

ABORTION AND CONTRACEPTION IN PAKISTAN: BIRTH CONTROL STRATEGIES IN AN ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Zeba Sathar, John Casterline, Naveed Rahat and Shafique Arif

Motivation

While demographers and public health researchers in Pakistan have been aware for decades of the practice of induced abortion to avert unwanted births, the common assumption has been that this practice is relatively rare in this society, because of strong social norms proscribing abortion and because of the scarcity of abortion providers. A pioneering national study conducted in 2002-03 is demonstrating otherwise.

Induced abortions appear to be a common and accepted choice for Pakistani women when they have an unwanted pregnancy (Sami et al, 2001, Rehan *et al* 2001). There is no way of knowing whether present rates exceed rates in the past, but one might expect this to be the case, given the sharp rise in contraceptive prevalence rates and decline in fertility during the past decade (Sathar and Casterline 1998, Feeney and Alam 2003). It is often the case the induced abortion increases simultaneously with increases in contraception, both satisfying increasing demand for fertility control (Bongaarts and Westoff 2000, Marston and Cleland 2003). With the unwanted pregnancy rate remaining high -- estimated as 30 percent of last pregnancies in the most recent national survey (Reproductive Health and Family planning survey 2001-2002) -- there is every reason to expect that the demand for induced abortion will persist.

The common recourse to induced abortion should not obscure the fact that induced abortions are illegal in Pakistan and social mores condemn abortion as a means of dealing with unwanted pregnancy. Our research and research conducted by others during the past decade reveals that, while women recognize the legal and moral issues surrounding induced abortion, they weigh these against their fear of contraceptive side effects and, above all, the costs of having an unwanted child (whether due to non-practice of contraception or ineffective practice). Women can be proactive about induced abortion, but typically decision-making involves husbands and sometimes mothers-in-law. Even so, interviews with women and their husbands document a large gap in the stated rationale and the actual occurrence of abortion. This may be due to spousal differences in the under-reporting of induced abortion, denial on the part of husbands, or clandestine abortions on the part of women.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between contraception and induced abortion, and the decision-making process that leads to an induced abortion, using exceptional data that have recently been collected in Pakistan.

Data

Data were collected in 2003 via two means.

1. Structured survey interviews. A survey of over 400 women who were receiving post-abortion care (induced or spontaneous) in public and private facilities. About 190 of these women openly admitted that they had come to the facility because of complications from an induced abortion, and others reported a prior history of induced abortion. These data were collected in 60 public and 57 private facilities dispersed throughout Pakistan. The information collected includes wantedness of recent pregnancies, contraceptive use before and after for last two pregnancies, and factors leading up to the complications. These data will be subjected to quantitative analysis.

2. In-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with 60 women and 42 men, 36 of which are couples residing in six urban and rural localities in Punjab and Sind. The in-depth interviewees consist almost entirely of women and their husbands who had experienced an induced abortion in the recent past. Key informant were utilized to trace and locate these respondents.

Hypotheses

The paper will explore three main hypotheses:

- Why do Pakistani couples resort to induced abortion rather than contraception to avoid unwanted pregnancies?
- How do contradictions about morality play out when deciding whether to practice contraception and, later, when deciding whether to resort to an induced abortion?
- What is the role of husbands and men, if any, in the choice of contraception versus abortion as birth control strategies?

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results has yielded striking findings, some of them unexpected. Most women with a recent induced abortion are knowledgeable about contraception and had prior experience practicing contraception (both traditional and modern methods). Some appear to 'prefer' abortion as a method to avoid an unwanted birth. Others have suffered contraceptive failure, because of ineffective use (especially condoms, withdrawal and pills). Many of the women appear to view induced abortion as an available, and tolerably acceptable, means of fertility regulation in itself. Most husbands are actively involved in decision-making about fertility regulation (contraception and induced abortion).

These are preliminary conclusions, subject to further more probing analysis.

The paper to be presented in Boston in April 2004 will contain more rigorous analysis. We will make a special efforts to cross-verify key findings. We intend to use the quantitative data to identify explanatory factors that underlie the decision to have an induced abortion. And in

the analysis of the qualitative data, we will pay particular attention to issues of morality and the matter of husband-wife discordance.

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