

How do Characteristics of the Couple's Relationship influence the Choice of Induced Abortion?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus on the choice between abortion and giving birth if pregnant and to analyse how various characteristics of the relation between the woman and her male partner (duration of the relation, the quality and the anticipated stability), influence the choice of induced abortion over birth. The present analysis will mainly use data from questionnaires completed in the hospitals (Sept. 2002 – May 2003) and compare women who chose abortion with women who chose to give birth.

The preliminary analysis indicate for each of the characteristics of the relationship: duration, quality and the anticipated stability in the next decade, an association as expected: Women in good relationships, who expect a future with their partner are less prone to choose induced abortion over birth. However, some of these associations were modified by controlling for the woman's age and the number of children already born.

Background

Several analyses of the reasons women give for having their pregnancy interrupted have revealed a strong association with the woman's social situation as well as her family situation, even when different countries are considered. A review of 32 studies of the conditions of women applying for abortion in 27 countries showed that women who chose abortion most often gave as a reason that they did not want to have more children or that they were not yet ready to begin childbearing, that they missed support from their partner or that they experienced problems in her relationship: One study from the US from the late 1980s and a study from the Czech republic in 1993 referred that 14 and 8 per cent of the women, respectively, stated that their reason for the choice of interruption was problems in the relationship or that the partner did not want the child (Bankole et al. 1998).

Further, the large proportion of women who have induced abortion after the experience of problems with their partner, have been documented regardless whether the women are married, cohabiting or going steady. However, these studies normally neither include a comparable group of delivering women nor have analyzed how the various characteristics of the relationship with the male partner influence the choice between the two options: giving birth or having an interruption.

In line with these findings, one of the most common reasons for having pregnancy interruption in Denmark has repeatedly been shown to be that the woman has no steady partner at all or do not experience the quality of the existing relation to the male partner to be satisfying (e. g. , Bertelsen 1994, Husfeldt et al. 1995, Hansen et al. 1996). In Denmark induced abortion on demand has been legal since October 1, 1973, provided the operation can be performed before the end of the 12th week of pregnancy, while later pregnancy terminations can be permitted under special circumstances. All interruptions are done in public hospitals without any costs for the woman. Induced abortion among the general female population can be and has been rather well described from published statistics (e.g. Knudsen 1997), while special surveys on women undergoing abortion have been conducted aiming at elucidating factors which can not be analysed from the official statistics (e.g. Rasmussen 1983a; Rasch et al. 2002), although national representative studies are rather rare (e.g., Bertelsen 1994).

The general rate of induced abortion decreased almost constantly since 1976. A strong increase in the first years after the law passed, was followed by a less steep decrease: From 23.7 per 1,000 women age 15-49 years in 1975 (28,000 abortions) to 19.0 in 1980 (23,334) and 12.0 in 2002 (14,967) in 2002. The decreasing rate has taken place in all age groups, including teenagers, and in all regions of Denmark (Knudsen et al. 2003; National Board of Health 2003). Routine statistics and the various studies have revealed a higher propensity to have induced abortion among very young women and women with relatively many children or undergoing education (e.g., Bertelsen 1994; Vestermark et al. 1990; Rasch et al. 2002) and among women living in non-stable relationships (Bertelsen 1994; Rasch 2000).

Even though the relationship - and the man - is thus often brought into the picture by the woman in surveys, only very sparse information on the male partner has been included in the analyses. Rasmussen (1983) found in his study in the surrounding areas of Copenhagen in 1978/79 that 42 per cent of women requesting abortion were either single or had a boyfriend with whom they did not cohabit compared to only 4 per cent among the delivering women. Kristiansen et al. (1991) found similar proportions of single women among aborters in the same area approximately 10 years later, in 1989. Also Bertelsen (1994), Husfeldt et al. (1995) and Hansen et al. (1996) have documented that the most frequent given reason for having an abortion among women in Denmark is either that they are single or that the relationship has a poor quality. Further, the aborters live less often in stable relationships than do the delivering women in Denmark (Bertelsen 1994; Rasch 2000; Vestermark et al. 1990).

However, published statistics include no information about the man at all, as the women are neither obliged to give any information on the male partner nor to present a permission or consent from the man to have the interruption.

Focus of the study

The aim of this paper is to focus on the choice between having abortion and giving birth if pregnant and to analyse how various characteristics of the relation between the woman and her male partner, such as the duration of the relation, the quality and the anticipated stability, influence the choice of induced abortion over birth among pregnant women.

When a woman gives birth today in Denmark it is considered to be a result of a deliberate and joint decision by her and her partner. Births are most often planned and the access to contraceptives and induced abortion provides the women and the couples with extended possibilities and effective means to plan, to delay and to limit their births. Both family formation and reproduction in the late modern society are part of the reflective planning of life course, and women, men and couples plan if, when and how many children they want to have and how this fits into their life-plans. It is assumed that for women with a partner, the couple will discuss, perhaps negotiate and weight costs and benefit of having a(nother) child and that the number of children already born, the quality of the relationship and the anticipated future of the relation, will be influential factors in this process.

An important consequence of the existence of contraceptives and right to induced abortion is, that neither women nor men are forced to accept and complete an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy or to establish a family with a partner, they do not want to raise children with. This kind of discussions and considerations are assumed to exist perhaps most specifically in the case of a pregnancy occurring after a very short relation (maybe a 'one-night-stand'), and before the birth of a couple's first child as well as in case of higher parity pregnancies. The character of the considerations may differ from the first to a subsequent pregnancy, both if it is the same partner or a new partner.

The access to induced abortion and contraceptives are means directed towards limiting, delaying and spacing fertility, while being fecund and the availability of a suitable partner who are interested in having a child and become co-parent, are fundamental when it comes to having children. A given population are thus able to limit the fertility and in accordance with this, studies have shown, that expressed fertility intentions are most strongly correlated with fertility in a subsequent period, when the intentions were *not* to have children (Schoen et al. 1999; Hoem 1993).

The characteristics of the women's relationships will primarily be elucidated through questionnaire data and include whether they are single, married or cohabiting, the duration of the current relation, the women's judgement of the quality, their anticipation of the future stability of the relation and, as a proxy for mutual commitment, whether the couple has joint finances with their partner. Further, information on whether the actual pregnancy was planned, will be included.

The working hypothesis is that women in good relationships, who expect a future with their partner, will be less prone to choose induced abortion over birth.

Material and Methods

The full study was carried out using a combination of methods: Information collected from public registers, self-completed questionnaires and anthropological in-depth interviews (Rasch et al. 2007). In the present analysis we will mainly use data from the questionnaire part of the study, comparing women who chose abortion with women who chose to give birth. The questionnaires were completed in the hospital by the aborters at the examination in the hospital before the induced abortion and by women attending routine antenatal care in the same hospitals in gestational week 13th –20th, who stated that they intended to carry their pregnancy to term.

Two questionnaires were developed for the two groups of women, although much of the information were similar. Identical background information and information on e.g. knowledge on contraceptives, general attitudes towards timing of childbearing, size of families and quality of the relationship with the male partner, was collected in the two groups, while a number of questions more directly concerning the decision to have an induced abortion or to give birth differed between the two groups. Collection of data began in September 2002 and ended May 2003. The participating hospitals represented seven counties from different regions of Denmark: Nordjylland, Aarhus, Ribe, Sønderjylland, Fyn and Storstrøms counties and Frederiksberg municipality.

A total of 1,419 questionnaires among women having induced abortion (rejected pregnancies) and 1,403 among pregnant women attending routine antenatal care (accepted pregnancies) were completed. Only women having induced abortion before the end of 12th week of pregnancy are included.

The representativity of the data collected through the questionnaires were validated from national register-based information including all women having induced abortion or giving birth in Denmark in almost the same period. This validation showed convincing accordance between the study population and the pregnant population regarding age distribution of the women, their marital situation and the number of children, they had already given birth to.

The study design was a case-control study, in which the cases consisted of women requesting induced abortion before the end of 12th gestational week.

The associations will be presented as Odds Ratios (OR) with confidence intervals (CI). Further, the influence of the various characteristics will be analysed by use of regression analysis.

Preliminary findings

The register data showed for the period 1991-2001 the general decreasing rate of induced abortion that was mentioned above. For the women younger than 20, the rate was higher among the married women and among those already having one or more joint children with their current partner, than among the single women, while among the women, age 20-24 years, the single women had a higher rate. The findings indicate that women, who has given birth in young age, and especially if they were cohabiting had a higher propensity to choose abortion over birth.

The questionnaire data revealed that the family situation of the women was the one factor with the strongest positive association with the choice of induced abortion instead of giving birth: Half of the women choosing induced abortion was single and neither married or cohabiting, while only 5 per cent among the delivering women was single. Among single women with a steady partner the propensity to choose abortion was increased 14 times while the propensity to choose abortion was especially strong among single women with no steady partner: 33 times higher than among women who were married or cohabiting. Together this indicate that women in a situation suitable for childrearing are more prone to choose to give birth. Moreover, after adjusting for the influence of the womans age and the number of previous children, this correlation becomes even stronger: Single women with or without a steady partner were now much more prone to chose abortion than women who were married or cohabiting.

Characteristics of the relationship

For each of the characteristics of the relationship: duration, quality and the anticipated stability in the next decade, an association has been demonstrated through the preliminary analysis.

Some of the women living with a male partner chose to have their pregnancy interrupted and for those women the choice was associated with how long they had known their partner, how they

experienced the quality of the relationship and whether they anticipated to be in the same relation as a couple in ten years time. A total of 660 of the 1,306 women (49 per cent), who chose abortion and 1,227 of the 1,384 (95 per cent) of the women carrying to term, stated that they were married or cohabiting with a partner.

Among the married/cohabiting pregnant women the duration of the relationship had no influence on the choice of abortion, when considered alone, but when controlling for the woman's age and number of previous children the relation between duration and the choice turns out to be significant: The shorter duration the more prone the woman was to choose abortion. These results mirror that the duration of the current relationship influence the decision only when the woman's age and number of children are also taken into consideration.

More than three quarters of all the women in the study population, 96 and 77 per cent among those intending to give birth and having abortion, respectively, lived in a relationship of good quality. The analyses show that the women's impression of the quality of her partnership influenced the decision on whether to choose abortion or to give birth. Compared to women living in a good partnership, the women in fair relations was 5 times as prone to choose abortion while women living in poor relationships had a 66 times stronger propensity to choose abortion. These associations did not change after adjusting for the woman's age and number of children.

To get an indication of the mutual commitment between the women and their partners, the women were asked whether they had joint finances in the partnership, which the main part of all the women stated that they had (82 per cent and 77 per cent among the deliverers and the aborting women, respectively). Women who stated that they did not have shared finances with their partner, had a slightly, but significantly increased propensity to choose abortion. When adjusting for the woman's age and number of children, this relation became even stronger.

A little less than three quarters of the women choosing abortion expected to be with the same partner in ten years time compared to almost all the women intending to give birth. Irrespective of the woman's age and number of previous children, her anticipation of the future stability of the relationship was crucial for her decision: If the women did not expect to be with the same partner the next ten years they were 28 times more prone to choose abortion than were women with faith in their current relationship. Controlling for her age and number of children this proneness doubled.

The further analysis will include more advanced modelling and combine the various factors.

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