

2007 National Abortion Federation Annual Meeting – Poster Abstract

Title:

Illicit sex, abortion, and so-called “honor-killings”: Attitudes and opinions of female university students in Palestine*

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Background: The legal status of abortion varies considerably across the Middle East and North Africa. The status and availability of abortion in Palestine is complicated by the worsening political situation and is generally limited to cases of severe endangerment to the woman's health or life. For Palestinian women without a Jerusalem identity card, movement and travel is severely restricted and generally prohibitive of seeking abortions in East Jerusalem, Israel or abroad. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Palestinian women in areas such as Bethlehem either obtain clandestine abortions or self-induce with medications such as misoprostol. Little is known about the experiences and attitudes of unmarried women with respect to pregnancy termination. The aim of our study is to better understand Palestinian students' knowledge of and attitudes toward abortion and is part of a larger multi-country project dedicated to the sexual and reproductive health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of never-married women in the Middle East and North Africa.

Methods: We conducted an orally administered open-ended survey with 146 female students at Bethlehem University, Palestine in 2006. All never-married women age 18 to 30 (inclusive) who were raised in Palestine and majoring in disciplines other than the allied health professions or biology were eligible to participate. The hour-long Arabic-language survey is comprised of 125 questions divided into five sections. In the fourth section we present five separate hypothetical situations and then pose a series of attitudinal, opinion, and knowledge assessment questions. One situation asks participants to reflect on how they would react to and advise a friend who became pregnant outside of marriage. The follow-up questions focus on attitudes toward and knowledge of abortion. Survey data was office coded and analyzed using SPSS.

Results: The majority of participants reported that abortion is only permissible for married women in a limited number of circumstances, such as when the pregnancy threatens the woman's physical health or in cases of fetal impairment. In contrast, the majority of respondents reported that abortion is always permissible if the woman is unmarried as she has engaged in illicit sex and therefore already engaged in a prohibited act. Further, approximately one fourth of our study participants reported that abortion was not only permissible but also obligatory for unmarried women, as these women needed to protect themselves from so-called “honor-killings.” Participants reported limited knowledge of abortion services and about 10% suggested that unmarried women self-induce abortions with a variety of medicinal and physical techniques.

Conclusion: Throughout the Arab world unmet family planning needs, changing pre-marital sexual behaviors, contraceptive failure, and sexual violence place both married and unmarried women at significant risk of unintended pregnancy. As reproductive health services are generally not available to unmarried women, this population is thought to be particularly vulnerable. Our study reveals that among university students, the permissibility of abortion is tied to the illicitness of the sexual encounter and the possible familial repercussions and suggests several areas for further research.

* The geographic entity of Palestine is recognized by the United Nations and more than 100 countries worldwide to include the Palestinian West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. We use this definition of Palestine throughout.

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