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The role of men in induced abortion decision making in an urban area of the Philippines

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Abstract

Objective—To understand beliefs about unintended pregnancy and abortion, and perceptions about male roles related to pregnancy decision-making among men in the Philippines.

Methods—Qualitative data were collected during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with men in an urban area of the Philippines between October 2007 and July 2008. Interview participants were purposively sampled from a local survey based on their having reported being “afraid or troubled” or “afraid and planned to terminate” in response to a recent pregnancy. Focus group participants were selected from the same communities. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Results—In-depth interview data from 15 men—each interviewed twice—and five focus group discussions were included. Male interview participants reported feeling morally responsible for the pregnancy and as wanting to avoid the “sin” of induced abortion; however, they were concerned about being able to support a family financially. Participants expressed resentment towards partners who attempted or completed an induced abortion without their knowledge. In such cases, men would disparage their partner and cease interacting with them to avoid the “sin” of induced abortion.

Conclusion—Participants described negative feelings towards women seeking induced abortions, and their own desire to avoid associated “sin”. This highlights the effects of unintended pregnancy and induced abortion on young Filipino men, including their own experience of abortion stigma.

Keywords

Abortion; Philippines; Stigma; Unintended pregnancy; Young adults

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All authors contributed to the data collection and analysis, and the preparation of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

1. Introduction

The Philippines has some of the most restrictive induced abortion laws in the world, condemning it in all situations and imposing severe penalties on women who have induced abortions, supportive family members, and abortion providers. Amidst these restrictions, induced abortion is highly stigmatized yet is relatively common—18% of the 3.4 million pregnancies that occurred in the Philippines in 2012 ended in an induced abortion [1]. As a result of these legal and social sanctions, most induced abortions are unsafe, and are conducted clandestinely by untrained providers [1, 2]. Unsafe abortion is a leading cause of maternal mortality in the Philippines, accounting for approximately 1000 deaths annually; in 2012, 100 000 hospitalizations due to abortion-related complications were recorded [1, 3].

The reliance on unsafe abortion reflects desperation among women and men to regulate fertility in the face of ongoing restrictions in reproductive education and services [4]. Recent social and demographic shifts suggest that Filipino young adults are engaging in sex at younger ages, yet they are without sufficient access to reproductive health information and services to prevent early and unintended pregnancies [5, 6]. Since 1994, the proportion of Filipino young adults who begin sexual activity before age 18 has nearly doubled—from 13% in 1994 to 32% in 2013—and the proportion of teenage mothers (aged 15–19 years) doubled from 6.3% in 2002 to 13.6% in 2013 [7].

Restrictions on reproductive health services within the Philippines are well-documented, particularly among young, unmarried adolescents and young adults, and these restrictions have been strongly supported by the Roman Catholic Church [6, 8]. In addition to these physical barriers, traditional gender norms affect sexual decision-making and outcomes. Young women are expected to remain chaste until marriage, whereas young men are afforded more sexual latitude though are expected to be “breadwinners” for the family [9]. Consequently, unintended pregnancies present unique concerns for young women and men as they attempt to navigate social expectations alongside potential stigma arising from a premarital pregnancy [6, 10–12].

Whereas numerous studies have examined women’s experiences with unintended pregnancy and induced abortion, few studies have focused on men’s experiences, despite the fact that men often play a significant role in pregnancy decision-making [13]. Men’s involvement and mobilization of material resources is often a critical determinant of the decision to terminate a pregnancy and the choice of induced abortion method [11, 14–16]. Consequently, understanding men’s role in pregnancy decision-making is necessary to identify factors that may lead to the use of unsafe abortion in the Philippines [17].

Using in-depth, qualitative data from young men living in an urban area of the Philippines, the aim of the present study was to understand men’s beliefs surrounding unintended pregnancy and induced abortion, and men’s perceptions of their roles related to pregnancy decision-making.

2. Materials and methods

In the present qualitative study, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted between October 2007 and July 2008 with men living in an urban area of the Philippines. All interview and focus group participants gave informed consent to participate and be included in the present study. The present study was approved by the institutional review boards of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD, USA, and the University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

In-depth interviews were conducted with young men from an urban area of the Philippines who reported in a local survey that they were “afraid or troubled” or “afraid and planned to terminate” when asked to describe their feelings regarding a past pregnancy; each participant was interviewed twice. Focus group discussions were conducted with men aged 20–29 years who were married/co-habiting or single, and resided in the same urban communities as the interview participants. Further study details have been withheld at the request of local collaborators to preserve the anonymity of participants.

The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted in the local language, lasted between 1–1.5 hours, and were digitally recorded. Audio recordings were translated and transcribed into English before being coded using NVivo version 8 (QSR International Pty, Melbourne, Australia). The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method [18]. Key themes and subthemes were identified and agreed by the investigators; subsequently, two researchers (AEH and JDG) used these themes and subthemes to code transcripts by identifying and grouping together sections of narrative relating to them. Team meetings and memo-writing were used to identify the range and variation within each theme, as well as the linkages between themes.

3. Results

In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 young men from urban areas, each of whom was interviewed twice, resulting in 30 interviews in total (Table 1). There were five focus group discussions performed that included 43 participants in total (Table 2).

In the focus group discussions, premarital sex, unintended pregnancy, and induced abortion were strongly looked down upon by most male participants; however, all participants reported having engaged in intercourse prior to marriage and most reported they had done so without the use of contraception. Despite men’s willingness to discuss their own premarital sexual encounters, their depictions of women who engaged in premarital sex, or who had an unintended pregnancy, were consistently negative. Participants described the “types” of women who have unintended pregnancies as “club dancers”, “strippers”, “members of gangs or fraternities”, and as “women who do not think about the consequences of their actions” (focus group discussion one). However, when asked about their own role in conception, participants expressed ambivalent views. Many attributed the occurrence of an unintended pregnancy to the, “will of God”, questioning their own ability to fully prevent the pregnancy. However, at the same time the men included said they would feel morally and financially responsible in the event a pregnancy occurred. Most participants endorsed the belief that

induced abortions are a “big sin” against both “God” and the “unborn child” (focus group discussion two).

Whereas men in the focus group discussions expressed strong opposition to induced abortion, in-depth interview participants provided more nuanced and personal accounts of their reactions to unintended pregnancies. Men noted that decisions regarding an unintended pregnancy were complex and affected by multiple factors, including their relationship with the woman, as well as financial and educational considerations. In nearly all cases, men said they would, ideally, want to “step up” by marrying the woman to make the pregnancy “legitimate” in both the eyes of the community and in the eyes of God. However, many male participants reported that they were living with their parents, attending school, and/or did not have stable employment; they felt their circumstances were inconsistent with the roles they should play as responsible partners and as fathers:

In-depth interviewee 2 (IDI 2): “...[We were] still depending on our parents. I knew I did not have work to feed the child. I did not have the money to pay for her maternity expenses, but when we discussed having the child aborted, that is another story because that is a sin.”

Men were acutely aware of the concerns of women when disclosing an unintended pregnancy, including how her parents would react, and whether the male partner would take responsibility. Men also recognized that the physical and social consequences faced by women (and their families) when pregnant were more pronounced compared with those experienced by men and that, ultimately, the man’s decisions regarding the relationship and the pregnancy would heavily influence these outcomes.

Participants described situations where their partner’s parents intervened and prevented them from either marrying their daughter, or facilitated their daughter’s induced abortion. In these cases, men reported feeling frustrated by their lack of control over the situation. Men realized they were not able to financially support the woman and child yet were also strongly opposed to induced abortion, did not want to commit a “sin”, and wanted to have a say in pregnancy decision making.

Whereas the men interviewed acknowledged that women have greater responsibility for pregnancy and childcare and should, therefore, have greater say in pregnancy decision making, they also expressed frustration and felt powerlessness in situations when women chose to terminate a pregnancy without consulting the male partner:

IDI 3: “...it’s up to her because she is the one carrying herself. We would not know what she would do to herself...but on my part if ever she will tell me about it, I will tell her not to do it because it is bad. It is abortion... I will really keep her from doing so but if she is already decided how can you restrain her since she’s the one controlling her body? It depends on her.”

The stability of the relationship, the economic situation of the couple, and parental reactions were described as factors that influenced if and when an unintended pregnancy would be disclosed by a woman and to whom. In many cases, interviewees reported that disclosing a

pregnancy to a male partner was driven by a woman's desire to know if he would take responsibility for the child and for her:

Interviewer: "What did she tell you...?"

IDI 4: "Nothing really...she just made me decide. I told her not to abort it, because it was ours, that's what I told her. We will accept that, I told her. So she did not insist. It was never really her "mindset" to really do it..."

Participants reported that disclosures of pregnancies to male partners sometimes occurred after consideration of, or even action towards, an induced abortion. Men acknowledged that women could take action on their own, including buying misoprostol without their partner's knowledge. In these cases, men reported not wanting any association with the medication owing to its use as an abortifacient and its illegality.

In addition to frustration with being excluded from the pregnancy decision-making process, men reported that they were angered and concerned by their unwilling or unknowing association with an induced abortion—an illegal procedure that they often considered to be "sinful". Men in this situation expressed resentment towards the female partner and her decision to take away their chance to be a father:

IDI 5: "...When she knew she was pregnant she should have come home. I am always here for her. I deeply regret it because it could have been born and I would be a father now. I really resent her. She was acting like a prostitute when she goes to the boarding house [university residence] of these guys. She should have thought about me and she should have come home."

Some of the men interviewed felt the "sin" of an induced abortion affected not only the woman, but also the man responsible for the pregnancy. Men often described this as leading to them separating from the women once they learned of the induced abortion, as well as referring to their former partner in derogatory terms (e.g., "the devil"), and distancing themselves from them socially. In some interviews, participants reported that their family would also react negatively to the woman following the disclosure of an induced abortion:

Interviewer: "What happened when you told her that you wanted to end the relationship?"

IDI 6: "...I told her that...my parents could not accept you for what you have done...because she had sinned to my parents and she is not welcome in my family. I told her we better end this relationship so that our conscience would be clean because I already asked forgiveness from the Lord that we killed our child."

These negative views and reactions towards women were expressed by men in both the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions; however, the narratives from the in-depth interviews provided richer insight into how men resolved the often conflicting social pressures and personal expectations when faced with an unintended pregnancy.

4. Discussion

The present study provides rare insight into the perspectives and experiences of men involved in pregnancy decision-making in a setting where induced abortions are restricted.

Men characterized women who had unintended pregnancies as “irresponsible” while at the same time acknowledging their own responsibility. Participants considered the desire to take responsibility for the pregnancy fundamental to their roles as a man and as a father; this was seen as a way to protect their families’ honor, provide the child with a legitimate family, and to avoid the “sin” associated with an induced abortion. This desire to take responsibility often presented a conflict for men as to how to balance limited material and social resources with societal expectations of parenthood. These conflicts are reflected in findings from other settings where men have described tensions between preparing for marriage and fatherhood, and meeting societal and gendered expectations of being the “breadwinner”, especially amidst increasingly limited education and employment opportunities [19–23].

Men felt the decision to resolve an unintended pregnancy should be made jointly; however, men indicated that they were not always involved in this decision. In a South African study [24], men’s preference for joint decision-making was found to be rooted in gendered assumptions of men having a greater capacity than women to make rational decisions about reproductive events. The participants in the present study expressed similar notions, citing the ability to dissuade one’s partner from having an abortion by taking responsibility for a pregnancy and, essentially, overriding a woman’s reproductive decision.

Findings from the present study and studies from other settings [1, 14, 15, 26] indicate it is common for women alone to make decisions regarding induced abortion—a previous report found that less than half of Filipino women involved their partner in induced abortion decision-making. Male participants acknowledged and expressed discomfort with the fact that they cannot always control whether the pregnancy is carried to term.

Similar to studies from other settings, male participants spoke disparagingly of and distanced themselves from women who had an unintended pregnancy, who chose to undergo an induced abortion, or who even contemplated an induced abortion [11, 14, 25, 26]. In the present study, the negative perceptions of women desiring or seeking an induced abortion often prompted men to separate themselves, both physically and emotionally, from women and from relationships. These efforts appeared to be a way whereby men would attempt to distance themselves from the “sin” that induced abortion generates. These findings align closely Kumar et al.’s [27], definition of abortion stigma as, “a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to ideals of womanhood”. Abortion stigma may arise when these ideals of womanhood—particularly sexual purity and nurturing motherhood—are violated [28].

A key finding of the present study was that male participants also experienced abortion stigma. Men’s perceptions of unintended pregnancy and induced abortions were strongly influenced by concerns that their knowing or unknowing association with an induced abortion would result in judgement from God, from their community, or both. Similarly, in a previous study in the Philippines, many men felt that the “sin” of abortion was something

that they would have to endure for their lifetime for having killed an “innocent child” [11]. These religious sentiments mirror public discourse on abortion in the Philippines, a discourse heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church and an influence that may likely serve to perpetuate abortion stigma at the community level [8, 12, 29].

The present study had several limitations; first, the in-depth interview participants were purposively sampled based on their reporting of a negative reaction to a pregnancy. Consequently, perspectives shared by the study sample may not reflect the broader experiences of similar men from this study area. Second, while a focus on men addresses a persistent gap in the literature, the study was unable to assess women’s perspectives of men’s influence on their decision making; similarly, it was not possible to explore the impact of men’s involvement, or lack thereof, on women’s decision-making and abortion-seeking processes. Evidence from other settings indicates that men’s withholding of social and material resources can negatively impact a woman’s ability to seek safer induced abortion options [13, 16].

The present study highlights the impact of unintended pregnancy and induced abortion on young Filipino men, as well as their role in pregnancy decision making. Importantly, the findings provide a glimpse into how men navigate competing pressures to adhere to societal and individual expectations of marriage and fatherhood amidst economic and institutional constraints in this restricted setting.

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Synopsis

Men desired to be involved in pregnancy decision making. Men reacted negatively if they felt excluded from decision making, perpetuating stigmatizing views on induced abortion.

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Table 1

Demographic characteristics of in-depth interview participants (n=15).

Participant	Age, y	Occupation	Self-reported education completed	Marital status	No. of children	Reported considering, attempting, and/or experiencing an induced abortion
IDI 1	24	Construction	Fourth year high school	Single	1	Yes
IDI 2	24	Unemployed	Vocational school	Single	0	Yes
IDI 3	24	Coffee shop	First year college	Married	1	Yes
IDI 4	23	Construction	Grade 6	Single	0	Yes
IDI 5	29	Furniture maker	Second year high school	Cohabiting	2	Yes
IDI 6	24	Student	Second year college	Single	1	Yes
IDI 7	24	Tricycle driver	Vocational school	Cohabiting	2	Yes
IDI 8	24	Machine operator	College graduate	Married	2	Yes
IDI 9	29	Delivery driver	Fourth year high school	Cohabiting	2	Yes
IDI 10	24	Construction	First year high school	Married	2	No
IDI 11	24	Meat seller	Third year college	Married	2	Yes
IDI 12	24	Sales	Vocational school	Married	1	Yes
IDI 13	27	Unemployed	Some college	Married	1	No
IDI 14	27	Fisherman	Grade 4	Married	2	Yes
IDI 15	23	Sells meat and fish	First year college	Married	3	No

Abbreviation: IDI, in-depth interviewee.

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of focus group participants (n=43).

Focus group	Age range, y	No. of participants	Marital status of participants	Religion
1	22–28	8	Married	8 Catholic
2	20–27	11	Single	10 Catholic, 1 Protestant
3	20–29	10	Single	10 Catholic
4	23–29	6	Married	6 Catholic
5	22–29	8	Married	8 Catholic