

# US-linked anti-abortion centre targeting women with misinformation in Côte d'Ivoire

Tuesday 31 May 2022, by [CROWE Portia](#), [ONÉKÉKOU Emma](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2022).

## **Abortion would be 'murder', even in cases of rape, a counsellor says to openDemocracy's undercover reporter**

A senator in Côte d'Ivoire has expressed concern about a US-linked 'crisis pregnancy centre' in his country misinforming women and girls about their sexual and reproductive rights.

Months after openDemocracy [first revealed](#) the presence of such centres in 18 countries around the world, more have been identified in the francophone West African countries of Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.

In Côte d'Ivoire, a counsellor with the Étoile du Matin 'crisis pregnancy centre' in Abidjan, the country's largest city, provided misinformation about the laws and medical facts concerning abortion. The centre's [Facebook page](#) says that it offers "advice" to pregnant women, but openDemocracy found that, faced with a young woman who said she was considering an abortion, the centre's counsellor used misinformation and emotional manipulation to dissuade her from seeking one.

The counsellor told the woman that ending her pregnancy would constitute "murder". In fact, murder and illegal abortions are entirely different matters under Ivorian law. If rape is legally proven, the law permits abortion. Even when illegally done, abortion is a much less serious offence than murder; the woman would face a maximum of two years in prison and a fine of \$516. Convicted murderers face life imprisonment.

The counsellor also implied that she could provide financial assistance, as an inducement for the woman to keep the baby, and offered misleading opinions on contraception, which is encouraged by the Ivorian government.

### **Legal and medical misinformation**

Étoile du Matin's Facebook page includes posts that make it appear neutral, rather than anti-abortion. For example, a post (in French) reads: "Pregnant and desperate and want to talk to someone? We are here for you. Without judging you, we will lend you a listening ear."

However, when the counsellor met openDemocracy's undercover reporter – posing as a vulnerable woman who had been raped by an uncle – she told her that aborting the "child" would constitute murder, and offered to take her to a lawyer who would show her the laws that "stipulate" that.

"Murder is punished by law," she told the reporter.

The counsellor repeatedly referred to abortion as "murder" and said that Ivorian law prohibits abortion. In fact, abortion is [allowed](#) in some circumstances, including rape, if the rape can be

legally proven. When the reporter suggested she could explain to police officers that she had been raped, the counsellor said the police would not ask for an explanation, but would arrest her because she had “killed a human being”.

The counsellor also misled the undercover reporter about the medical facts surrounding abortion, and repeatedly told her that she could die if she had an abortion, leaving her current child motherless.

The counsellor also alleged – without providing any evidence – that women can face psychological problems after having an abortion. She said that some women cannot go near babies afterwards, and when asleep are haunted by the sound of infants crying. She also implied that the use of birth control or the morning-after pill could lead to infertility.

Despite the fact that the reporter said she had been raped by a family member, the counsellor told her the way to avoid getting pregnant was sexual abstinence.

The Côte d’Ivoire government funds access to contraception. Family planning is encouraged, and condoms are available over the counter (only the birth control pill requires a prescription). Emergency contraception is also legal; the morning-after pill is available in pharmacies without a prescription.

When the reporter told the counsellor that she could not afford to raise another child, the counsellor suggested that she could provide her with financial support if she kept the baby. She also encouraged the reporter to forgive her rapist and ask him for financial help.

Étoile du Matin referred openDemocracy to their lawyer, who did not respond to our request for comment.

## **US Christian Right links**

Étoile du Matin is [listed](#) as an affiliate of Ohio-based Heartbeat International. openDemocracy’s previous [investigation](#), involving 18 countries, found that undercover reporters were fed false claims at ‘crisis pregnancy centres’ affiliated to Heartbeat.

Étoile du Matin is also an [affiliate](#) of the Association for Life of Africa (AFLA), an anti-abortion organisation based in Zambia. AFLA’s goal is to create a regional network of grassroots efforts to promote alternatives to abortion. It is financially supported by Heartbeat International, and US donors can give money directly to AFLA via the Heartbeat [website](#).

According to a 2019 US [tax return](#), Heartbeat International spent \$48,469 in Zambia. It said all funds were used for “training, consulting and support of our joint affiliates”.

Heartbeat International and AFLA did not respond to openDemocracy’s request for comment.

In response to openDemocracy’s findings, senator Mamadou Kano said the Ivorian government should investigate “what is really happening in this centre”. He said it was wrong for the counsellor to tell our undercover reporter that she would be imprisoned for murder if she sought an abortion.

“I don’t think that the current law is going to imprison someone who has ‘removed’ an unwanted pregnancy after being impregnated by rape,” he said (in French).

Carelle-Laetitia Goly, an Ivorian lawyer, feminist blogger and women’s rights advocate, said the government must firmly condemn Étoile du Matin. “The law is clear: a woman who has been raped

[...] has the right to abort the child born of the rape,” she said. “The government should act to dismantle these groups. This NGO [...] is undermining the rights of women in particular and human rights in general in Côte d’Ivoire.”

Nènè Fofana-Cissé, regional director for West and Central Africa at EngenderHealth, a US-based sexual health charity, said that Étoile du Matin should be better regulated.

“We need to see better management of this centre by the ministry of health or the ministry of women and family affairs to understand what kind of services they are providing, and what kind of information they are sharing,” she said. “Frightening or making women feel guilty should not be tolerated in a country where [...] clandestine abortions are [one of] the main cause[s] of maternal mortality.”

Côte d’Ivoire has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with [614 deaths per 100,000 live births](#), 18% of which are due to complications from unsafe abortions. More than 200,000 women aged between 15 and 49 seek abortions every year. But only [30% of young people use contraception](#), according to Médecins du Monde.

### **Current law on rape victims: ‘ridiculous’**

[Abortion](#) is legal in Côte d’Ivoire only in cases of rape or to save the life of the woman, on the advice of three doctors. Otherwise, those who perform, receive, advertise or “incite” abortion could face imprisonment.

However, the country is also a signatory to the Maputo Protocol, an African Union initiative that obliges members to allow abortion in cases of sexual assault, rape and incest; if the pregnancy endangers the mental and physical health of the mother; and if the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother or the foetus.

Côte d’Ivoire ratified the protocol in 2011, but has not changed its laws accordingly. “The law needs to be updated – it’s outrageous,” said EngenderHealth’s Fofana-Cissé. Senator Kano said that if Côte d’Ivoire has signed the protocol, the government must apply it.

Campaigners say that the current provision for rape victims is insufficient because of the burden of proof required – and the time it takes to obtain it. Rape victims have to go to a hospital, pay for a medical certificate, file a police report (though not all police stations accept rape depositions) and then prove the rape in court – all this before being allowed to access an abortion.

“There’s so much that needs to be done to be able to prove rape, it’s just ridiculous,” said Fofana-Cissé.

Goly described the current process as a “trap” for vulnerable women. “[When] we say a raped woman has the right to abort if she becomes pregnant, we are not talking about presumption of rape, but about rape, which requires a legal procedure,” she said. “But a legal procedure can take one to two years.”

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**P.S.**

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