

# Opinions on Abortion among a Group of University Students in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Turkey has witnessed a clash between conservative and liberal perspectives on abortion policy lately. The abortion is highly medicalized and the psychosocial aspect has been neglected. In this study we investigate the abortion opinions of 485 students from psychology, psychological guidance and counselling and social work departments in a variety of universities in Turkey through an online questionnaire from professional lists. The findings suggest that most of the students either have no opinion on or are against the allowance of abortion. Majority of the students take an anti-abortion stance with religious references. Gender, mother's educational status, number of siblings in the family and having a romantic relationship are the social variables that make a significant difference for an anti-abortion stance. Results were discussed within current literature on abortion and the political climate of Turkey. Students for human service professions are at a critical position and should employ a rights-based approach to abortion discussions.*

**Keywords:** Abortion, human service professions, university students, Turkey

## 1. Introduction

Induced abortion has been legal in Turkey since 1983 with the Population Planning Law (Law No. 2827) (Gürsoy, 1996; Arda & Aydın, 2004). Because of the pronatalist policies of the state, the abortion was prohibited as well as contraceptives before that date (Gürsoy, 1996; Çavlin-Bozbeyoğlu, 2011). Antinatalist policies started with the increased birth and population growth rate during 1950s (Çavlin-Bozbeyoğlu, 2011). The "Abortion law" may be considered rather conservative in that, it sets a 10 week of legal limit on the termination of pregnancy, instead of 12 weeks and it seeks the approval of both partners for the abortion (Gürsoy, 1996). Induced abortions have been available at government hospitals, for a nominal fee, as well as in private institutions (TDHS, 2013) since the "1983 Abortion Act". According to the latest Demographic and Health Survey of Turkey (TDHS, 2013) 14% of ever married women had at least one induced abortion in life-time period. There has been a substantial decline in the rate of induced abortions during the 20-year period, from 18 per 100 pregnancies in TDHS-1993 to 5 induced abortions per 100 pregnancies in TDHS-2013. (TDHS, 2013). The main reason for this decline in the rate of abortions may be explained with increased and more conscious use of contraceptives (Mihçioğur, Akın, Doğan & Özvarış, 2015).

However, in the last decade, there has been a reaction against the pro-abortion perspectives. Since 2012, this has been articulated by the politicians. The Prime Minister condemned abortion as a crime" and "asked women to have at least three, even five children each" (Mihçioğur et al., 2015). There has been an attempt to change the existing abortion law for "either restricting abortion after 4 weeks' gestation or banning it completely" (Green, 2012). Efforts of women's groups and scientific community made the attempts unsuccessful, however in practice, it is reported that some hospital units are unwilling to provide abortion services (Mihçioğur et al., 2015) and there is still an unmet need for induced abortion services provided by the public health services especially in rural and

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semi-urban parts of the country (Akin, Koçoğlu & Akin, 2005). In their analysis, focusing on both pro- and anti-abortion discourse among current government and opposition parties in Turkey, Unal and Cindoglu (2013) point out lack of the perspective of prioritizing women's autonomy for both sides, even while the opposition is criticizing the government's anti-abortion campaign. The "pro-abortion" discourses of opposition parties include abortion as a reproductive right, needed to be "granted to victimized women, who live under economic hardship or have been subject to rape". Moreover, they also state that the political discourses highly medicalize the abortion (Unal & Cindoglu, 2013). There is a lack of a rights-based approach in abortion discussions and practices in the current situation and the psychosocial aspect of abortion is being neglected within this highly medicalized area. Abortion, though, may also be considered as a social phenomenon, as well as a medical issue, with its causes and consequences. For example, in their study Rasch et al. (2007) emphasize the effect of certain social characteristics play an important role in abortion decision, such as being immigrant and associated with low education, weak social network, poverty, unemployment and being outside common pathways to healthcare. Köken et al. (2008) also underscore the psychological, cultural and structural properties influencing sexual and reproductive behavior, including effective use of contraception, inconsistent or nonuse of contraceptives. Psychological consequences of abortion on women include grief, guilt, depression, whereas social aspects include the factors during the decision making process, the status of women in the society, the status of contraceptives, sexual freedom, etc. (Millner & Hanks, 2002; Illsley & Hall, 1976). These psychosocial aspects of abortion make pre and post-abortion counselling important (Hosseini-Chavoshi, Abbasi-Shavazi, Glazebrook & McDonald, 2012) and therefore human service professions should be more integrated in the process of more humane abortion policy and services.

There are plenty of studies, investigating abortion related attitudes and beliefs among medical professionals (Cochrane & Cameron, 2013; Rehnström Loi, Gemzell-Danielsson, Faxelid & Klingberg-Allvin, 2015; Cheng et al., 2012; Acharya & Kalyanwala, 2012), medical students (Steele, 2009; Wheeler, Zullig, Reeve, Buga & Morroni, 2012; Sjöström, Essen, Syden, Gemzell-Danielsson & Klingberg-Allvin, 2014), nurses and midwives (Natan and Melitz, 2011; Ege, Akin & Altıntuğ, 2008). Limited studies can be found on human service professionals (Akers, Ely & Sparkes, 2008), when compared to health workers. In this study we aim to explore the opinions of Turkish university students, who are prospective human service professionals to work with the psychosocial aspect of abortion.

## **2. Aim**

The aim of this research is to determine the attitudes and related variables of students from human service professions departments (social work, psychology, psychological counselling and guidance) in a variety of universities in Turkey.

## **3. Method**

This research is a survey conducted during the period February-May, 2014. The sample consists of 485 undergraduate students from departments of social work, psychology and psychological counselling and guidance in a variety of universities in Turkey. This study uses a cross-sectional design through an online survey to explore abortion attitudes among university students. Volunteers were recruited from undergraduate students. Developed by the researchers, an online-questionnaire involving questions on socio-demographical characteristics (gender, age, educational status of parents, etc) and furthermore, the students were asked to state if they agree/not agree/neutral on 11 abortion related statements was used to collect the data. Informed consent was sought prior to participation of the students. The data were analyzed with SPSS Statistical Software Package, using descriptive statistics and chi-square test.

## **4. Findings**

Among the 485 students who are participating in our research 65.6 % (318) are women, 34.6 % (167) are men. The mean age of the participants is 21.01 (sd:1.93). 19.6% of participants are from department of psychology, 36.9% are from psychological counselling and guidance and 43.5% of them are from social work. 28.2% of respondents are first-year, 30.1% are second-year, 26% are third-year and 15.7% fourth-year students. Opinions of students about abortion are given in Table 1.

It is seen from the table that 22.7% of the students agree that abortion should not be allowed in anyway, and 57% took a neutral position for this statement. 57.1% of the students are unsure about performing abortions without any restrictions, 70.7 % of the students think that ending a life is only right to Allah (i.e. God), 51.3% of the students believe that all life is sacred, 50.1% of them agree that sexually abused women can have an abortion and 66.8% agree that individuals should make decisions about abortion by themselves.

**Table 1: Opinions of Undergraduate Students about Abortion**

Opinions		Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Abortion should not be allowed in anyway.	N	110	100	275
	%	22.7	20.6	56.7
Abortion should be made available without any restrictions.	N	111	97	277
	%	22.9	20.0	57.1
I believe that all lives are sacred and the unborn baby is precious.	N	249	126	110
	%	51.3	26.0	22.7
People has no right to end one's life, this right is only to Allah.	N	343	71	71
	%	70.7	14.6	14.6
Drug-addicted parents can have an abortion.	N	143	151	191
	%	29.5	31.1	39.4
Extremely poor parents can have an abortion.	N	111	92	282
	%	22.9	19.0	58.1
Women who are raped can have an abortion.	N	243	125	117
	%	50.1	25.8	24.1
Decisions about abortion should be determined by law.	N	186	112	187
	%	38.4	23.1	38.6
Individuals should make decisions about abortion by themselves.	N	324	73	88
	%	66.8	15.1	18.1

Also in the study, some socio-demographical variables are evaluated in terms of agreeing to the statement "Abortion should not be allowed in any way". These variables are gender, grade level of the students, mother's educational status, father's educational status, parental attitudes, number of siblings and having a romantic relationship (girlfriend/boyfriend) (Table 2).

**Table 2: Some Social Variables and Abortion Stance**

		Abortion should not be allowed in anyway				p
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Total	
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	N	56	67	195	318	.001*
	%	17.6	<b>21.1</b>	61.3	100.0	
Male	N	54	33	80	167	
	%	32.3	19.8	47.9	100.0	
Total	N	110	100	275	485	
	%	22.7	20.6	56.7	100.0	
<b>Educational Status of Mother</b>						
Illiterate	N	26	17	28	71	.013*
	%	36.6	23.9	39.4	100.0	
Primary school	N	57	52	141	250	
	%	22.8	20.8	56.4	100.0	
Lycee	N	10	10	28	48	
	%	20.8	20.8	58.3	100.0	
University and above	N	17	21	78	116	
	%	14.7	18.1	67.2	100.0	
Total	N	110	100	275	485	
	%	22.7	20.6	56.7	100.0	
<b>Number of Siblings</b>						
1 or 2	N	12	27	109	148	.000*
	%	8.1	18.2	73.6	100.0	
3	N	32	27	78	137	
	%	23.4	19.7	56.9	100.0	
4 and above	N	66	46	88	200	
	%	33.0	23.0	44.0	100.0	
Total	N	110	100	275	485	
	%	22.7	20.6	56.7	100.0	
<b>Attitudes of Parents</b>						
Oppressive	N	14	21	32	67	.091
	%	20.9	31.3	47.8	100.0	
Democratic	N	88	67	220	375	
	%	23.5	17.9	58.7	100.0	
Permissive and irrelevant	N	8	12	23	43	
	%	18.6	27.9	53.5	100.0	
Total	N	110	100	275	485	
	%	22.7	20.6	56.7	100.0	
<b>Have a Romantic Relationship</b>						
Yes	N	32	35	119	186	.026*
	%	17.2	18.8	64.0	100.0	
No	N	78	65	156	299	
	%	26.1	21.7	52.2	100.0	
Total	N	110	100	275	485	
	%	22.7	20.6	56.7	100.0	

$p < .05$

The ratio of male students (32.3%) participating in the statement “Abortion should not be allowed in any way” is higher than female students (17.6%) and this difference was found statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). There is no significant difference between agreement in this statement and the grade level of students.

Among the students who agree that abortion shouldn't be allowed, the ratio of the students whose mothers graduated from primary school (36.6%) is higher than the students whose mothers graduated from university (14.7%) ( $p < .05$ ).

However, there is no significant statistical relationship between agreement in this statement and the father's educational status. The ratio of students who have 1 or 2 siblings (8.1%) participating in the statement is lower than the students who have 4 and above siblings (33%) ( $p < .001$ ). There is no significant difference between agreement in this statement and the parental attitudes of students. Finally, the ratio of students who have a romantic relationship (17.2%) participating in this statement is lower than the students who do not have a romantic relationship (26.1%) ( $p < .05$ ).

## **5. Discussion**

In this study, we investigated the students' opinions on abortion and analyze the socio-demographical variables associated with their agreement to abortion allowance. To this end, the research sample comprises university students majoring psychology, psychological counselling and guidance and social work departments. The results of the study showed that most of the students (80%) either have no opinion on, or are against the allowance of abortion. Despite the discussions on abortion in the political diary, it is an important finding that most of the students declare no position on the allowance of abortion. Majority of the students took an anti-abortion stance, with religious references (by agreeing the item: People have no right to end one's life, this right is only to Allah). However in case of a rape, half of the students agreed that abortion should be allowed. A positive finding is that most of the students agreed that abortion should only be the decision of the woman. When considered together, there are three important results arising about the opinions on abortion; (i) students do not have a strong pro-abortion stance, (ii) students have strong religious references when talking about abortion, (iii) but they also have a women's rights stance, to some extent, about the decision of abortion. In other studies among university students, participants were found to be pro-life with a slim majority (Hess & Rueb, 2005; Carlton, Nelson & Coleman, 2000; Patel and Myeni, 2008). However among medical students, the rates for pro-choice stance increases (Steele, 2009; Sjöström et al., 2014; Gleeson et al., 2008). In a Turkish study among midwifery students, majority of the students (62%) disagreed with the statement that abortion was morally wrong (Ege et al., 2008). Scenarios relating to the mother was not a distinctive agent for the abortion notion, except for the case of rape. It is common that students usually represent a more positive attitude towards abortion in some social circumstances, mostly in case of rape (Natan & Melitz, 2011; Steele, 2009) and if the mother is an adolescent and the pregnancy was unplanned (Klingberg-Allvin, Tam, Nga, Ransjo-Arvidson & Johansson, 2007). Klingber-Allvin et al. (2007) report that even the students find abortion morally wrong, they agree that it is acceptable in the case of an unwanted pregnancy as the only solution for an unmarried girl. They describe this double view as a conflict of 'ethics of justice' and 'ethics of care' where they describe the general moral judgement in the former one and the professional carer perspective in the latter (Botes, 2000). We did not find a strong positioning among students with regard to this justice versus care perspective in various social circumstances related to women, but it was rather clear in the case of rape.

We did not investigate religious observance as an independent variable for abortion attitudes but the agreement to the item containing religious reference was rather high in our study (70%). Religious affiliation is a significant variable for abortion attitudes (Wheeler et al., 2002; Steele, 2009; Sjöström et al., 2014; Natan & Melitz, 2011; Akers et al., 2008; Gleeson et al., 2008). Health care providers are mostly found to make a distinction between their personal and professional attitudes towards abortion (Wheeler et al., 2002), however, it is possible to say that it is an early phase for our study group to make this distinction because of limited clinical experience and direct contact with client having abortion that will enable them to form their professional identity. In the study, we also considered some socio-demographical variables in relation with the agreement to the statement "Abortion should not be allowed in any way". The statistical analysis showed that gender, mother's educational status, number of siblings and having a romantic relationship had an effect on the abortion attitude. Age and the grade level of the students were not important variables for the abortion opinions but gender had an effect on being pro-abortion or not. Similar to Patel and Johns (2009) and Hatipoglu Sümer (2013), we found that females had more pro-abortion stance than males. However prior research does not find a consistent gender gap on abortion attitudes in general public (Lizotte, 2015) and among other population groups. Some studies among University students indicated that being male is related to pro-choice than being female (Carlton et al., 2000; Gleeson et al., 2008) and some other studies found gender variable insignificant (Altshuler, Storey & Prager, 2014; Steele, 2009).

Our finding that male students present a more anti-abortion stance may be closely related to the current Turkish policy on abortion, which employ a strong anti-abortion stance and incorporate the discussions highly dominated by males (Unal & Cindoglu, 2013). Lizotte (2015) points out the importance of controlling the religiosity in investigating the gender gap for supporting legal abortion, however we did not include the religiosity variable in this study to control the gender difference. In our study, among those who are against abortion, mother's educational status was lower than others. There are limited studies investigating the effect of parental variables on University students' abortion attitudes. Hess and Rueb (2005) state that variables such as income, employment and family values may moderate abortion opinions but in their study with college students, they found that family influence was minimal in determining the abortion opinions. We consider mother's educational status as a determinant for family income and socio-economical level. As Hans and Kimberly (2014) state, attitudes toward gender equality and abortion seem to be related and being a women in the paid labor force makes a difference in being pro-life or pro-choice. Therefore, our finding may be an extended interpretation of this statement among the families of students. Likewise, the number of siblings in the student's family may be another indicator of family values and socio-economical level. As the number of siblings increases, it was possible to see more anti-abortion perspective. Parental attitude was also investigated but has not been found to be an effective variable. Finally, the relationship status of the student was an important variable for abortion stance. Students who have a romantic relationship (a boyfriend/girlfriend) were more positive towards abortion.

This finding was also parallel with other studies among University students (Altshuler et al., 2014; Wheeler, et al., 2012). This study should be considered within some limitations. First of all, the study is conducted through online mail lists and therefore does not include all the students from selected departments and may not reflect the general tendency in the Country. Moreover, although the questionnaires were filled out anonymously there may be a social desirability bias. Despite these limitations, the study gives an emphasis to some important issues for human service professionals and abortion counselling services. Human service professionals, especially due to their possible direct contact with women who have to give abortion decision, have a critical position and should employ a rights-based approach and consider the issue within a human rights perspective. Self-determination principle should be considered as the key principle during their work with women. In our research, the majority of the students had other references, such as religion, rather than human rights perspective. Of course we should keep in mind that beliefs are not always followed by actions (Firmin, Hwang & Wood, 2007) and that it is not possible to know the degree to which students will present their current concerns to their future professional work with clients (Akers et al., 2008). We also expect that, forming a professional identity is not completed during the undergraduate studies, but it also requires a contact with client, and the work experience is important in that manner. Therefore it is not just to make assumptions from current opinions for the students' future professional life. But this finding should be regarded as an early sign for educators to include more rights-based perspective into the classroom discussions on abortion policies and services. We believe that, the reflections of the current political debates and high incidence of violence against women should have an impact on the opinions of the students. However, more efforts should be made for awareness-raising and more discussions in the framework of universal ethical principles should be conducted within the curriculum for human service professionals, including social work, psychology and psychological counselling and guidance.

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