

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON ABORTION IN ROMANIA. CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract: Exploring the opinion regarding abortion in Romania is based on legislative changes in the past which aimed at abortion, some of them being very restrictive. The ethical value of the decision to choose abortion as a solution to an unwanted pregnancy has a wide axiological register. Opinions are divided from a bioethical, philosophical and theological point of view in Pro-Choice which supports abortion, women's right to decide and Pro-Life which is about the child's right to life. A questionnaire was applied to 1902 subjects who were randomly selected from 8 Romanian cities. The Pearson chi-square tests were employed using the statistical programs SPSS. In case of an unwanted pregnancy, the solution of abortion was chosen in higher percentages by men, by the ones with higher education levels, by persons under 50 years old ($p < 0.001$). Planning the birth of a child is a legitimate right of couples and, should the situation demand it, abortion can be an option to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. The decision to have an abortion will always raise an ethical dilemma; it is therefore necessary for the decision to have an informed basis in order to minimize risks to women's health.

INTRODUCTION

Starting with the woman's right over her own body on the one hand and the right of the fetus to life on the other hand, two groups were made up that perceive abortion in opposing ways, Pro-choice and Pro-life.(1,2,3,4) Starting from the moral aspects of abortion on demand, Pro-life group searches for arguments, articles, testimonials to demonstrate that abortion can produce health issues in general and mental problems in particular.(5,6,7)

On the contrary, Pro-choice group brings forward arguments that the negative psychological effects of abortion known under the name of post-abortion syndrome have not been recognized by any psychological or medical organisation.(8,9)

Voluntary abortion (on demand) had a special history in Romania, especially throughout the brutal external involvement of the state in controlling this intervention. Provoked abortion on demand was legalized in Romania in 1957, prohibited then in 1966 and legalized again in 1990. This history has left its mark on the way voluntary abortion is perceived nowadays. In turn, the Orthodox Church has condemned abortion as a great sin, as it still does nowadays. The most powerful voice was that of the Romanian state, which prohibited abortion and surrounded it with draconian laws for reasons quite different from those of the church: the demographical policy. In this social context, forming an opinion on the justification and morality of voluntary abortion was affected less by education received in school or by religious education and more by external legal factors.

In Romania, family planning and the use of modern contraception started to be legalized only after 1989. Abortions, per 1000 women, aged 15-49 years old, decreased constantly from 78.6‰ in 1996 to 18.8‰ in 2010, most abortions occurring in the age group 25-29 years old and then in the age groups 20-24 years old and 30-34 years old.(10,11)

Nevertheless, in Romania, the percentage of known pregnancies ending in legal abortions is one of the highest in the European Union.(12,13) Data suggests that the best way to reduce abortion rates is to make contraception more available rather than banning the practice of abortions.(14,15)

Before 1989, the aggressive pro-birth policy prohibited both the sale and use of modern means of contraception and abortion as well.

After 1990, in Romania, family planning programmes started with the serious situation that was in the communist era: a large number of illegal abortions that were associated to a high rate of morbidity and mortality in women and a large number of abandoned children and of children with disabilities. As a matter of fact, during the communist period the fundamental right of families to establish the number of children they want was violated.

The problem of abortion is interesting to be studied in Romania, starting from these variations of the legal context which declared abortions legal and then illegal, which facilitated access to abortions before 1967 and after 1990.

PURPOSE

The objective of this study is to describe and identify opinions on unwanted pregnancy.

The aim of this bioethical approach is not to persuade the acceptance of one or both views as it would probably not be possible. Arguing different meanings we want to build informed opinion, documented with data from the international literature and an enhanced understanding of the issue, integrated in the Romanian context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The basis of this article is Grant no. 116, 108 named Sexual education and family planning to strengthen the health of

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the population”, financed by the Romanian Academy in 2005-2006.

A sample of 1 902 subjects (961 women and 941 men) was randomly selected from Ploiești, Craiova, Timișoara, Baia Mare, Iași, Constanța, Tîrgu-Mureș and Bucharest. Of the 8 cities, samples were randomly selected with an homogenous distribution regarding gender, demographical age groups (ages between 15 and 90 years old), education level (low, medium, high). With no representativeness at national level, the study included subjects from all historical, social-economical and cultural areas of Romania.

The stratification of the sample was made taking into consideration the coverage of the seven historical-geographical Romanian areas: Muntenia, Oltenia, Banat, Maramureș, Moldova, Dobrogea, Transylvania and separately, Bucharest. For each region, a representative city was selected from an economical and cultural point of view.

A questionnaire with 90 common items was used for both women and men and in addition, there were 15 items specific to women. The questionnaire was structured to cover the concept of sexual-reproductive health as it is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO).(16,17)

To meet the objective of this study, there was analyzed the item referring to opinion regarding unwanted pregnancy: In case of an unwanted pregnancy, what should a woman do? Answers: to have an abortion, to keep the child, to give the child up for adoption.

Subjects with a high educational level filled out the questionnaire themselves; interviewers later checked the responses in face-to-face encounters with the respondents. For subjects with low and medium educational levels, the data-collection method involved questionnaire-based face-to-face interviews. The response rate was 100%.

The Pearson chi-square tests were employed using the statistical programs SPSS (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

Informed written consent was obtained from each participant at recruitment. The subjects were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage and they were assured of confidentiality. The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Francisc I. Rainer Anthropological Institute of the Romanian Academy.

RESULTS

Unwanted pregnancy

Subjects were asked what should a woman do in case of an unwanted pregnancy. Over half of the subjects have opted for abortion (55.7%), 38.6% opinionated for the keeping of the child and 5.7% had the opinion to give the child up for adoption.

Regarding the solutions in case of an unwanted pregnancy Pearson χ^2 test indicated significant differences in gender, education level and age groups ($p < 0.001$). Men perceived abortion and adoption in a higher percentage as an option, 38.6% of the men considered keeping the child as an option and 5.7% had the opinion of giving the child up for adoption in case of an unwanted pregnancy. Women also opted for keeping the child in a higher proportion. The subjects with higher education level opted in a higher percentage for an abortion in case of an unwanted pregnancy, compared to the persons with medium or lower education level. In case of an unwanted pregnancy keeping the child was an option rather for the persons with a medium education level and giving the child up for adoption was a stronger option for persons with a lower and medium education level. Subjects under 50 years old opted in higher proportion for abortion; the ones aged 50 or higher opted in higher percentage for keeping the baby or for giving it up for adoption (table no. 1).

Table no. 1. Variability option for an unwanted pregnancy by gender and educational level

What should a woman do in case of an unwanted pregnancy/gender, education level ^a	Have an abortion	Keep the child	Give the child up for adoption	Total
Gender				
Female	52.9	42.9	4.2	100
Male	58.3	34.3	7.3	100
Education level				
Low	53.4	38.5	8.1	100
Medium	51.6	41.9	6.5	100
High	62.3	34.6	3.1	100
Age groups				
<50	59.2	35.2	5.6	100
>=50	44.3	49.4	6.3	100

^aSignificant at $p < 0.001$

DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study show that over half of the respondents expressed their opinion in favour of abortion in case of unwanted pregnancy, the other side opting for the pregnancy or, in a smaller percentage, for adoption. This emphasizes the ethical dilemma intensely debated in literature, which is the ethical issue of abortion from the point of view of the mother and of the fetus. It is, on the one hand, the right to life of the fetus and on the other hand, the woman’s right to choose, her right to choose over her own body and her own life. The moral issues, pro-choice options and pro-life options reflected in the choices the subjects have made will be discussed in light of other data in literature for an enhanced understanding of both aspects.

Supporting the opinion that encourages freedom of decision for the mother about her own body leads to the cancellation of the life of the fetus, this being the essence of great maternal-fetal conflicts.(18)

From a philosophical point of view, this separation into two sides, pro-life and pro-choice, is not correct because one part has arguments against life while the other has arguments against choice and it is not the case for this division. The debate about abortion also has legal implications so that in Europe and Asia the subject is better tolerated than in the USA, where the intensity of the debate increased over time. In the opinion of pro-life supporters terminating pregnancy is murder. In the opinion of pro-choice supporters the moral status of the fetus is minimized stating that abortion is under the control of the woman and that the woman has the right over her reproductive freedom. To many societies this debate is harmful perpetuating endless moral and legal battles.(19)

German obstetricians Carl Segan and Fritz Zimmer propose the principal of symmetry in order to solve this ethical dilemma. This principle states that life ends with the death of the brain, life starts with the initiation of brain function. But this principle does not solve the ethical dilemma because it creates a new wave of debates concerning the human being (“human being”) and “human in being”.(20)

Research results of the sample also show that the subjects younger than 50 years old opted in higher percentages for the solution of abortion; the ones aged older than or equal to 50 years old opted in higher percentages for the keeping of the baby and adoption. The two cohorts differ in opinion. Subjects aged older than or equal to 50 years old have mostly pro-life options, probably due to moral maturation accompanied by socio-economical changes, professional and financial stability. Before this age the opinion is pro-choice and the option to have a child may take into consideration the budget of time and

economic resources involved by the education of a child; these may not coincide with the career stage and long-term objectives, marital status, financial status or the couple's relationship.

The majority of families, mostly women, decide whether to keep an accidental pregnancy. Although abortion, as a pregnancy planning method, has been practiced by women since ancient times, officially or not, the way people relate to abortion is quite different. In case of a teenage unwanted pregnancy, in case of a family that has no material resources to raise the child the dispute between abortions being moral, ethical, acceptable or a crime and unacceptable goes on mostly in strongly religious groups or between leaders and priests of the church.

CONCLUSIONS

The specific features of each type of community, changing from one period of time to another emphasizes the socio-historical character of family planning moral. Optimal reproduction of population, by stimulating or braking births, bears the mark of values, principles, rules, emotions, feelings and mentalities passed through culture, constituting in what is called the moral family planning.

The debate of the bioethical issue of abortion from the mother-fetus perspective is an emotional problem, sensitive and complicated at the same time because it interests society and religion. Arguing different opinions of the ethical dilemma of abortion is a step forward on the road to accept both sides, Pro-choice and Pro-life and to respect the individual decision of every woman that has an unwanted pregnancy.(18)

In conclusion, the present study shows that over half of the respondents consider that planning the birth of a child is a legitimate right of the couples and if the situation asks for it abortion is an option to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. We conclude that regardless of the pro or against attitude, it is desirable to choose the acceptance of individual decision concerning an unwanted pregnancy. The ethical dilemma will probably always accompany this decision of whether or not to choose an abortion as a solution for an unwanted pregnancy.

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