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Women's attitude in Poland and Belarus toward the issue of induced abortion

Abstract

Introduction. In most countries, abortion is allowed to save woman's physical and mental health. In Poland, women have no right to abortion on demand; the procedure is illegal and punishable by imprisonment up to 3 years. In the neighbouring country of Belarus, induced abortion on demand is legal through the 12th week of pregnancy, while for social reasons and on demand, through the 22nd week of pregnancy, in governmental hospitals only. Abortion deserves the name of one of the most serious contemporary ethical dilemmas and constitutes one of the most difficult problems in medical ethics. Performing abortion continues to be opposed by many individuals and communities.

Aim. The study of the attitude of women in Poland toward the problem of induced abortion and the comparison of their attitude with that of women in Belarus.

Material and methods. The method used to conduct this study was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire designed for the purpose of this work. The study was conducted among women in Poland and Belarus. The group surveyed was comprised primarily of young women of reproductive age, with the desire to conceive, have families or plan to have families. Two hundred surveys, properly filled out, 100 from Poland and 100 from Belarus, qualified for the analysis.

Results. The comparative analysis of the responses of the women surveyed in Poland and Belarus demonstrated that in both countries attitudes toward the problem of induced abortion and women's opinions on the use of induced abortion are still divided.

Conclusions. Women of Belarus are more supportive of abortion and they consider it less shocking and more common than women from Poland.

Keywords: abortion, induced, legal, miscarriage, pregnancy.

DOI: 10.12923/j.0044-2011/123-4/a.04

INTRODUCTION

Abortion remains one of the social issues that divide societies most all over the world. Pro-life and pro-choice supporters heatedly exchange with one another health, religious, demographic and economic arguments concerning abortion. There are many planes to this issue. This issue is considered in medical, psychological, social, and ethical terms.

According to a dictionary, the term "abortion" (abortus provocatus from Latin abortion – miscarriage) has two meanings. In a general sense, this term refers to establishing or maintaining a condition. The second meaning (used most often) refers to a spontaneous or artificial, induced removal of an embryo or a foetus, which causes its death before the foetus is viable [1,2]. Until recently, the term "abortion" had not appeared in Polish medical terminology. In medical terminology, the term "abortion" is synonymous with artificial pregnancy termination, induced abortion. The Comprehensive Medical Dictionary (PZWL 1996) lists only the term "induced abortion" which is defined as artificial pregnancy termination performed for medical or legal reasons in accord

with the accepted medical practice. Tadeusz Pisarski defines induced abortion technically as expulsion of a foetus from the uterus [3]. Performing an abortion is an artificial termination of pregnancy that results in the destruction of the foetus. In Polish, the word abortion is not used for spontaneous miscarriage. Abortion consists in the pharmacological or mechanical removal of an embryo or a foetus from the uterus leading to the death of the embryo or the foetus [4,5]. The range of terms used for induced abortion reflects difficulties in describing the phenomenon in a fairly impartial manner, indicating many planes of the issue [2,4,6]. Two terms commonly used in Polish reflect the method used to perform abortion (curettage or aspiration of the content of the pregnant uterus) and in certain circles are considered vulgar. This is a drastic procedure that brutally encroaches on the natural laws of procreation and brings to mind murder [6]. All abortion methods can be divided into two categories (depending on stage of pregnancy): methods used in early stages, through the 12th week starting with the date of the last menstrual period, and methods used after full 12 weeks, starting with the date of the last menstrual period [7,8].

The procedures and techniques used to terminate abortion in an early stage of pregnancy are simple and safe, if they are performed by a trained health care personnel using appropriate equipment and appropriate techniques and following the rules of aseptic and antiseptic work. In the countries in which women have access to safe services, the odds of death due to induced abortion performed using modern methods do not exceed one in 100,000 procedures (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999) [7].

The accurate determination of the annual number of artificial abortions is not possible because a relatively large number of abortions are performed outside the official recording scope. It is estimated that approximately 30-40 million legal abortions are performed worldwide and it is likely that an additional 20 million procedures are performed illegally [9].

Although much of the current work concentrates on the abortion issue, detailed studies and analyses of the impact of a political system in a given country, religion, culture on women's views and their attitude toward artificial abortion are still lacking.

In Poland, abortion is illegal and punishable by imprisonment up to 3 years. Every person, including anyone who encourages, and an assistant, with the exception of the woman having an abortion (even if she consents to the procedure), is considered an offender.

The Law Concerning Family Planning, the Protection of Human Foetus and the Conditions Under Which Abortion is Allowed, that was adopted on 7 January 1993 was restrictive and limited the access to abortion [10].

The Law permits abortion only if (Art. 4a of the 7 January 1993 Law):

1. Pregnancy poses a risk to the life or health of the pregnant woman (until the foetus is viable outside of the body of the pregnant woman); the existence of such a risk is to be determined by a physician other than the physician performing abortion.
2. Prenatal testing or other medical premises indicate a high probability of severe or irreversible impairment of the foetus or incurable illness which is life threatening (before the foetus is viable outside the body of the pregnant woman); the existence of such a risk is to be determined by a physician other than the physician performing the procedure,
3. There is a reasonable suspicion that the pregnancy resulted from an illegal act (through the 12th week from conception); the existence of such a circumstance is determined by a prosecutor [11-13].

Rules for abortion procedures:

An abortion procedure may be performed only by a gynaecology and obstetrics specialist and only in a public health facility (with the exception of an immediate threat to woman's life in which case this procedure may be performed in a private office) [14].

In case of a minor or a woman deemed completely incompetent, a written consent of the legal representative to abortion is required. In case of a minor older than 13, her written consent is also required; if a minor is less than 13 years old, a consent of the Guardian Court is also required and the minor has the right to voice her opinion [12,13].

In Polish law, criminal code applies to offences associated with abortion. Legal regulations are contained in the Criminal Code of 1997, Chapter 19 "Offences against Life and Health" which are set forth in Article 152-154; 157:

Article 152.

Paragraph 1. Any person performing an abortion, with the woman's consent, in violation of the provisions of the Law, is punishable by imprisonment for 1 month to 3 years.

Paragraph 2. The same punishment applies to anyone who assists a pregnant woman in an abortion, or who persuades her to have an abortion, in violation of the provisions of the Law.

Paragraph 3. Anyone who commits an act, specified in Paragraph 1 or 2, after the foetus has become viable outside the body of the pregnant woman, may be imprisoned for 6 months to 8 years.

Article 153

Paragraph 1. Anyone who uses force against a pregnant woman or otherwise without the woman's consent, performs an abortion, or by force [repetition], illegal threats or stratagems makes a pregnant woman undergo an abortion, may be punished by imprisonment for 6 months to 8 years.

Paragraph 2. Anyone who commits an act, specified in Paragraph 1, after the foetus has become viable outside the body of the pregnant woman, may be punished by imprisonment up to 10 years.

Article 154

Paragraph 1. If the act specified in Article 152, Paragraph 1 or 2, results in pregnant woman's death, the offender may be punished by imprisonment for 10 years.

Paragraph 2. If an act specified in Article 152 Paragraph 3 or Article 153, results in the pregnant woman's death, the offender may be punished by imprisonment for 2 to 12 years [4,15].

Under the Polish Criminal Code, individuals who undergo an abortion in a country in which the procedure is legal, are not subject to punishment.

On the other hand, induced abortion is legal in Belarus and may be performed both in private medical offices and governmental hospitals through the 12th week of pregnancy on woman's request. "On Health Care" Law of the Republic of Belarus:

Article 27 Artificial pregnancy termination.

Abortion on demand is legal through the 12th week of pregnancy.

Abortion may be performed only by an authorised physician, in a hospital or other medical facility, only with the pregnant woman's consent, and, in case of a minor: with the parents' or legal guardians' consent.

For medical reason, abortion may be performed only in a governmental hospital, regardless of the duration of the pregnancy, with the woman's consent. Medical indications for performing abortion in pregnant women are determined by the Ministry of Health of Belarus.

Abortion for social reasons and on demand of the woman may be performed through the 22nd week of pregnancy only in governmental hospitals. Social indications for performing abortion are determined by the Ministry of Health of Belarus [16].

Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus:
Article 156. Illegal abortion.

1. Illegal abortion by a physician with medical education – the offender may be punished by fine or may lose the right to hold certain positions or conduct certain activities.
2. Abortion performed by individuals without medical education – the offender may be punished by an arrest or imprisonment for two years, and by losing the right to hold certain positions and conduct certain activities, or without losing such rights.
3. If an act specified in point 1 or 2 results in the pregnant woman's death or severe injury to her health, the offender may be punished by imprisonment for no longer than five years with the loss of right to hold certain positions and conduct specified activities, or without such a loss [17].

According to the data of the Ministry of Health of Belarus, 46,285 women performed an abortion in Belarus in 2007. Now there are 38 abortions for every 100 deliveries.

Abortion deserves the name of one of the most serious contemporary ethical dilemmas and constitutes one of the most difficult problems in medical ethics. The ethical evaluation of abortion depends on the way an unborn is perceived and on the ethical significance ascribed to various criteria of the foetal development, and on the way in which the conflict between the rights of the mother and those of the future child is construed [18].

In general, two opposing issues can be distinguished in the discussion on abortion. The first one has to do with the ethical status of the foetus, the other one concerns the right of women to decide about their own motherhood – the relation between the right of women to make decisions regarding procreation and to conduct their personal lives in accordance with their preferred value system [4,18]. The views concerning this issue may be very controversial, and the subject of the legality of abortion is treated very emotionally by parts of populations.

Given such diverse views and arguments, the problem of abortion and the discussion on the status of induced abortion continues to be the focus of the whole series of fundamental ethical conflicts both in Poland and many other countries, and constitutes an essential problem of the contemporary world [19].

This report presents the medical and ethical sides of the abortion issue, and is also based on legal provisions. It attempts to present the reasons for the procedure and the impact of the procedure on the woman. The issue of the psychological, as well as ethical and social assessments of abortion procedures has been addressed. This report is intended to demonstrate whether or not, and to what extent, the prevailing culture, religion, public opinion impact the society in Poland, where induced abortion is illegal, and in neighbouring Belarus, where this procedure is available on demand

through the 12th week of pregnancy. In the research part, the answers to these issues and a detailed description of our own study conducted in two countries, Poland and Belarus, are presented.

AIM

The goal of this work was to study the attitude of women in Poland toward the problem of induced abortion and comparing it with the attitude of women in Belarus.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A questionnaire for the survey designed by the authors constituted the study material. The study was conducted among women in Poland and Belarus. Participation in the survey was anonymous and voluntary. The group surveyed was comprised primarily of young women of reproductive age, with the desire to conceive, have families or plan to have families. Two hundred surveys, properly filled out, 100 from Poland and 100 from Belarus, were qualified for the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the individuals surveyed, the greatest number of indications for abortion was found in the 18-30 year old age group which constituted 86% of those surveyed in Poland and 91% of surveyed in Belarus. Further, 10% of indications were in the 31 to 40 year-old age group in Poland and 6% in Belarus. Among the individuals surveyed, both in Poland and Belarus, the lowest number of women were more than 40 years-old – in Poland 4%, and in Belarus only 3%.

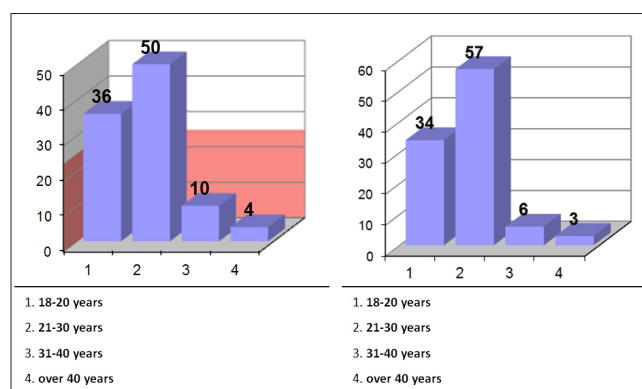


FIGURE 1. Age of the women surveyed.

Among the Polish women surveyed, 36% of women were from cities with a population of more than 100,000, 31% from towns with a population of up to 100,000, and 17% and 16% from towns with a population of up to 30,000 and rural areas, respectively. The majority of the Belarusian respondents participating in this survey, as much as 74%, were from cities with a population of more than 100,000, 19% from towns with the population of up to 100,000, 6% of women were from cities with a population of up to 30,000 and only 1% from rural areas.

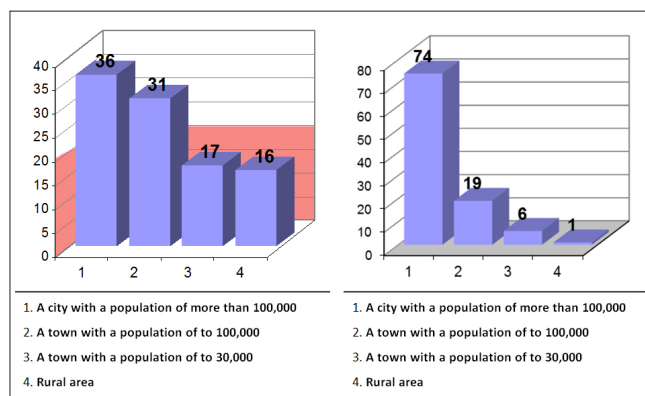


FIGURE 2. Type of residential area in which women live.

Nearly a half of the Polish respondents had higher education – 41%, and the majority of the Belarusian respondents, 63%, had higher education.

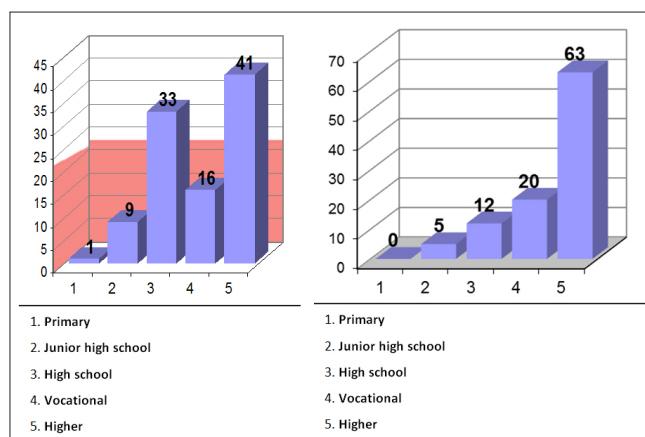


FIGURE 3. Education of the women.

The majority of women, both in Poland and Belarus, were unmarried – as many as 70% in Poland, and 59% in Belarus. Twenty-two percent of the Polish respondents surveyed were married, 7% – divorced, and widows – only 1%. Thirty-five percent of the respondents in Belarus were married, 4% were divorced, and 2% were widows.

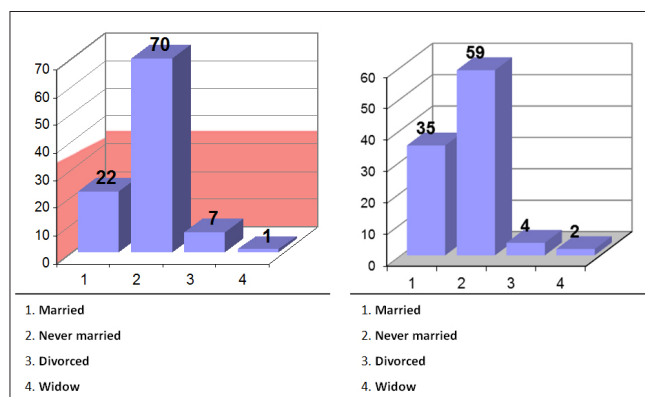


FIGURE 4. Marital status of the women surveyed.

The analysis of living accommodations showed that nearly one half of the women in Poland, as much as 46%, regard their own living accommodations as very good, 35%

of the women regard them as good, while only 18% of those surveyed regard them as medium and 1% consider them poor. Among the group surveyed in Belarus, only 7% regard their living conditions as very good, while 61% regard them as good, 27% as medium, and 5% of those surveyed define them as poor.

The attitude toward faith is slightly different between the two groups. About 70% of women in Poland and 77% of women in Belarus are believers. Among the Polish respondents, the majority, 68%, are Catholics, and only 1% are Orthodox, while among the Belarusian respondents only 13% are Catholics, and as much as 60% are Orthodox. Thirty percent of the Polish respondents stated that they are not members of any religion and 1% stated that they adhere to a religion other than those specified. Three percent of the Belarusians are Muslim, 1% are Protestant, and 23% do not belong to any religion.

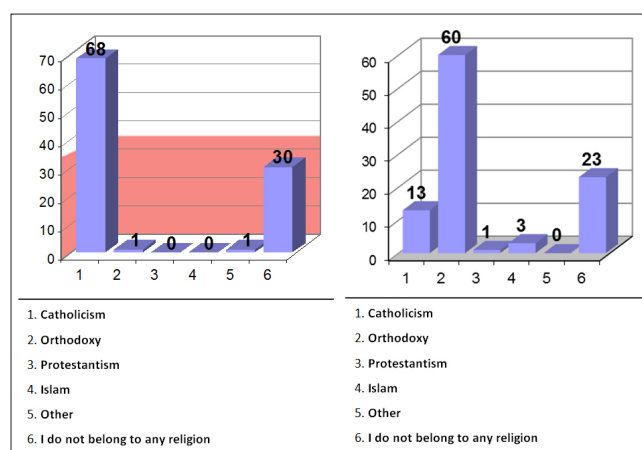


FIGURE 5. Religion of the respondents.

Among both groups, the majority of the persons surveyed consider life to be the greatest value: 73% of the persons in Poland and 76% of the persons in Belarus.

Only 16% of the women tend to agree with the statement that abortion is a birth regulation method, while as much as 40% strongly disagree with it; 29% of the Belarusian women surveyed tend to agree with the statement, while 27% of women emphatically do not consider abortion as a birth regulation method.

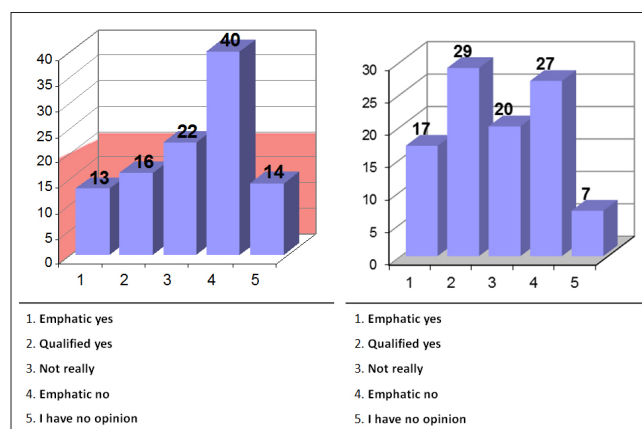


FIGURE 6. Perception of abortion as a method of birth regulation by those surveyed.

In both groups surveyed, the opinion that abortion should be limited definitely prevails (41% of votes in Poland and 53% of votes in Belarus). Twenty percent of the Poles and 33% of the Belarusians believe that this procedure should be entirely legal. As opposed to the group in Belarus, in which only 10% of the persons believe that induced abortion should be entirely illegal, in Poland as much as 38% of the women are proponents of a complete ban on abortion. A great majority of the women surveyed in Belarus believe that women should have the right to abortion in the first weeks of pregnancy 68%, whereas in Poland 37% of women. Only 13% of the women surveyed in Belarus emphatically disagree with the legality of abortion in the first months of pregnancy, while as much as 31% of the persons surveyed in Poland hold this opinion.

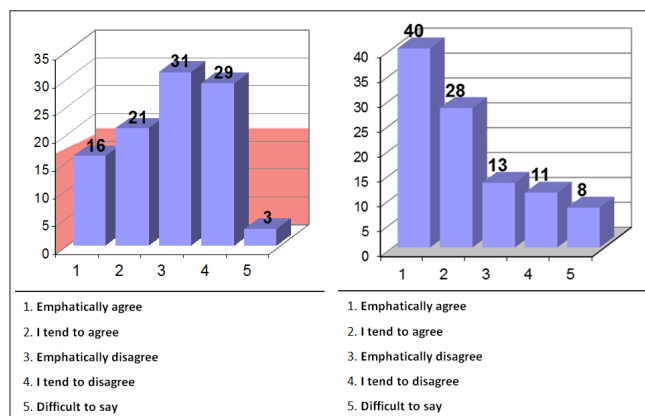


FIGURE 7. Perception of the legality of abortion on demand in the first weeks of pregnancy by the women surveyed.

According to 60% of the Polish respondents, legal abortion results in an increase of this type of procedures, 29% of the women disagreed with this statement and 12% did not have a clear-cut opinion. In Belarus, these responses are on the level of 43%, 53% and 4%, respectively.

Forty-five percent of those surveyed in Poland believe that the option of induced abortion reduces the number of children abandoned after birth, 35% of the surveyed disagree with this opinion and 20% of the respondents do not have a clear-cut opinion in this matter. As much as 78% of the Belarusian respondents chose the answer that the availability of abortion reduces the number of children abandoned after birth, only 20% did not agree with this opinion and chose the answer "no", and 2% did not have an opinion.

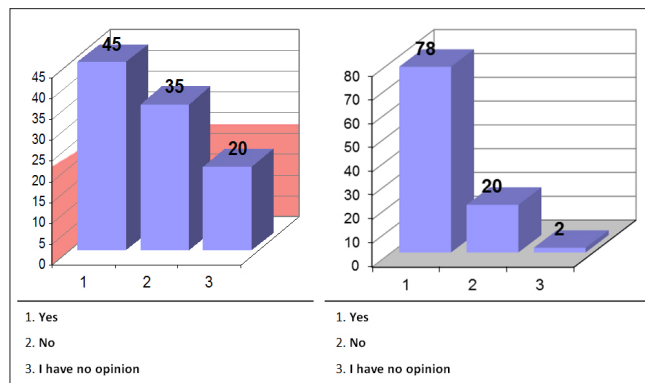


FIGURE 8. Impact of the availability of abortion on the decrease in the number of children abandoned after birth in the opinion of the persons surveyed.

The respondents of both groups were asked to answer the question: does the number of children in the family impact the abortion decision. It is surprising that the majority of the Belarusian respondents, as much as 70%, agree with this opinion, while only 31% of the Polish respondents agree with this statement.

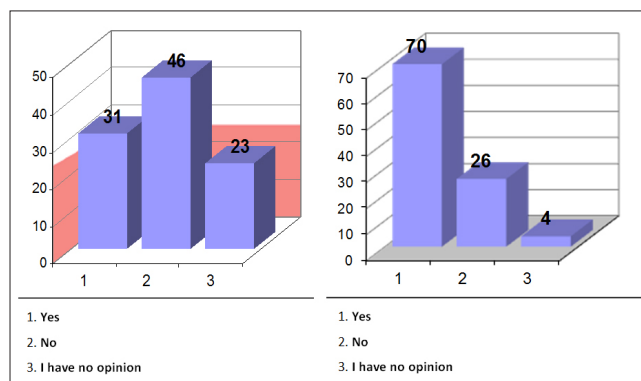


FIGURE 9. Impact of the number of children in a family on an abortion decision according to those surveyed.

Of all possible answers in both groups the most frequent were: rape (50% of responses in Poland, 53% of responses in Belarus), threat to the mother's life/health (Poland: 49%, Belarus: 63%), threat to the baby's life/health (Poland: 40%, Belarus: 48%).

In addition, 39% of those surveyed in Poland think that abortion should never be allowed (only 13% in Belarus), while 16% of the Polish respondents and 19% of the Belarusian respondents think that it should be allowed in all situations up to a certain point during pregnancy. To both groups, woman's difficult financial situation is no less important – 19% in each group.

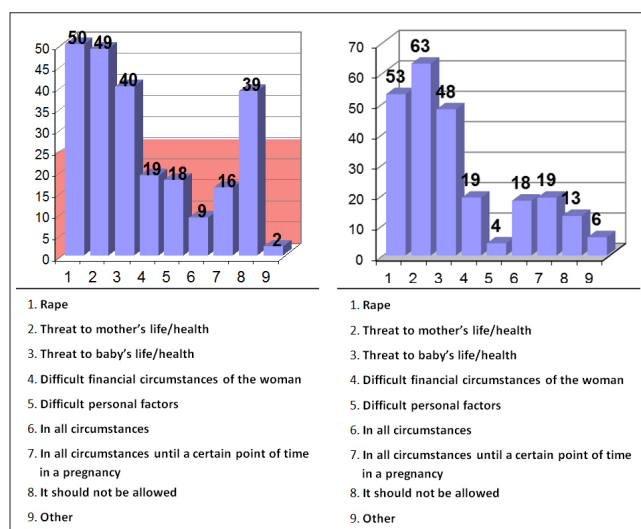


FIGURE 10. Opinion of those surveyed concerning legalization of artificial miscarriage.

According to this survey, the large majority of the persons surveyed in Belarus (as much as 85%) responded that an acquaintance or a person close to them had had an abortion, and only 8% declared that no one they knew had had one.

In the group of the persons surveyed in Poland, despite the fact that artificial abortion remains illegal in the country,

41% checked the response that among their acquaintances, there were persons who had had an abortion, and 32% of women responded that nobody had had one. To the question “How would you respond to the finding that a person close to you had an abortion?”, the respondents answered in the following way: 46% of the Polish respondents answered that this would not change their relation with the person close to them (as much as 62% of those surveyed in Belarus), 24% of the women in Poland and 13% of the women in Belarus responded that it would be difficult for them to maintain close relationship with that person.

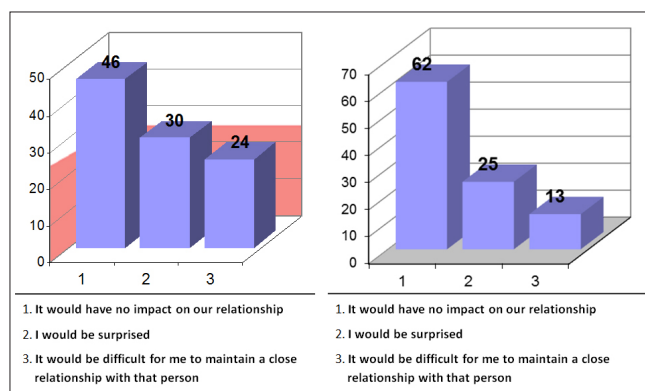


FIGURE 11. Women's response to an abortion by a person close to them.

Nearly one half of the women surveyed in Belarus (45%) would have an abortion, while among those surveyed in Poland – only 25% of women. Fifty-two percent of the Polish and 45% of the Belarusian respondents would not have an abortion, while 23% of those surveyed in Poland and 10% of those in Belarus were uncertain how to answer this question.

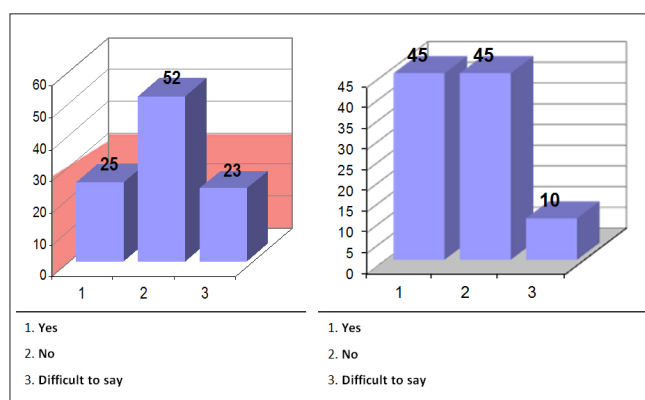


FIGURE 12. Potential willingness of those surveyed to have an abortion.

The predominant majority of the persons surveyed, declared that their attitude toward induced abortion has remained unchanged over time: 72% of the respondents from Poland, 91% of the respondents from Belarus. Only 18% of the persons from Poland and 7% from Belarus indicated that their attitude toward abortion had changed. The partner has the greatest influence on the opinion of those surveyed on abortion. This was true for 74% of those surveyed in Poland and for 88% in Belarus. Among those surveyed in Poland, religion (54%) is in the second place while among those surveyed in Belarus, a physician is in the second

place (as much as 66%). The influence of a physician (43%) and parents (40%) are on nearly the same level among those surveyed in Poland, while in Belarus parents influence 31% of persons, 30% are not influenced by anything and only 20% of the respondents indicated that religion affects their views on abortion.

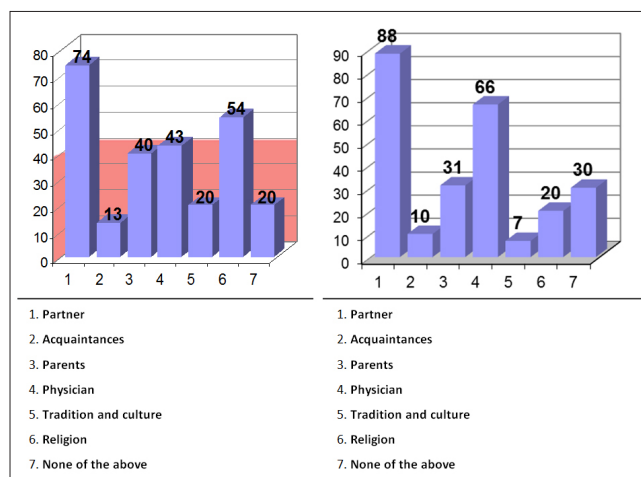


FIGURE 13. Factors and individuals who may affect the attitude of the women surveyed toward abortion.

The issue of induced abortion is the subject of a bitter controversy. This controversy is about legality or illegality of abortion in various societies. Certainly, this study does not exhaust the whole subject of abortion. Further studies, which will show a more complete picture and extent of this phenomenon, are still required.

CONCLUSIONS

After performing the analysis of the study results, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Opinions of women concerning the use of induced abortion as a method of birth regulation, both in Poland and in Belarus, are still divided.
2. Religion does not have a significant influence on opinions on abortion. Although Catholic, Orthodox and nonreligious women were surveyed, most of them, regardless of religion, indicated that abortion should be limited.
3. Abortion is supported more by women from Belarus than from Poland.
4. Women of Belarus consider the abortion method less shocking and more common than women from Poland.
5. A higher percentage of women in Belarus believe that women should have the right to abortion in the first weeks of pregnancy, while according to the opinion of women from Poland, legalizing this procedure may lead to an increase in the number of abortions, and consequently, performing abortions may become widespread.
6. The women surveyed both in Belarus and in Poland believe that the availability of abortions may have positive consequences, e.g., less children abandoned after birth.
7. Most surveyed in Poland believed that the number of children at home certainly does not affect mother's decision regarding abortion.

8. In both groups surveyed, the respondents emphatically stated that the partner has the greatest influence on the women's attitude toward abortion. In the second place, the surveyed women from Poland indicated religion, while most women from Belarus regarded a physician as the second to influence their opinion on induced abortion.
9. In case of threat to the mother's life or health, in case of rape, threat to the baby's life and health, respondents of both groups studied believe that abortion can be legal.

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