

Department and Clinic of Psychiatry
Interfaculty Chair and Department of Public Health, Medical University of Lublin

MARTA MAKARA-STUDZIŃSKA, MAŁGORZATA SKÓRSKA,
EWA RUDNICKA-DROŻAK, MACIEJ LATALSKI

*Young women's attitudes towards the anti-abortion act
binding in Poland*

The necessity of undertaking abortion has been practiced for thousands of years. It has appeared in all societies and cultures all over the world. Descriptions of the methods of performing abortion intervention were found in ancient Egypt and China. The problem of abortion is not only a matter of women, who decide to undergo pregnancy termination, since it is reflected in various spheres of human and social lives (2). Therefore, we should see abortion as a multi-dimensional phenomenon: philosophical, psychological, theological, medical and social one (5, 6, 7).

The attitude towards abortion is one of the most controversial social questions in Poland too. Legal regulations concerning pregnancy termination were several times in dependence on government which was in authority. The termination of pregnancy was made legal in Poland in 1956. From 1956 to the early 1990's, abortion was widely accessible, both on medical and social grounds. Terminations were conducted in public hospitals and in private clinics as a paid service (4,8). Political features of the discussions on abortion in Poland were not conducive to undertaking by researchers deep consideration to human consciousness conditioning and attitudes towards abortion. The restrictive abortion law in Poland has not increased the number of births, it has only caused suffering among women and their families (1, 3).

Therefore, abortion is a problem which still arouses many emotions, that is why it became the subject of the research presented here.

The purpose of the work was an analysis of women's attitudes towards abortion. We also tried to estimate the knowledge on the subject of the anti-abortion law in force in Poland, and also behavior in case of unplanned pregnancy.

RESEARCH METHOD

There were 870 women examined. The socio-demographical data are presented in Table 1. The research was executed with the use of a specially constructed questionnaire. The blank was made up of 21 questions, which mostly concerned the knowledge of the anti-abortion law presently in force in Poland, but there was also touched the question of behavior in case of unplanned pregnancy. None of the examined women refused to fill up the questionnaire. General perception was positive. The subject of the questionnaire aroused a great interest; some of the respondents expressed the will for conversation on the subject.

Table 1. The socio-demographical data of the examined group

Age	20–24 years old
Social status	single
Family status	childless
Place of residence	35% in a village, 36% in a town, 29% in a city
Education	higher in course

RESULTS

Since 1997, Polish law permits the possibility of pregnancy termination:

1. If pregnancy menaces the woman's life or health, which is ascertained by a doctor, but the performing one. Doctor at hospital performs pregnancy termination.

2. If prenatal examinations, or other medical premises, present great likelihood of serious and irreversible fetus's handicap, or his incurable disease menacing his life, which is ascertained by a doctor, but the performing one. Doctor at hospital performs pregnancy termination.

3. If there is the suspicion (ascertained by public prosecutor) that the pregnancy appeared as a consequence of an illicit act. Pregnancy termination is permissible in such a situation, if since the beginning of the pregnancy there have not elapsed more than twelve weeks. The circumstances which qualify for pregnancy termination are ascertained by public prosecutor. Pregnancy termination could be performed in a private consulting room.

Knowledge of the law and the attitude towards it is very important for proper understanding of the phenomenon of pregnancy termination in Poland. That is why the respondents answered the questions concerning legal regulations in force (Fig. 1).

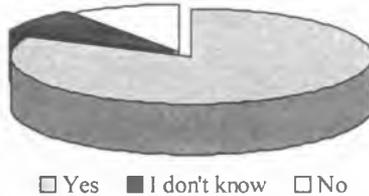


Fig. 1. Does every woman have the right to decide about her own life, lot and her body, and does the present anti-abortion law make it impossible?

Most, that is 714 respondents (82%), answered that the law in force hinders women from deciding about her own life, 87 of them (10%) recognized that the law has no such influence, few, only 8% they ascertained that they did not know how to answer. Besides, the examined people were asked about the knowledge of the anti-abortion law, the thing that is very important (Fig. 2).

Among 870 responding women only 383 (44%) knew the law content, whereas most – 487 women (56%) acknowledged that they do not know the conditions for the admittance of pregnancy termination in Poland. The obtained results are alarming considering that most of the respondents answered positively to the previous question concerning limitations of women's rights in the light of the law that they, as it appears, do not know in fact. The women knowing the anti-abortion law assumed attitudes towards what they think of the law (It was possible to mark more than one answer) (Fig. 3).

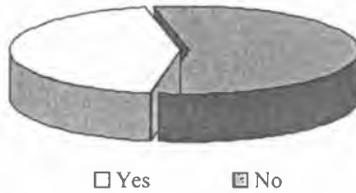


Fig. 2. Do you know the anti-abortion law presently in force?

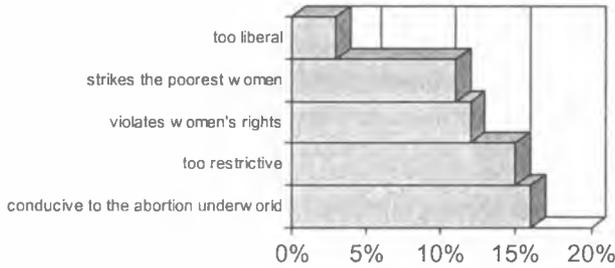


Fig. 3. The anti-abortion law presently in force is...

As it is shown in figure 5, none of the answers gained majority. However, the law in force seems to be disadvantageous to the examined as a legal document: too restrictive for 130 respondents (15%), violating women's rights for 104 (16%). Ninety-six of the examined women (11%) think that it has the greatest influence on women of low social status, and only 26 (3%) consider that the law is too liberal. It is alarming that more than half of the respondents do not know the presently functioning law, nor are conscious of its effects.

As an interesting thing seemed to be young women's opinion about the need for the need for organizing referendum considering pregnancy termination in Poland (Fig. 4). A great majority of the respondents, 661 (76%), marked the answer 'yes', 121 (14%), decided rather yes, only 44 women (5%) ascertained that the referendum is not necessary, similar result (5%) was reply – 'no'. Therefore, women notice the need for referendum having its aim in getting to know Poles' opinion about abortion.

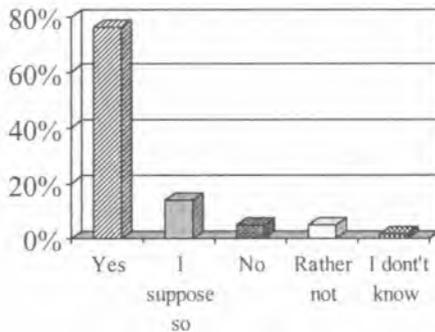


Fig. 4. Do you think there should be a referendum about abortion?

Besides, the examined women answered a question about the people who should participate in the referendum. Most women – 652 (75%) – acknowledged that in the voting there should participate men and women at the age 18–60, the remaining 218 respondents (25%) ascertained that it should be only women in reproduction age. Apart from the anti-abortion law and referendum, the questionnaire contained a question about women's rights in Poland. As many as 618 respondents (71%) noticed that women's rights are violated in Poland, only 78 (9%) ascertained that they are not, whereas 174 people (10%) ascertained either they rather are or they are rather not.

As it appears from research executed by OBOP (OBOP 1998), where respondents were asked about human rights concerning especially women, only a third part were convinced that such rights exist. Among 31% of the examined who acknowledged violating human rights in relation to women in Poland, only 16% ascertained that it refers to the right for abortion, and even less – 6%, noticed the right for possessing children. They also called attention to women's attitude towards a possible unplanned pregnancy. They were asked what they would do in such a situation.

There were only 18 people (2%) who would terminate pregnancy; most of the women would accept such pregnancy, even though it would be unplanned one. Similar research was executed by Polish Federation of Women and Planning Family (Nowicka 2000). That research was executed in the village environment women, who were asked similar questions. They were at the age 18–24. 49% of them acknowledged that in the situation of unplanned pregnancy they would rather give birth, 45% marked that they would give birth for sure, whereas 5% would rather terminate such a pregnancy.

The further part of the research was to show the respondents' opinion on men's participation in deciding about pregnancy termination.

Analyzing the received answers we can clearly see that most women – 687 (79%) – acknowledged men's right to co-decide about pregnancy termination, and only 68 (9%) declared categorically against it, whereas 87 of the examined (10%) were convinced about the possibility of a decision made only by women.

DISCUSSION

Examining the attitudes towards abortion and their conditions, based on empirical data obtained through quantity researches, is rendered difficult by the fact that the declared views and opinions strongly depend on their context in which the questions are asked, the way how the questions are read, and the expressions used. Among the examined persons, all the factors trigger off a definite way of thinking of abortion either in moral categories, or in relation to the law, which is to be decisive, or in the aspect of women's law, or in perspective of real women's life and their individual and collective interests.

Attitudes towards abortion are shaped more by value systems and normative convictions of the examined than thinking in categories of collective interest. The domination of the perspective makes that abortion is mostly spoken of in moral categories, and this point of view is dominant in opinions about legal regulations. Taking the perspective of collective interest towards the right for abortion or women's rights as human rights is out of proportion to the perspective of moral appreciations. For the abortion opponents their values are a child and his right for life, whereas abortion advocates think highly of woman subjectivity, her right to decide about herself and taking free decisions in the sphere of procreation. People declaring against abortion are characterized by general disinclination to sexual life. The sphere of sexual life is wholly rejected by such people, it is a taboo regulated by social norms, which does not undergo discussion, education and reflections. Women's reproduction rights, women's right for the decision for abortion in it are not seen in the perspective.

We could draw a conclusion from the executed research that the examined women approached the problem in rather a liberal way, there were no radically restrictive attitudes, though most of the respondents qualified themselves as believing Christians. It was alarming that most of the women acknowledged that their rights are violated by legislation concerning abortion, and by it they are deprived of the right to decide about their own life.

Most of the respondents did not know the content of the anti-abortion law presently in force in Poland, nor heard, nor were conscious of its tragic consequences. The subject of pregnancy termination itself is certainly ticklish. For the question about legal admittance of abortion because of women's difficult financial situation half of the women answered positively and half negatively. Answers to some questions were very differentiated, much depended on the question content, sometimes the respondents answered in a very restrictive way.

One of the positive conclusions is the fact that most respondents thought that a woman in such a difficult situation should not stay alone. Almost all respondents acknowledged that her partner has the right to decide about abortion. Analyzing the attitudes towards abortion and other subjects, which may be counted as ticklish, we should ascertain that the respondents' convictions are more and more liberal; of course, they are influenced by the mentality of society and also the reality in which we are to function.

REFERENCES

1. Girard F. Clear and Compelling Evidence: The Polish Tribunal on Abortion Rights. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 10 (19), 22, 2002.
2. Kis J.: *Abortion: Arguments pros and cros*. PWN, Warsaw 1993.
3. Nowicka W.: *The anti-abortion Law in Poland*. Polish Federation of Woman and Family Planning, Warsaw 2000.
4. *Offical Journal* of 1993, nr 17, position 78 with changes.
5. Ossowski S.: *On the Social Psychology*. PWN, Warsaw 1967.
6. Sarnowski S.: *Problems of ethics*. AMB, Bydgoszcz 1993.
7. *The Medical Profession act* of 5 December 1996.
8. *The report on the survey conducted by OBOP*. Poles on human rights, 1998.

SUMMARY

The necessity of undertaking abortion has been practiced for thousands of years. The attitude towards abortion is one of the most controversial social questions in Poland too and it became the subject of the research presented here. The purpose of the work was an analysis of women's attitudes towards abortion. We also tried to estimate the knowledge on the subject of the anti-abortion law in force in Poland, and also the behavior in case of unplanned pregnancy. There were 870 young women examined. The research was executed with the use of a specially constructed questionnaire. The blank was made up of 21 questions, which mostly concerned the knowledge of the anti-abortion law presently in force in Poland, but there was also touched the question of behavior in case of unplanned pregnancy. The examined women approached the problem in rather a liberal way, there were no radically restrictive attitudes. Most of the respondents did not know the content of the anti-abortion law presently in force in Poland. Almost all respondents acknowledged that her partner has the right to decide about abortion.

Postawy młodych kobiet wobec obowiązującej w Polsce ustawy antyaborcyjnej

Konieczność dokonywania sztucznych poronień staje przed kobietą od tysięcy lat. Stosunek do aborcji to jedna z bardziej kontrowersyjnych kwestii społecznych również w Polsce i dlatego stał się przedmiotem przedstawionych tutaj badań. Celem pracy była analiza postaw kobiet wobec aborcji. Próbowano również określić wiedzę na temat obowiązującej w kraju ustawy antyaborcyjnej, a także zachowanie się w przypadku nieplanowanej ciąży. Badaniem objęto 870 kobiet. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone z użyciem specjalnie do tego celu skonstruowanego kwestionariusza. Formularz składał się z 21 pytań, większość z nich dotyczyła znajomości obecnie obowiązującej w Polsce ustawy antyaborcyjnej, ale także poruszono kwestię postępowania w przypadku nieplanowanej ciąży. Badane kobiety podchodziły do problemu aborcji dosyć liberalnie, nie zdarzały się skrajnie restrykcyjne postawy. Większość respondentek nie знаła treści obecnie obowiązującej w Polsce ustawy antyaborcyjnej. Prawie wszystkie ankietowane uznały, że partner ma prawo do decyzji w sprawie aborcji.