

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Abortion and Coercion



Society for the **Protection**
of Unborn Children



Ideas about “choice” and “autonomy” are central to the abortion industry. In reality, however, many abortions take place because a woman feels she has no choice – either because of her circumstances, or because she has been forced by her partner, family, or even medical professionals. It is important to understand the reasons why women have abortions, including the horrific phenomenon of abortion coercion.

Unintended ≠ unwanted

Deciding to have an abortion is far more complex than simply not intending to become pregnant.¹ Researchers often use “unintended” and “unwanted” interchangeably, yet women are ambivalent about pregnancy and abortion in ways that are not easily categorised.² Unintended pregnancies may end with very much wanted babies, and women who wanted their babies may end up aborting.

Research shows that women rarely see babies themselves as a threat, and instead feel positively towards them. Women seek abortion because of issues like the future stress and difficulty of parenthood, financial stress, loss of freedom, ongoing violence or deprivation.³

Reasons women have abortions

In most cases, no single factor motivates women to seek abortion. A variety of factors can be involved, including:

- relationship problems
- pressure from partners and family members
- study and career aspirations
- financial difficulties
- lack of confidence as a mother
- lack of community support^{4,5}
- disruptive events, eg unemployment, separation from a partner, falling behind on rent or mortgage payments, or moving house⁶

In a review of several studies, researchers found that women's concern for the welfare of their child, and concern that they might not be a good parent was, tragically, seen as a reason to abort.⁷

Forced by others

The reasons women "choose" abortion can be complex, but many women are coerced, to a greater or lesser degree, into undergoing abortions by others.

Research for the *Independent* newspaper found that seven per cent of women in the UK have been pressured into having an abortion.⁸ An academic study found that 64% of American women and 37% of Russian women who had abortions reported that they "felt pressured by others".⁹ In a survey of women who were dissatisfied with their abortions, 39% reported they were "very much" pressured by others and a total of 73% reported some degree of pressure from others.¹⁰

A post-abortive counsellor described coerced abortion as "one of the most unrecognised and insidious forms of domestic abuse". She says: "Typically 75 per cent of the women who summon up the courage and bravery to make a call for help regarding an abortion were pressurised or bullied into having one, in almost all cases by the man involved."¹¹

Even pro-choice ethicist Daniel Callahan, director of the Hastings Center, writes: "That men have long coerced women into unwanted abortion when it suits their purposes is well-known but rarely mentioned. Data reported by the Alan Guttmacher Institute indicate that some 30 percent of women have an abortion because someone else, not the woman, wants it."¹²

Pressure can also come from family members, friends, employers, and support agencies.

Pressure to abort is not always overt – a lack of emotional support to keep a pregnancy may be experienced as a pressure "forcing" a woman to choose abortion.¹³

Case study

A woman shared this about her experience of coerced abortion on a popular forum for mothers:

"I had an abortion 2 months ago at 10 weeks and have been devastated ever since. I am mid-30s and childless and was delighted when I discovered I was pregnant – although my relationship with the father was and is not stable, I was happy to have the child as a single mum, am financially secure and have a supportive family.

I wasn't able to tell the father for some time but his reaction was even worse than I anticipated and in just a few hours he had convinced me to have the termination and one day later I was at the clinic - until you've been in that situation it is hard to see how it is possible for an independent and educated woman to be coerced in that way, and I know now I was so vulnerable with the hormones I was really in no fit state to defend my wishes. The clinic (Marie Stopes) was awful - I was sobbing the whole time I was there and barely able to speak, and their 'aftercare' was a joke. I know I walked in there and signed the consent but I was in a terrible state.

I would do anything to turn back the clock now and am scared that I will never recover from this and it is all I think about."¹⁴





Effect on women

Coercion and pressure are well-established risk factors for women coming to terms with their abortion. “Perceived pressure from others to terminate a pregnancy” has been identified as a factor “associated with more negative psychological reactions”.¹⁵

A study of 252 post-abortive women who suffered psychological consequences reported that 53% felt “forced” into the abortion by others, and 65 percent felt “forced” by their circumstances. Only 33 percent felt “free” to make their own decisions.¹⁶

Medical coercion

Women (and their partners) can also feel coerced into abortions by doctors, especially if their baby has a disability. Common experiences include being told that their child “was incompatible with life (87%), would live a life of suffering (57%), would be a vegetable (50%), or would ruin their family (23%)”.¹⁷ Many doctors still seem to have misinformed views about disability, and may have

negative and judgmental attitudes towards couples who wish to continue a pregnancy, and as a consequence fail to provide the necessary support.¹⁸

There is a solid body of evidence showing that when an abortion is undertaken for reasons of foetal abnormality the after-effects can be particularly traumatic.^{19,20,21}

(For more information, see SPUC’s leaflet on Abortion and Disability).

Informed consent

Abortion coercion is not just a tragedy, it goes against a fundamental of medical ethics and international law – the principle of consent. The NHS states: “For consent to be valid, it must be voluntary and informed, and the person consenting must have the capacity to make the decision.”

The meaning of voluntary is – “the decision to either consent or not to consent to treatment must be made by the person, and must not be influenced by pressure from medical staff, friends or family.”

It is clear that this criteria is often not met in the context of abortion. Action is needed to ensure that no woman’s rights are breached.

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