

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

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Abstract

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 use, 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.

Background: Abortion in Palestine



The geographic entity of Palestine is widely recognized by the international community to include the Palestinian West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. We use this definition of Palestine throughout.

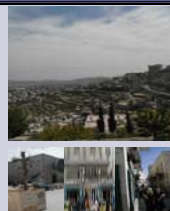
- Although abortion is legally permissible in Israel for many indications, the legal status of abortion in Palestine is complex
- In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, abortion is restricted to cases in which there is severe endangerment to the woman's health or life
- It appears that many women obtain clandestine abortions or self-induce with misoprostol
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that since the second *intifada* (uprising) began in 2000, the unintended pregnancy rate and the number of abortions have increased, particularly among unmarried women

Barriers to accessing reproductive health services: Setting the context



Entrance to wall surrounding Bethlehem

- The continued occupation, worsening political situation, frequent curfews, and restrictions on freedom of movement have a significant impact on women's access to health services
- For women without a Jerusalem identity card, movement is severely restricted and generally prohibitive of seeking abortions in East Jerusalem, Israel or abroad
- For communities like Bethlehem, the creation of the wall has further disrupted service delivery and continuity of care
- This is particularly burdensome for unmarried women who often try to seek RH services outside of their immediate community



Greater Bethlehem

Study objectives

- To assess Palestinian students' knowledge of and attitudes toward abortion
- To better understand unmarried women's reproductive health needs & barriers to accessing services
- To identify strategies for improving access to comprehensive SRH information & services

Methods

- Part of larger multi-country project dedicated to SRH knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of unmarried women in the Middle East and North Africa
- Orally administered, open ended survey with 146 female students at the University of Bethlehem, Palestine
- All never-married female university students, aged 18-30 were eligible to participate, except women majoring in biology or the health professions and women raised outside of Palestine
- One section poses hypothetical situations and asks a series of opinion and attitudinal follow-up questions
- Data was office coded and analyzed with SPSS and a content analysis was performed



Palestine study team, 2006

Hypothetical scenario

Your unmarried friend becomes pregnant. She comes to you for advice.

- What would you advise her to do? Why?
- How would you react to an unmarried friend who became pregnant? Why?

Results

- 15.1% would advise the friend to get an abortion
- 42.5% would advise her to try to get married immediately and if unsuccessful to get an abortion
- Approximately 25% of students discussed the threat of so-called “honor killings” and explained that the friend would have to have an abortion to both preserve the honor of her family and protect herself

About so-called “honor killings” and perceived protective role of abortion

- A so-called “honor-killing” refers to the murder of a woman by a male relative for her perceived immodest behavior or sexual misconduct
- Perpetrators claim to be acting to preserve familial “honor” and consequently receive little or no punishment, thus differentiating these murders from other forms of violence against women
- From 1996-1999, 12 such cases were documented in the West Bank, although this is likely an underestimate
- Recent research suggests that these murders are actually committed for economic gain or to mask incest or rape
- Although these crimes are relatively rare, many women in the study framed the necessity of abortion in this context, as one woman said: **“She must have an abortion. This is the only solution and the only way for her to protect herself from being killed by her family.”**

Results: Opinions about permissibility

	Permissibility of abortion by marital status Number of students (N=146)		
	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
Married women	15 (10.3%)	118 (80.8%)	13 (8.9%)
Unmarried women	68 (46.6%)	50 (34.3%)	28 (19.2%)

Permissibility for unmarried > permissibility for married: 42.5%
Permissibility for unmarried = permissibility for married: 41.1%
Permissibility for unmarried < permissibility for married: 16.4%

Conclusions

- Reproductive health issues cannot be separated from the overarching political context
- Abortion is severely restricted and is apparently becoming more difficult to obtain
- Among participants in the study, the moral permissibility of abortion was inversely tied to the licitness of the sexual encounter
- Many women see abortion as protective in the context of gender-based violence

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Our Middle East and North Africa program is geared toward expanding knowledge of and access to a wide array of sexual and reproductive health issues and services, especially to women whose needs are often ignored, such as young women, unmarried women, and refugee women. We partner with local organizations to conduct action-oriented and policy relevant research and respond quickly to emerging needs and priorities.

