

The pro-life perspective

The report misrepresents the pro-life perspective. It dishonestly portrays pro-life advocates as being anti-woman. It says: "(t)he pro-life camp sees the mother's body as just the place where the unborn child grows and feeds, and this is why the woman is not seen as having the right to decide on the life of the unborn child"¹. Pro-lifers actually believe that the mother and the unborn child are intrinsically connected, which is why abortion is violence against both mother and child. This is why many women experience grief and psychological harm from both abortion and miscarriage.

Pro-lifers' acknowledgment of the importance of the male partner also reflects women's perspectives. Research² shows that men have a direct influence on women's desire to get pregnant and have children, and on women's attitudes towards their own pregnancies. A pro-abortion ideology that stereotypes women as isolated individuals can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, where women who choose to give birth are given less support since the situation is avoidable.

The legal status of abortion and its practice

The report fails to understand the relationship between law and abortion practice. It says: "The Assembly takes the view that abortion should not be banned. A ban on abortions does not result in fewer abortions, but mainly leads to clandestine abortions, which are more traumatic and more dangerous. The lawfulness of abortion does not have an effect on a woman's need for an abortion, but only on her access to a safe abortion."³

Not only is it almost certainly untrue that "a ban on abortions does not result in fewer abortions", but this statement suggests that women are generally *not* law-abiding citizens and pay no attention to the legal status of particular procedures. It also implies that all the women who currently undergo abortions are so desperate for abortions that they are willing to flout the law and risk their lives and health for dodgy procedures. If this is true, then women are seeking abortions under coercion, feeling that they have little choice.

If women are coerced into abortion, there are serious social and financial issues to consider. Why are women not free to choose to become mothers? Why is the committee not addressing women's right to choose to give birth?

¹ draft resolution, point 15

² Stanford JB *et al.* Defining dimensions of pregnancy intendedness. *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 2000;4(3):183-189

³ part 4

What are the sociological causes of a phenomenon in Europe where it is expected that women would, on a large scale, take great risks to obtain abortions? When access to abortion is broadened based on the argument that women will seek abortion no matter what, so it needs to be made safe, legal abortion really becomes a surrogate for serious investigation and action regarding family life and the status of women.

Has the committee done a review of academic literature on why European women seek abortion? One example⁴ of the types of external circumstance motivating women to seek abortion comes from Scotland, where deprivation was the most important predictor of repeat abortion. Another example⁵ comes from Sweden, where women living in crowded housing chose abortion more than twice as often as women living in spacious conditions. There is also a massive amount of evidence supporting the link between domestic violence and abortion. Dr Germaine Greer, the feminist writer, says that such circumstances are where abortion becomes “the last in a long line of non-choices”.

Considering the inequalities between women who undergo abortion and women who do not, the decriminalisation of abortion is not a matter of equal rights.

As a matter of fact, the committee seems in reality to expect that, if any European countries decriminalise abortion, the number of abortions will increase there. This is because the report assumes that there is a lack of access for women who want abortions, and therefore the resultant easier access would mean more abortions. Moreover, according to the report, this outcome would be a positive one.

Sex education and contraception

The report suggests the introduction of “compulsory relationships and sex education for young people (*inter alia*, in schools), so as to avoid as many unwanted pregnancies (and therefore abortions) as possible.” The committee seems unaware that “reasons women give for why they seek abortion are often far more complex than simply not intending to become pregnant.”⁶ Women’s decisions are influenced by their environment and the people around them, and abortion decisions involve a great deal of ambivalence.

⁴ St John H, Critchley H and Glasier A. Can we identify women at risk of more than one termination of pregnancy? *Contraception* 2005;71:31-34.

⁵ Skjeldestad FE. When pregnant, why induced abortion? *Scand J Soc Med* 1994;17(4):425-442

⁶ Bankole A, Singh S and Taylor H, Reasons why women have induced abortions: evidence from 27 countries. *International Family Planning Perspectives* 1998;24(3)

This is exemplified by the fact that demographic and social differences can be seen between women who seek abortions and those who do not.

Furthermore, the concept of an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy is fairly theoretical and not highly relevant to women's real lives. Many researchers⁷ in sexual health are now questioning the value of assuming that pregnancy is a rational activity based on planning and forethought. Sex education and contraception are therefore unlikely to be successful alone in preventing abortion.

What would be beneficial would be quality counselling independent of abortion providers. This is just one way to try to remove the bias towards abortion in current abortion practice. A Swedish study⁸ found that, two years after their abortions, 16.3% of women were dissatisfied and felt they had made the wrong decision.

Psychological harm of abortion

The report shamefully ignores the huge body of research on the harm which abortion does to women's mental health. There is relative consensus⁹ among post-abortion psychology researchers that at least 10% of women who have had an abortion suffer from severe negative psychological complications. Why was this data ignored?

In recognition of research in this area, the Royal College of Psychiatrists recently issued new abortion guidance, wherein they overturned their previous guidance which said that there was no evidence of long-term distress after early abortion. The college now says that some studies indicate a range of mental disorders occur following abortion.

In summary, the PACE report is a seriously deficient work which is shallow in its analysis of a complex social, ethical and legal problem. Its recommendations, if adopted, will produce more harm than good.

⁷ Klerman L V. The intendedness of pregnancy: a concept in transition. *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 2000;4(3):155-162

⁸ Major B *et al.* Psychological responses of women after first-trimester abortion. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 2000;57:777-784

⁹ Coleman, P K, Reardon, D C, Strahan, T, and Cogle, J R. The psychology of abortion: a review and suggestions for future research. *Psychology and Health*, 2005, 20 (2), 237-271