UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE

DULLAH OMAR INSTITUTE
FOR CONSTITUTIONAL LAW, GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# MEDIA REPORT
# From Criminalisation to Care
# Self-Managed Abortion in Africa
# 11 November 2025

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# MEDIA REPORT

## From Criminalisation to Care: Self-Managed Abortion in Africa

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## 1 Overview

On 11 November 2025, the Dullah Omar Institute, in collaboration with the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, hosted a webinar titled From Criminalisation to Care: Self-Managed Abortion in Africa. The session brought together experts, legal practitioners and advocates to examine the evolving landscape of self-managed abortion and its relationship to public health, bodily autonomy and regional human rights standards.

The discussion highlighted the urgent need to move away from punitive approaches and towards legal and health systems that provide accurate information, safe care and meaningful support. Decriminalisation emerged as both a human rights imperative and an essential public-health measure.

### 1.1 Criminalisation, safety and autonomy

Presenters emphasised that the criminalisation of abortion in many African countries continues to push women and girls towards unsafe procedures. Punitive laws have not prevented abortion; instead, they have created fear, stigma and avoidable harm. Criminalisation can also deter people from seeking medical assistance, increase uncertainty among healthcare providers and disproportionately affect those with the fewest resources.

When supported by accurate information and access to recommended medication, self-managed abortion can be safe, effective and empowering. It can offer privacy, dignity and greater control, particularly where formal healthcare systems are under-resourced, inaccessible or hostile.

### 1.2 Regional human rights standards and structural barriers

The webinar considered the growing support for self-managed abortion within African regional human rights frameworks, including the Maputo Protocol and the jurisprudence of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. These standards affirm rights to dignity, bodily autonomy, equality and freedom from cruel or degrading treatment.

Significant structural barriers nevertheless remain. These include limited access to essential medicines, unclear or contradictory national laws, stigma, restricted sexual and reproductive health budgets, and the heightened policing of adolescents, low-income women and other marginalised groups. Country examples showed that legal uncertainty and social pressure can undermine safe abortion access even where human rights protections exist.

### 1.3 Community-led responses

Participants highlighted the important role of community-led initiatives in expanding access to safe self-managed abortion. Feminist accompaniment networks, telephone hotlines and digital information platforms have helped individuals obtain reliable information and support despite legal and social constraints. These initiatives demonstrate the value of trusted, community-based care, while also underscoring the need to protect those who provide information and assistance.

## 2 Conclusions and priorities

The path from criminalisation to care requires both legal and social change. Reform must remove punitive barriers, clarify the responsibilities of health systems and ensure that individuals who self-manage abortions, as well as those who support them, are protected from punishment, stigma and abuse. Decriminalisation is central to reducing preventable deaths, addressing inequality and enabling women and girls to exercise their reproductive rights safely and with dignity.

- Advance legal and social decriminalisation of abortion.
- Adopt clear national guidelines on self-managed abortion and access to recommended medication.
- Strengthen sexual and reproductive health systems so that information, support and follow-up care are accessible and non-judgmental.
- Protect accompaniment networks, healthcare workers and others who support people self-managing abortions.
- Address stigma, misinformation and the disproportionate policing of adolescents, low-income women and other marginalised groups.

## Recommended citation

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Given the need for regional integration to encourage development in Africa, the Institute also seeks to advance human rights and democracy in this broader context. Based on high quality research, the Institute engages in policy development, advocacy and educational initiatives, focusing on areas critical to the realisation of human rights and democracy in South Africa and Africa in general.