

STUDY OF ATTITUDES AND REASONS FOR INDUCED ABORTION IN WOMEN REFERRED TO LEGAL MEDICINE CENTER IN URMIA IN 2014

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: As a problem, Abortion around the world, especially in developing countries is important that causes many somatic and sexual disabilities and economic complications. Based on these reasons, attitudes and reasons for induced abortion in women is critical and this research was carried on to study of attitudes and reasons for induced abortion in women referred to a Legal Medicine Center in Urmia, Iran.

Methods: This is a cross sectional study and the sample group was pregnant women referring to legal medicine office in 2014 in order to get the abortion license. All relevant data were recorded in a questionnaire and analyzed by SPSS software. The questionnaire has been used in order to collect all data. After completion, the SPSS version 19 software has been used for analyzing data.

Results: 80 women referred to a Legal Medicine Center in Urmia in 2014 were studied. Of the samples, Mean age of mothers at the time of abortion was 30.05 years.

There was a significant correlation between demographic characteristics and questions of It is better the abortion is done in after 3 months of pregnancy ($p=0.04$), It is better the abortion is done in genetic malformations ($p=0.046$) and It is better the abortion is done in single girls ($p=0.039$). There was not a significant correlation between attitudes and reasons for induced abortion.

Conclusion: retraining programs and workshops will be held to increase knowledge of women that reduce forensic problems and also improved the health of pregnant women. The results of study can increase managers information about the circumstances under which therapeutic abortion is permissible.

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Introduction

Induced abortion is the intentional termination of pregnancy before the fetus viability usually performed during the first trimester by medical or surgical means (1). Globally in 2008, 21.6 million women underwent unsafe abortion with 18.5 million from developing countries (10.8 million in Asia and 6.2 million in Africa) (2,3). Among women aged 15 to 44 in developing countries, there were 29 abortions per 1,000 women (4). In Iran, the estimated general abortion annual rates was 5.5 per 1,000 women (5) while induced abortion rate was 8.9 per 1,000 women aged 15-44 years(6). The most commonly cited reasons for induced abortion were fertility-related and economic reasons.(7,8) Unsafe abortion is the leading cause of maternal death that

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is easily preventable and treatable. The World Health Organization reported that 44 million out of the 358,000 annual maternal deaths, 47,000 are due to complications arising from induced abortions mostly in developing countries (9), Death of a mother was mainly due to unsafe induced abortions mostly performed out of the legal system by unskilled persons or in places with inappropriate medical standards (10).

According to the World Health Organization, the main reasons for induced abortion is largely based on maintaining the lives of mothers, maintaining physical health of the mother or fetus, maintaining the mental health of the mother, in cases of rape, fetal defects, socio-economic reasons, as well as the parents' request (9). Different countries have different rules in relation to the above conditions based on their culture, customs, and religious beliefs (11). In Iran, abortion is forbidden under normal circumstances and not permissible by Muslim scholars. However, scholars begun to consider fetal and maternal indications which started decriminalization of abortion by passing the Therapeutic Abortions Act by the Iranian Parliament in 2005 (12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19) stipulating that abortion be legally allowed before the 20th week of pregnancy for the complications during pregnancy endangering mother's health and termination of pregnancy due to major malformation of fetus (13,20,21,22,23,24,25).

In countries where abortion is legal and can be done at the request of the mother, there is still not enough information regarding the reasons for and the attitudes of the women to induced abortion. The reasons for abortion are often more complex than not just wanting the pregnancy. Emotional, ethical, economic, social and psychological reasons influence the women's decision to request abortion (25, 26). Unintended pregnancy increases the risk for unsafe abortion and can occur even in women who use contraceptive methods. However, Cheraghi et al (27) reported that of the 572 women who participated in their study, 5.4% had not used any methods of contraception and 36% used ineffective contraceptive methods. Among the 181 unintended pregnancy, 30.4% were unwanted thereby resorting to induce abortion. In a study of women aged 15 to 49 years, Motlaq et al (28) found that unwanted pregnancies were reported by 30.5% of the pregnant women, however, only 0.7% were unaware of contraceptive methods and 17.4% reported unmet need for modern contraceptive methods. They also found that the reasons for unmet need were the women's perceived low risk of pregnancy, opposition from husband and relatives and worries about side effects of contraceptives. Unwanted pregnancy was also found in the study of Motaghi et al (29) mainly due to lack of information about family planning and lack of information on the religious aspect of abortion. They also found that despite having unwanted pregnancy, women did not have an abortion because of religious beliefs, attachment to the unborn baby, other people's opinions, late diagnosis of pregnancy and previous unsuccessful abortion attempts. The lack of ambiguity of the law in relation to abortion reflects differing public opinions about acceptability of abortion in Iran. However, for those who opted to undergo induce abortion, women were found to experience conflicting emotions irrespective of the medical reason for having an abortion (30) and the belief that abortion is sinful.(31,32) Some may argue that the main reason why women decide to undergo induce abortion is because they do not want pregnancy, however, few studies have reported other reasons especially the women's attitudes for induced abortion especially in developing countries. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore, in particular, the women's attitudes and reasons for induced abortion who were legally referred by the court to the Legal Medicine Centre in Urmia, Iran. The study also will add to the growing concern of providing appropriate interventions to these women who live in a different socio-cultural context.

Materials and Methods

This was a cross-sectional study conducted in the Legal Medicine Centre (LMC) in Urmia, Iran. Participants in this study included those women referred to the Legal Medicine Centre for induced abortion in 2014. We designed a 15-item structured questionnaire based on the literature reviewed to explore women's attitudes to abortion and reasons for abortion. The questionnaire was reviewed by three experts (midwife clinician, doctor, and nurse midwife academic) for content validity. The internal consistency reliability of the tool as used in this study was Cronbach alpha = 0.88.

Approval to conduct this study was granted by the Urmia University Medical Sciences ethics committee and access the Legal Medical Centre by the Director of the LMC. The women were approached at the MLC at the end of the procedure to explain the purpose and nature of the survey. They were informed that their participation will be kept confidential and their privacy will be maintained. They were also informed that they can refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without this affecting the treatment they would receive after the procedure. Upon obtaining their consent, the women were asked to respond to each of the item if they agree (Yes) or disagree (No) to each of the statements. Only their age and marital status were obtained. Completion and return of the questionnaire was accepted as their informed consent. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the demographic characteristics of the women and their responses to the dichotomous-responded questionnaire.

Result

The study included 80 women with the mean age of 30.05 years (range=17 to 44). Most of the women (78.8%) were married to non-familial relatives while 21.8% were married within the extended family relatives. The three main reasons the women agreed for induced abortion were: (1) fetuses suspected of mental or physical abnormality (83.8%); (2) abortion performed after the first trimester of pregnancy (71.2%); and (3) abortion performed in unmarried women (52.5%). With regards to the women's attitudes to abortion, more than 75% agreed that: (1) public health officials should have complete control of abortion law (85%); (2) partners must be involved in abortion decisions; and (3) abortion is dangerous to women's health (77.5%). The

three main reasons why the women disagreed with abortion were: (1) abortion is a method of birth control (40%); (2) abortion should be performed if pregnancy interferes with educational and/or career goals (27.5%); and (3) abortion should be performed in pregnant women who do not want to have any more children (20%).

Discussion

The reasons for having an induced abortion were quite different from that reported by Ranji's study in Urmia in 2012. In that study, the main reasons were family economic problems, postponing childbearing and wanted no more children. During this study, abortions were also conducted in the home of non-medical providers thereby resulting in incomplete abortion, heavy bleeding, infection, perforation of the uterus requiring hospitalization. At least in our study, induced abortions were performed in a legal medical center and women were referred to by the Iranian legal system.

The World Health Organization supported termination of pregnancy before 20 weeks of pregnancy or termination of pregnancy before the fetus weighing less than five grams.(9) In our study, the women had and agreed that induce abortion be performed after the first trimester. The plausible explanation for this could be the late diagnosis of pregnancy or that they were still considering whether to keep the unborn baby or not.(30) In any case, therapeutic abortion after four months of gestation is allowed only if the mother's health is in danger.13 Since, the women were referred to by the court, the women therefore assumed that such abortion after the third trimester is acceptable. However, health care professionals involved in performing induce abortion in Iran should be guided by the abortion bill in the country including: (1) fetus must be less than four months of age; (2) fetus must be suffering from profound developmental delay or profound abnormalities; (3) fetal problems is causing extreme suffering or hardship to the mother or fetus; (4) the life of the mother is in danger; (5) both the mother and father should give consent to the procedure; and (6) physician performing the abortion is not penalized for the service performed.(13) Health professional in other countries should also be guided by the Abortion Law in their country or that suggested by the World Health Organization.

The women also agreed that induce abortion should be performed in unmarried women. Most studies on women's unintended pregnancy have been conducted on unmarried teens and in some countries induce abortion are performed legally or illegally.(33) In our study, the response of the women could be explained because as an Islamic country, extramarital fertility and sex outside of marriage are taboo.(34) Pregnancy of unmarried women results in severe negative consequences, shame to herself and to her family and social deprivation.(35) As such, this could lead to hiding the pregnancy and opting for illegal abortion from relatives and friends.(31,32)

There are three main reasons why women disagreed to induce abortion. One of the reason was that abortion is a method of birth control. In the of Sell et al, (8) the most cited motivation for abortion was that it could be used as a contraceptive method mostly because of the difficulty in accessing family planning services or emergency contraception. Another reason was that abortion should be performed if pregnancy interferes with educational and/or career goals. In the study of Sell et al,(8) the desire not to drop out of school was less cited as a motivation for abortion. On the other hand, studies reported that economic situation including inflation, housing, and mortgage was a reason for seeking abortion. The women in our study did not agree that abortion should be performed in pregnant women who do not want to have any more children. On the other hand, induce abortion in developing countries was influenced by couples not wanting any more children or postponing childbearing.(10) The decision to abort meant that there was no planning carried out by the couple. Thus, couples should plan for the number of children they would like to have. However, within the cultural context of this study, the attitude of Iranian women to family size varies among different religious and ethnic groups.(7) Controlling the family size with careful planning meant increased opportunities for education and employment for the women(31) thereby overcoming the economic situation of the family.

With regards to the women's attitudes to abortion, they agreed that public health officials should have complete control of abortion law, partners must be involved in abortion decisions and abortion is dangerous to women's health. Since decriminalization of abortion was now legalized in Iran,(13) the women believed that this would prevent unsafe abortions thereby safeguarding women's health. Indeed, the women believed that partners should be involved in abortion decisions and should not be interfered by family members and relatives opposing to the procedure. This could prevent women for secretly having the abortion without their husband knowing that could damage their relationship.(7)

This study was limited because we did not collect information about the educational levels of the women and also the number of children that already have. Correlations about these two variables with the reasons and attitudes for induced abortion could have given us more information to address any concerns they may have even though induced abortion was performed legally as approved by the court. Nevertheless, the results of this study support the need to improve women's and couples' awareness and practice of effective contraceptive methods and that induce abortion is now legally acceptable in Iran. All women, their partners and family should be made aware that unsafe abortions could lead to maternal morbidity and mortality. Further large scale studies are needed to better understand the complex issues that lead to unintended pregnancies and abortions considering the cultural and legal context.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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