortion and the options available to them.
- As a future obstetrician, I feel more equipped to acquire these knowledge.
- To have enough exposure
- To be part of a movement that promotes women's right.
- To be empowered with enough skills for my future career.
- To contribute to the reduction of maternal mortality.

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[2] MINISTRY OF HEALTH-RWANDA, "Ministerial order on safe abortion"



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