

The Abortion Debate - a heated and never-ending ethical debate

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Roughly speaking, there are two camps with two distinct conceptions on life. The pro-choice movement emphasizes the freedom of choice for women, while the pro-life adherents wish primarily to protect the rights of the unborn child/foetus. There is strong correlation between the abortion issue and religion. Generally, abortion is preached as negative because it entails killing of a human being, yet many religious groupings concede for some exceptions. Abortion rights fall under the larger concept of reproductive rights, generally referred to as women's rights, but these do not form part of the international human law. Abortion becomes a highly politicised term when the state starts interfering with abortion law reforms.

Abortion/Birth Trends in Macedonia

Year	Abortions	Live Births
1989	30,442	35,927
1991	23,166	34,830
1995	15,805	32,154
2000	11,407	29,308
2003	6,690	27,011
2006	6,164	22, 585

Source: Johnston's Archive

Recently, there have been some street campaigns supporting the governmental strategy to award Macedonian women with at least three children, which were in turn condemned by many pro-choice NGOs. Additional turmoil was caused by rumours that the Macedonian Ministry of Health is drafting a more restrictive law on abortion in order to improve the population growth. Tighter rules (e.g. asking approval of the male partner) would restrict women's rights and might suggest a drawback for woman emancipation in Macedonia.

So far, Macedonia has had a quite liberal abortion policy (Yugoslav legacy). The statistics by the Republic Institute for Health Protection is not updated (circa 6,000 in 2006), but it still shows that abortions have been constantly diminishing in the last 20 years (five times lower than at independence). The official data is also lacking estimates of the existent practice of illegally terminated pregnancies and does not reflect the complexity of the problem.

For comparison, Slovenia, with an equal population rate of 2 million, is displaying similar abortion trends. Experts believe that natality rate is not related to the abortion rate, as induced abortions are diminishing faster than natality is falling. Even the myth that irresponsible young women abort the most is untrue. Rather, it is the socio-economic status of women which is to blame for terminating a pregnancy.

Studies show that minority women have a higher rate of unintended pregnancies because of their marginalisation and stigmatisation. Half of the Macedonian Roma women interviewed by the National Roma Centre have had one or more abortions. The size of Roma families can be explained by poor use of contraceptives which in turn leads to high rates of abortions.

Who benefits from making abortion a highly-charged issue?

A negative aspect of banning abortions is the phenomenon of medical tourism - travelling to countries where abortion is easier to perform - which in the Macedonian case is difficult because of slim financial means and visa policy. The prohibition may lead women to seek illegal practices, where unsafe and risky quasi-medical interventions can even be life-threatening. As the praxis from other countries has shown, women can easier plan their pregnancies when the economic situation is favourable, i.e. with better employment chances, organised child care and an overall climate of well-being. These factors stimulate childbearing more than state-imposed rulings.

Anti-abortion groups have the right to express their views. Understandably, these views should not become hate speech towards the female population. The real question that should be posed is whether the new law can in reality favour the national interests or whether it will just discriminate women in an already highly patriarchal society. There is need to speak openly about these issues and to have a sound and balanced public debate.

Quick Facts: Macedonia 6,000 (Source: RZZZ); Slovenia 6,000 (Source: IVZ) World: 42 mio (in 2003); 19 mio performed illegally, 70,000 deaths (sos.se). Illegal in Malta, Ireland, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile...