

What happens to abortion rights for refugees in Africa when they cross borders?

Introduction

The refugee population around the world, including Africa, is growing at an accelerated pace each year with no sign of abatement;¹ between 2015 and 2022, the number increased by one third to almost 30 million.² Between 2017 and 2022 alone, the number grew by almost 10 million individuals. The causes of displacement are also increasing. One in four refugees is someone who can become pregnant,¹ yet due to resource constraints in complex humanitarian emergencies, they are likely to have a higher unmet need for sexual and reproductive health services, including abortion.^{3,4,5,6} The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact to African refugees' lives, with respect to their ability to access abortion services, as they sought protection in a country other than that of their origin.

Methods

Definitions

We define refugees according to the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, which includes refugees and "people in refugee-like situation".² We use the term "origin country" to mean the country from which a refugee fled and "host country" to mean the country to which a refugee fled and where they currently reside. The country names are preserved from the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder query.²

Refugee data

We downloaded aggregate data for 2022 from the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder² that included origin country, host country, sex, and age group (0-4, 5-11, 12-59, 60+ years, other). We included data for females 12-59 years old and excluded all data for the age group "other". We also excluded refugees with "Unknown" or "Stateless" origin.

Abortion law data

We retrieved abortion law data from the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR)'s The World's Abortion Laws map.⁷ We matched each country in the UNHCR data query to its corresponding abortion law category based on the CRR designation, which included "5: prohibited altogether", "4: to save the pregnant person's life", "3: to preserve health", "2: socioeconomic grounds", "1: on request".⁷ To confirm that we did not include any countries with abortion law changes in 2022, we reviewed the Council on Foreign Relations' summary of changes to abortion law between 2000 and 2022⁸ and the World Health Organization's Global Abortion Policies Database for each of the 38 listed countries to confirm the year the law changed and when the law entered into force.⁹ We analyzed the data using R programming.¹⁰

Results

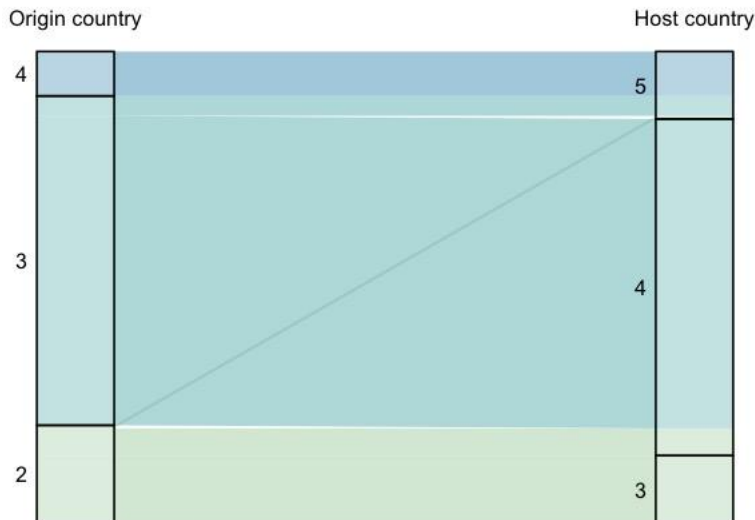
We retrieved 29,413,033 records from the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder for the calendar year 2022. Out of 6,860,398 female refugees aged 12-59 years who sought asylum in 2022, 33% (n=2,254,109) originated in Africa and 33% (n=2,268,104) sought asylum in Africa: 32% (n=2,179,568) of individuals migrated within Africa. Our final sample for Africa includes data from, with 52 origin countries and 48 host countries. Among African refugees, 1% (n=22,680)

of refugees went to countries with abortion on request, 15% (n=333,433) went to countries with abortion for socioeconomic reasons, 36% (n=784,841) went to countries with abortion to preserve health, 44% (n=963,586) went to countries with abortion to save the pregnant person's life, and 3% (n=75,028) went to countries where abortion is prohibited altogether.

Refugee travel within Africa from countries with less restrictive laws to countries with more restrictive laws

23% (n=494,411) of refugees moving within Africa sought asylum in countries with more restrictive laws than their origin country in 2022, compared to 16% of refugees globally. The largest contributors to this group were refugees from the Dem. Rep. of the Congo, abortion category 3, fleeing to Uganda, abortion category 4 (28%; n=136,342), from Rwanda, abortion category 2, fleeing to the Dem. Rep. of the Congo, abortion category 3, (12%; n=60,947), and from Eritrea, abortion category 3, fleeing to Sudan, abortion category 4 (9%; n=45,983). *Figure 1* shows the exchange of refugees in Africa between countries with less restrictive to more restrictive abortion laws, with refugees moving from the lefthand column to the righthand column.

*Figure 1. Segment of refugee population moving between African countries with less restrictive to more restrictive abortion laws based on abortion law category, 2022**



Note: We removed 42 individuals that moved from category countries from this figure for illustration purposes (<0.01% of total sample).

Travel between countries with the same assigned abortion law category

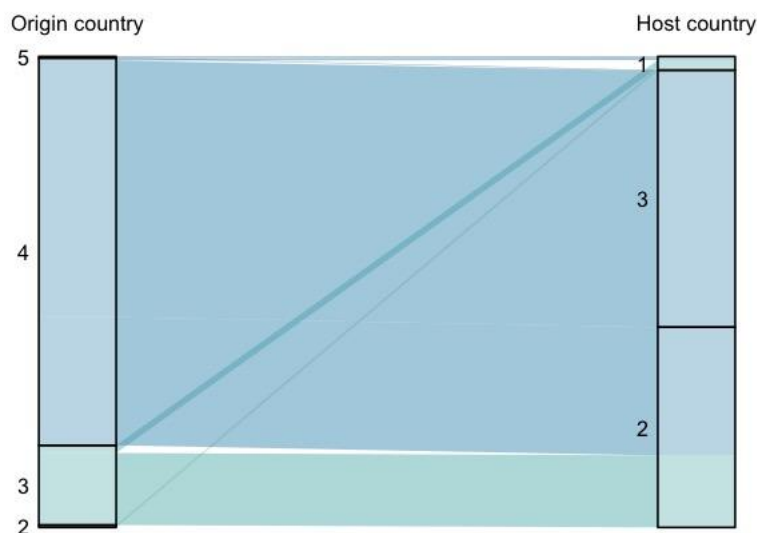
895,886 (41%) refugees moving within Africa sought asylum in countries with abortion laws in the same abortion law category as their origin country in 2022, compared to 44% globally. Abortion law category 4 represented the highest proportion of individuals involved in these exchanges, at 67%. The largest contributors to this group were refugees from South Sudan fleeing to Uganda, both abortion law category 4 (29%; n=255,543), from South Sudan fleeing to

Sudan, both abortion law category 4 (27%; n=241,919), and from the Central African Rep. fleeing to Cameroon, both abortion law category 3 (12%; n=106,585).

Travel from countries with more restrictive laws to countries with less restrictive laws

In 2022, 789,271 (36%) refugees within Africa sought asylum in countries with less restrictive laws than their origin country. The largest contributors to this group were refugees from Sudan, abortion law category 4, fleeing to Chad, abortion law category 3 (17%; n=134,654), from South Sudan, abortion law category 4, fleeing to Ethiopia, abortion law category 2 (15%; n=122,332), and from Somalia, abortion law category 4, fleeing to Kenya, abortion law category 3 (11%; n=88,546). *Figure 2* shows the exchange of refugees between countries with more restrictive to less restrictive abortion laws, with refugees moving from the lefthand column to the righthand column.

*Figure 2. Segment of refugee population moving between African countries with more restrictive to less restrictive abortion law categories, 2022**



Note: We removed 5,979 individuals that moved from category 5 to category 4 countries (~0.3% of total sample) from this figure for illustration purposes.

Discussion

This analysis of refugee movement between countries in Africa in 2022 starts to fill an important gap in our understanding of how forced displacement affects access to reproductive healthcare. Almost half a million individuals, in one year alone, and comprising almost one quarter of female refugees aged 12-59 years moving within Africa, decreased their ability to legally access abortion relative to the level allowed in their country of origin when they fled for protection to another country. This analysis draws attention to the need for more funding, guidance, and support for entities to provide access to abortion services wherever they implement other reproductive health services.

References

1. UNHCR Global Trends - Forced displacement in 2020. UNHCR Flagship Reports. Accessed May 10, 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/>
2. Refugees UNHC for. UNHCR - Refugee Statistics. UNHCR. Accessed April 19, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>
3. Tanabe M, Myers A, Bhandari P, Cornier N, Doraiswamy S, Krause S. Family planning in refugee settings: findings and actions from a multi-country study. *Confl Health*. 2017;11(1):9. doi:10.1186/s13031-017-0112-2
4. Volkov VG, Granatovich NN, Survillo EV, Pichugina LV, Achilgova ZS. Abortion in the Structure of Causes of Maternal Mortality. *Rev Bras Ginecol E Obstet Rev Fed Bras Soc Ginecol E Obstet*. 2018;40(6):309-312. doi:10.1055/s-0038-1657765
5. Ward J, Vann B. Gender-based violence in refugee settings. *The Lancet*. 2002;360:s13-s14. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(02)11802-2
6. Sardinha L, Maheu-Giroux M, Stöckl H, Meyer SR, García-Moreno C. Global, regional, and national prevalence estimates of physical or sexual, or both, intimate partner violence against women in 2018. *The Lancet*. 2022;399(10327):803-813. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02664-7
7. The World's Abortion Laws. Center for Reproductive Rights. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/worlds-abortion-laws/>
8. Abortion Law: Global Comparisons. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed August 25, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/abortion-law-global-comparisons>
9. GAPD - The Global Abortion Policies Database - The Global Abortion Policies Database is designed to strengthen global efforts to eliminate unsafe abortion. Accessed September 15, 2023. <https://abortion-policies.srhr.org/>
10. R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing. <https://www.r-project.org/>