

Abortion Remain Illegal in Many Countries for Our Failure to Disseminate the Evidences

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1. Abstract

Unsafe abortion is a very important public health problem, responsible for a substantial proportion of maternal mortality and morbidity, particularly in countries with restrictive abortion laws [1]. The availability of Manual Vacuum aspiration and medical abortion has helped to reduce abortion related maternal mortality, but unsafe-abortion-related mortality continued to be a problem, almost exclusively restricted to developing countries [2].

2. Background

Most unsafe abortion occurred among women in the lower income section of the population and the consequences of unsafe abortion are more frequent a severe in the most underprivileged groups of the population. Thus, restrictive abortion laws are examples of legislations that increase inequalities as they only affect the less privileged sections of the population [3, 4].

3. The Evidences

Restrictive laws are justified on the grounds that women will have fewer abortions than in an environment of liberal laws and easy access to safe abortions. Experience shows, however, that in countries where abortion is legally restricted women have more abortions than those living under more liberal laws [5].

Restrictive laws are maintained on the grounds that liberalization of abortion would lead to an increase in abortion rate, and that abortion related maternal mortality is already low and the effect of liberalizing abortion will be minimal or nil. The recent experience of Portugal shows that such reasoning is not correct [6]. First, the legalization of abortion was very soon followed by a decrease in abortion rate [6], something which had already been described for Italy and France [7]. In addition, while there were 14 abortion related maternal deaths from 2001 through 2007, before legalization, there was only one abortion related maternal death in the five years following legalization [6]. Though the numbers are not impressive, no parliamentarian can be insensible to save 10 women's lives in five years, more so if the abortion

rate is reduced at the same time.

The mechanism that explains the reduction of abortion rate after legalization is simple. When abortion is clandestine and commercial, the provider is not interested in preventing its repetition. When abortion is legal and institutional, the health system is interested in preventing its repetition by providing information and contraceptive services immediately after abortion, intervention which has shown to reduce abortion rate [8].

Such information, however, remain practically unknown, even among gynecologists and obstetricians [9] and more so for the general public and policy makers, such as the parliamentarians who are responsible of the promotion and approval of any legal reform.

In addition of not being aware of the evidences described above, parliamentarians follow carefully public opinion, knowing that the voters will consider their position related to issues of social relevance, such as the laws related to a subject as controversial as abortion. Thus, they are sensible to opinion polls, which almost invariably show that the majority of the population is against depenalization of abortion [10]. The problem with those opinion polls is that they almost invariably ask if the person interviewed is in favor or against the legal criminalization of abortion, that is, the question is asked in abstract, without requiring that the person interviewed reflects about the consequences the law has over the people affected by it.

In earlier studies, we found that there is a great difference in the

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answers. If the question on punishing a woman who abort is asked in abstract, than when is asked making the respondent to think on women in general and more so, if they think in a women they know [7]. In two different studies, one among medical students from all Brazil and another among civil servants of the state of Sao Paulo, we found that while only 15.7 % of medical students and 5.4% of civil servants were in favor of allowing abortion on request, 54.4% and 58.8% of medical students and civil servants, respectively, were against punishing with jail any woman who had an illegal abortion and 84.9% of medical students and 82.9% of civil servants were against punishing with jail a woman they know who had an abortion against the law, a law which they were supposed to approve [11].

In other words, most people declare to be in favor of criminalizing abortion, but against applying the law in practice, less so to a woman they knew. This data also confirm what we had already observed and published, that the closer the problem of abortion is to a person, his opinion and behavior related to abortion can change dramatically [12].

4. Conclusions

The evidences show that liberalization of abortion laws reduced maternal mortality, and are instrumental to reduce abortion rate. In addition, most people is not in favor of punishing women who abort with jail. The problem is that the investigators who have work hard to obtain all the evidences describe above, have failed, until now, to disseminate the information to the media, the general public and the policy makers in particular. Investigation should continue, however, in order to turn the evidence more and more robust.

5. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared they do not have any conflict of interest.

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