

Abortion – A Life and Death Issue



THE FACTS

Abortion is the deliberate medical intervention to end the life of an unborn child. Abortion is carried out by medical staff in hospitals and clinics. Abortion using powerful drugs, where the woman expels a small dead unborn child at home, is becoming increasingly common. Unborn children can be aborted up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. However, if the unborn child is disabled in any way, however minor, then its life can be ended right up to birth.

Abortion is very common in Britain. There are nearly 600 abortions carried out every day in Britain (Source: Department of Health Abortion Figures). The womb is the most dangerous place to live – 1 in 5 unborn babies are never born – their life ended in the womb by abortion. (Sources: Department of Health Abortion Figures and Office of National Statistics)

IT source: You can check the latest abortion figures for yourself at www.dh.gov.uk and www.scotland.gov.uk (to add in the Scottish abortions that are counted separately) You can also check out the number of live births at www.statistics.gov.uk Using these two figures and some basic maths you can then work the % of unborn children that are killed by abortion. Is the 1 in 5 figure quoted above still correct?

Abortion, like all other killing, was always against the law in Britain, and punished severely until 1967 when the legal protection of unborn children was overturned. Since then rising 6.5 million children have been killed by abortion.

The arguments for and against abortion raged in 1967 when the Abortion Act was passed, but abortion remains a controversial issue today. That's not surprising – it's a matter of life and death, so it's important to understand the arguments.

Below are listed some of the main arguments that are used in favour and against abortion. Some suggestions for further work for you then follow.

THE ARGUMENTS

“Abortion is a woman's right to choose”

FOR ABORTION: A woman has a right to control her own body and fertility. A woman should have an absolute right to decide whether or not to continue with her pregnancy. As it is her body and life that will be affected by pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, no-one else should have the power to force her to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. This is one of the main arguments in favour of abortion. People who take this view will often describe themselves as **pro-choice**, because who can be against choice?

AGAINST ABORTION: Each pregnancy concerns two bodies: those of the mother and the unborn child. From the moment of conception there are clearly two persons involved – the unborn child might be a different sex from the mother. In any case, he or she will be unique with their own fingerprints. In an abortion, an unborn child is killed. We may have the right to choose to do many things, to drink coke rather than water or to listen to one type of music rather than another but there is no general right to choose. We may choose to rob a bank or mug an old lady, but there is no “right” to make this choice. Removing an unborn child is not like removing a tooth. The unborn child is an individual human being and abortion violates the child's right to life. People who take this view will often describe themselves as **pro-life**, because who can be against life?

IT source: The Right to Life - Take a look at the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights issued in 1948. <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

The Right to Life is included in Article 3. It is the very first specific right that is mentioned in the declaration. It is often called the fundamental human right. Why do you think this is?

The UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child issued in 1959 makes clear in its introduction (preamble) that the universal right to life applies before as well as after birth.

<http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/25.htm>

“Every child should be a wanted child”

FOR ABORTION: No woman should be forced to bring an unwanted child into the world. There is already enough suffering and child abuse.

AGAINST ABORTION: This slogan sounds compassionate, but what it really means is 'every unwanted child should be a dead child'. If the “every child a wanted child” slogan was based on reality then in Britain with its easily available abortion, child abuse should have been eliminated. Yet recorded cases of child abuse have increased substantially since abortion was legalised. No child should be unwanted as there is the option of adoption. However because of abortion the number of new born babies available for adoption is small and the number of people wanting to adopt is very high. In 1971 there were 21,495 adoptions in England and Wales. By 2004 this number had plunged by 75% to 5360. Only 252 of these adoptions were of babies less than one year of age. (Source: Office for National Statistics)

IT source: You can check how common child abuse is by visiting the website of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) at www.nspcc.org.uk and check the latest adoption figures at www.statistics.gov.uk Has legal abortion succeeded in making every child a wanted child?

“If abortion wasn’t legal, women would resort to illegal “back-street” abortions”

FOR ABORTION: Before the 1967 Abortion Act was passed most women who wanted to end their pregnancies would have had to resort to self-induced or backstreet abortions. It is estimated that there were between 100,000 and 150,000 illegal abortions every year. Widespread injury and infection often led to infertility and other permanent health problems, and death by septicaemia (blood poisoning) or haemorrhage (bleeding) was not uncommon. In 1966 up to 40 women a year in the UK died from the complications of unsafe abortion. Worldwide, where abortion is still illegal in many countries it is estimated that there are over 20 million unsafe abortions each year causing the death of 70,000 women.

AGAINST ABORTION: The fact that abortion happens is not a reason for making it legal. Murder, rape and domestic violence occur on a daily basis and cannot be entirely prevented, but no one suggests legalising these crimes or allowing them to take place in a hygienic environment! Those in favour of abortion use alarming statistics, to persuade politicians to change the law on abortion but there is little evidence to suggest that backstreet abortion is a massive problem. Poland provides an example of what happens when a country restricts abortion. In 1993 Poland outlawed almost all abortion. Legal abortion fell from nearly 60,000 a year in 1990 to a mere 174 in 2003. Did Polish women rush to back-street abortionists to get the abortions that Polish law now denied them? If backstreet abortions had risen we would expect to see a rise in the number of reported miscarriages and also in deaths associated with pregnancy. In fact the reverse happened and in both cases the figures have fallen since 1990. (Source: Polish government figures)

IT source: You can check Poland’s abortion figures for yourself at the Council of Europe website: http://www.coe.int/t/e/social_cohesion/population/demographic_year_book/2002_edition The group Education for Choice deals with the issue at <http://www.efc.org.uk/Foryoungpeople/Factsaboutabortion/Unsafeabortion> but as with all groups that wish to suggest backstreet abortion is a problem there are no sources provided for the numbers of backstreet abortions quoted. In fact, the main medical body put the number of illegal abortions at only 14,600 at the time the Abortion Act was passed (Source: Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists – British Medical Journal – 2 April 1966)

“The fetus isn’t a person”

FOR ABORTION: A sperm is alive and an egg is alive. They have potential in the same way as a fetus has potential, but the fetus isn’t a human person, only a potential person. It is alive, but it lacks the degree of development and the attributes that a human person has. Therefore we should not give it the same protection as a full human person – the mother.

AGAINST ABORTION: There can only be human persons and non-persons. Saying that someone is a half-person sounds nonsense and is nonsense! So there can be no degrees of personhood. A being cannot gradually become a person. Moreover, if we decide the value of human life on the basis of someone’s abilities and degree of development what does this say about new born babies? They have low abilities and are far from fully developed – are they too only a “potential person” whose life should not be fully protected? Similarly in old age, people often decline and cannot do things they could when younger. Are they becoming less of a person? You can see that the decision about who is a person and who is less than a full person is very subjective – it depends on someone’s point of view. This is no way to make laws.

IT source: Carry out the following two internet searches using your favourite search engine:
Dred Scott
Nuremburg Laws 1935

Learn more about the consequences when courts in America and Germany defined human beings as less than full human “persons”.

“I’m not in favour of abortion, but it should be allowed if the fetus is handicapped”

FOR ABORTION: Many handicapped children will suffer a lot of pain and lead a short miserable life. For the parents too it is a massive burden and the welfare of the other children in the family can suffer. In these cases, abortion is the least bad option.

AGAINST ABORTION: Most pain can be controlled by doctors, so handicapped children should not normally be in pain. In abortion though, the unborn child is not anaesthetized and will likely suffer pain as its life is ended. Brain waves associated with pain have been measured in an unborn baby 10 weeks after conception. Once again we are into subjective decisions – what is a handicap depends on someone’s point of view. Colour blindness is a handicap. Perhaps you are colour blind – are we saying abortion should be possible if the unborn child is colour blind? If not, and it is only for “serious” handicaps who decides what is “serious”? In any case, the current law allows abortion up to birth for any degree of disability as an exception to the 24 week limit. Surely disabled people have the right to be treated equally?

IT source: This link to the international disability group Disability Awareness in Action provides a good overview of the issue from the perspective of disabled people

<http://www.daa.org.uk/index.php?page=b>

The newspapers frequently have stories linking abortion and disability.

Type the two words into a search engine and see what you find.

One example from The Daily Mail is:

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=388114&in_page_id=1770&ico=Homepage&icl=TabModule&icc=NEWS&ct=5

“There are too many human beings on Earth. We are destroying the planet. Look at climate change for example”

FOR ABORTION: The resources on Earth are limited. Oil and other raw materials will run out. Land space cannot be increased and the battle for fresh water has already caused wars around the world. Added to which the sheer number of people in the world is leading to climate change which threatens the lives of millions of people in poorer countries. We have to control the population level and efforts to reduce the birth rate, including abortion are an important part of that.

AGAINST ABORTION: Throughout history, learned people have been saying that the Earth is overpopulated. These people forget that human beings are a resource too. Humans are intelligent and each time worries have been raised about population, technological progress has enabled many more people to live on the Earth and in better living conditions. Climate change and the other issues facing our environment are big challenges but the inventiveness of human beings will enable us to cope and adapt to change. Countries such as China, which have heavily promoted population control, have had to compel families to have only one child - including by forced abortion. This curtails the fundamental human freedom to reproduce.

IT source: The BBC science website details the challenge from climate change but also some of the steps that are being taken to deal with it.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/climateexperiment/whatcanwedo/whatelse.shtml>

The National Grid for Learning includes information on Thomas Malthus who in 1798 wrongly suggested that the world would shortly run out of food because of too many people.

http://tre.ngfl.gov.uk/uploads/materials/5592/POPULATION_4.doc

Learn more about China's forced abortion policies at Amnesty International's website

<http://www.amnesty.org.uk>

An excellent specific piece on China's forced abortion policy is covered in the Times newspaper at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article567921.ece>

Ideas for further work:

- 1** Hold a class debate on the motion that “This house believes that abortion is a woman's right to chose”. Arrange a number of speakers for and against the motion and allow the rest of the class to ask questions of the speakers ending with a class vote. You could also consider taking a vote before the debate to see if the debate has changed anyone's mind.
- 2** Write an essay arguing for or against legal abortion.
- 3** Arrange for your teacher to invite a speaker to come to school from one of the organisation's listed in the teacher's pack.



www.righttolifetrust.org.uk/education

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