

Report: Coerced Abortion

Introduction

“In my heart, I was like... I can't lie there and have them kill my baby. I can't do it.' And I called [my boyfriend] and I told him, and with choice words he said, 'No, you're going to do this. You don't have a choice. This is what's going to happen.' He drove me to the abortion clinic.”

—Ashley¹

The situation Ashley faced is more common than many people realize. Although 64% of women presenting for post-abortive treatment report feeling coercion to abort², the topic remains under-researched. This report examines the prevalence of coerced abortion and the situations that contribute to its existence, as well as examining what legal measures are in place to protect women from coercion and/or abuse.

Feminists for Nonviolent Choices is a pro-life, pro-woman organization that seeks to open minds to its philosophy of pro-life feminism: the belief that all people, by virtue of their human dignity, have a right to live without violence from conception to natural death. Coercing women to abort through violence, the threat of violence, or exercising other forms of control over women to coerce them to abort is a clear violation of a woman's right to live free from compulsion or fear.

Context and Methods

Sources used for this report include the Canadian Medical Association Journal, the University of Illinois Law Review, the Public Library of Science Medical Journal, the Elliot Institute

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

of Research, the Social Science & Medicine journal, the American Journal of Public Health, and various online news sites including Reuters, The Colorado Independent, and ThinkProgress.

The studies cited in this report relied mostly on surveys, therefore statistics are based on self-reporting from individuals who chose to participate. Survey audiences included women seeking post-abortive treatment, women presenting for abortion, men present at abortion clinics with their partners, and men recruited from community health centers.

What is Coercion?

Coercion occurs when another individual (typically either the father of the fetus or a pregnant woman's parents) uses force, the threat of force, or any form of manipulation or extortion in an attempt to compel a woman to abort. Coercion to abort can also come from other sources, such as from school counselors, employers, or clinic staff⁵.

One may argue that the current economic and political climate of the United States also imposes some level of financial coercion on pregnant women to abort, considering that 73% of women who abort do so from financial concerns²². The continued prevalence of gendered double standards and "slut-shaming" may also create an atmosphere of strong societal pressure to abort out-of-wedlock pregnancies. This report will be focusing specifically on social and emotional coercion with regards to direct interpersonal interactions between a pregnant woman and the people in her life, with the acknowledgement that financial pressure and pressure that the pregnant woman experiences from society at large may also exacerbate direct coercive situations.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

Types of Coercion

<u>Withhold Support</u>	<u>Emotionally Manipulate</u>	<u>Use Force or Violence</u>
Requiring a woman to seek an abortion as a condition for continued support or assistance that would otherwise be offered	Compelling a woman to abort through verbal or emotional harassment such as manipulation, guilt trips, lying, or put-downs	Using violence (or the threat of violence) to force a woman to abort. This may even lead to murder in extreme cases.
For Example:	For Example:	For Example:
Actually or threatening to deny financial aid, revoke a scholarship, terminate her employment, or evict her from the household unless she aborts	“A baby would ruin my life.” “I’ll leave you if you don’t abort.” “You’re being selfish and irresponsible.” “Everyone will know you’re a slut.” “You would be a terrible parent.”	Actually harming or threatening to harm the woman, her loved ones, her pets, or her possessions. Or, physically forcing a woman into the clinic

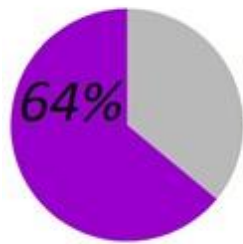
Prevalence of Coerced Abortion

Despite the notable lack of widespread sociological studies on the prevalence of coerced abortion, there are indications that a substantial proportion of women presenting for abortion are not making a truly “free choice” but are instead being pressured, bullied, or threatened into their decision.

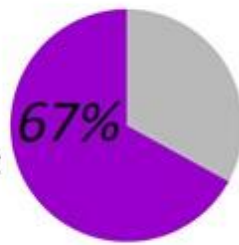
Data collected by the Elliot Institute of Research reveal that 64% of women presenting for post-abortive treatment report experiencing coercion to abort². 67% of women in the study expressed that they were not adequately counseled about abortion alternatives, and 65% showed signs of experiencing trauma². In addition, a study interviewing men who were present at an abortion clinic with their partners found that 45% admitted to urging their partner to abort⁴.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

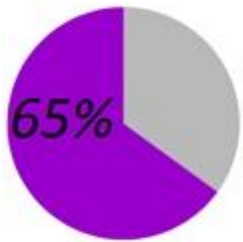
Among Women Presenting for Post-Abortive Treatment:



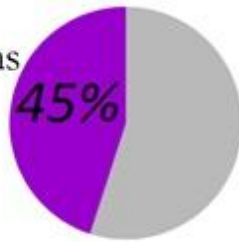
64% reported experiencing coercion to abort



67% expressed that they had not been adequately counseled about abortion alternatives



65% showed signs of experiencing trauma



In Addition,

45% of men present at an abortion clinic with their partner reported they urged their partner to abort

Data compiled by the Elliot Institute in "Forced Abortion in America: A Special Report."

A study surveying men from lower-income neighborhoods near Boston found that intimate partner violence was correlated with greater conflict regarding decisions to seek abortion and greater involvement by men in pregnancies that ended in abortion⁵. 33% of the 1,318 men in the study reported having been involved in a pregnancy that ended in abortion, and 4% of the respondents admitted that they “sought to compel” a female partner to have an abortion⁵.

The true rate of coercion, however, may be underreported by the respondents. The study’s authors concluded that women whose partners are abusive are more likely to abort because of fear of their partner; if so, their abusive partners may not admit to *directly* coercing them, when it was nevertheless the atmosphere of fear and control created by the abuse that compelled the women to abort. The study concluded that “[intimate partner violence] should be considered in the design of all services and policies related to family planning and abortion” and recommended screening⁵.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

In addition to the few scientific studies that examine coerced abortion, the personal experiences of individual women draw attention to this issue. Operation Outcry, a campaign run by the non-profit litigation firm The Justice Foundation, seeks to collect testimony of post-abortive women who were coerced into obtaining an abortion. In a little over a year, the campaign has collected over 5,200 testimonies—called “declarations”—on their website. These testimonies included examples of various types of coercion. One woman described how her parents evicted her from the house and demanded she abort when they discovered she was four months pregnant as a teenager²⁰. Another woman reported that her boyfriend pressured her into having an abortion and keeping it a secret from her parents²¹. Similarly, when the legislative government of South Dakota was considering a proposed abortion ban in 2005, 1,950 post-abortive women provided testimony of the coercion they experienced⁶.

Pro-life advocate Albany Rose was coerced into an abortion herself at sixteen when her father and stepmother threatened to evict her if she did not abort²³. Today Rose is a voice for the pro-life community. She reports that she receives an average of 30 personal messages each week—adding up to roughly 1,560 messages a year—from pregnant women of various ages who wish to keep their children, but are afraid to do so or otherwise feeling pressure to abort²³.

According to Rose, the women who contact her express struggling with people in their lives urging them to abort even more often than they cite financial concerns²³. Rose attests that “It’s almost always someone else or their whole family/friends/spouse telling them [an abortion] would ‘be best’ for them. That that is their ‘only choice.’”²³

Rose’s experiences with women facing crisis pregnancies indicate that the rate of coerced abortion could be difficult to quantify because many people pressuring a pregnant woman to abort may genuinely believe they are helping her.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

The Link between Coercion, Abortion, and Abuse

Recently, a major meta-analysis and review of the current scientific literature regarding abortion and abuse found conclusively that women presenting for abortion are much more likely to have experienced or be currently experiencing domestic violence or abuse⁷. This is particularly true for women presenting for *repeat* abortions; these women are more likely to have experienced abuse and report feeling high levels of stress in their current relationship⁸.

Furthermore, women who have experienced intimate partner violence are often subjected to reproductive control at the hands of their abuser⁹. An abusive partner will commonly attempt to control the outcome of a pregnancy, even resorting to violence if his demands are not met⁹. It has been documented that the chief target of intimate partner violence shifts to a woman's abdomen during pregnancy¹⁰.

It has also been shown that the leading cause of death for pregnant women is homicide—typically at the hands of their partner¹¹. Among men who have been arrested for murdering their pregnant girlfriends/partners, it has frequently been confirmed that the violence was done with the intention of ending the pregnancy¹². These men commonly report that they “did not wish to pay child support” as justification for the crime³.

Studies examining the correlations between these factors include a recommendation to screen for male reproductive control and/or domestic violence among women seeking an abortion in order to provide necessary counseling and resources and protect the bodily safety of women in abusive relationships^{8,9}. It has been shown that “Women welcomed the opportunity to disclose IPV [intimate partner violence] and be offered help”⁷ and a review of all available literature on the subject concludes that “TOP [termination of pregnancy] services provide an opportune health-based setting to design and test interventions”⁷.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

Legal Protections for Women Experiencing Coercion

Although studies examining the connections between abortion, coercion, and relationship violence have repeatedly recommended screening for abuse among women presenting for abortion^{5,7,8,9}, legislation on this topic varies greatly from state to state.

Currently, sixteen states in America have a coercive abuse prevention law of some kind, leaving thirty-four states with none¹³. The laws that do exist are myriad in nature and not all current legislation provides the same type of protection or to the same degree. Some laws make forcing a woman to have an abortion a specific crime (for example, by tricking her into taking an abortion-inducing drug or assaulting her with the intention of causing a miscarriage¹³). Other laws require abortion providers to screen for coercion, either through verbal questioning or by posting a sign which informs women of their right to obtain protection from coercion or abuse¹³.

Consistently, anti-coercion legislation is challenged wherever it is proposed by organizations that advocate for reproductive rights¹⁴. These organizations include the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Organization for Women (NOW), Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), and the Center for Reproductive Rights^{6,15,16}. Opponents of anti-coercion legislation have argued that such legislation does not protect against other forms of coercion as well (such as coerced pregnancy) and is putatively paternalistic in nature^{6,16}.

To provide an example of the debate: when the Coercive Abortion Prevention Act was passed in Michigan in December of 2012 (after being previously proposed at least three times), the ACLU and the Center for Reproductive Rights were vocal critics¹⁵. The new legislation required abortion providers to screen for coercion and domestic violence, and opponents of the bill argued that asking women if they were seeking an abortion voluntarily would “subject them to a type of interrogation”¹⁵.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

Depending on the state, women who are experiencing coercion to abort may have very few legal recourses available to them for this specific scenario. Women who are experiencing pressure to abort from an employer may find recourse under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978. This is an amendment to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act under which it is unlawful to terminate a woman's employment due to her pregnancy, and it applies nationwide¹⁷. Women who are being coerced by an abusive husband or boyfriend may seek whatever domestic violence resources are available in her location.

But unless the coercion a woman experiences can fall under another classification as well (such as abuse or discrimination), she may have trouble obtaining legal protection. What protections are in place for a student whose parents threaten to discontinue her education if she does not abort? What legal action can a post-abortive woman take after finding she has been misled into the abortion decision by a school counselor or clinic worker who provided her with false information? Such scenarios may not have an obvious answer and may depend greatly on the current political climate of the state.

It is also important to mention that although U.S. law currently holds that a father must provide child support even if he offered to pay for an abortion, there are those (mostly in "men's rights" groups) who argue that if a man has offered to pay for an abortion he should then be released from his obligation to provide child support¹⁸. Should this idea ever become law, it would essentially be *government-sanctioned* coercion of women, forcing pregnant women whose partners do not wish to be parents to either abort or face a life of single parenthood with no support or financial assistance from the child's father.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

Conclusion

Women who conceive unexpectedly find themselves in a uniquely vulnerable situation in which time is of the essence and decisions must be made. Friends, family members, partners, or coworkers may influence the outcome of the pregnancy by putting pressure on the pregnant woman. In some cases, this pressure can even take the form of coercion, in which a woman is threatened with the loss of financial status, support, education, employment, or even her bodily safety if she does not have an abortion. The leading cause of death for pregnant women is murder, usually at the hands of a partner and often connected with an unplanned pregnancy.

Research has repeatedly shown that presenting for abortion is correlated with relationship violence (particularly when presenting for a repeat abortion) and also that relationship violence often takes the form of reproductive control. Researchers examining the correlation between abortion and abuse have often recommended screening for abuse at abortion clinics^{5,7,8,9}. Despite these recommendations, very few states have passed legislation requiring abortion clinics to screen for coercion and/or abuse or provide women who have been coerced to abort with specific legal recourse. The laws that exist vary greatly from state-to-state, and no baseline level of coercion protection exists nationwide.

Groups in opposition to anti-coercion laws, such as the ACLU or Planned Parenthood, often claim such legislation violates women's rights by either failing to protect against other forms of coercion as well or by assuming women are incapable of making their own decisions.

However, by opposing such laws these putatively pro-woman groups seek to minimize the suffering experienced by victims of coerced abortion and neglect to help women in such a situation. Critics of such legislation have even claimed that coerced abortion is a problem that "doesn't actually exist"¹⁹.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

Yet it is clear that coerced abortion can and does happen, as 64% of women presenting for post-abortive treatment report being coerced² and thousands of post-abortive women have shared their personal testimonies of this fact. It is extremely important that all women be informed of their rights with regards to coercion. Given the link between abortion and intimate partner violence, it is especially crucial to screen for both coercion *and* relationship abuse at abortion clinics and provide women with the support and assistance needed to secure both their physical safety and the ability to continue their pregnancies without fear of retribution.

Feminists for Nonviolent Choices seeks to educate on the topic of coerced abortion and supports legislation that will address the concerns of women in need.

Notes

- The information in this report was gathered, collected, and presented as objectively and honestly as possible. Any mistakes or inaccuracies that may be present are due simply to human error or lack of available information and were not made with the intention to mislead or misrepresent.
- Feminists for Nonviolent Choices respects the existence of transgender identities and recognizes that not all individuals who are capable of becoming pregnant will identify as female. This report refers to all pregnant individuals as “women” in order to maintain consistency with the source materials, as the acknowledgement of transgender individuals is not yet commonplace in most forms of research and surveys.

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

- More information on Operation Outcry can be found at <http://www.operationoutcristories.org/>
- All research was done on the topic of coerced abortion in the U.S.A. and Canada and may not be applicable in other regions.

Dictionary of Terms

Abortion: 1. Induced termination of pregnancy, involving destruction of the embryo or fetus.

2. Any of various procedures that result in such termination.

Coerce: 1. To compel by force, intimidation, or authority, especially without regard for individual desire or volition

2. To bring about through the use of force or other forms of compulsion

3. To dominate or control, especially by exploiting fear, anxiety, etc.

Intimate Partner Violence: Physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a partner or spouse

Post-Abortive: Having undergone an abortion procedure in the past

Pregnant: The state of carrying a fetus or fetuses within one's womb

Pro-Life: The moral and philosophical belief that induced abortion is a violation of human rights

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

Sources

1. Quoted from Ashley's testimony, provided by Back to Life Canada <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggOujiq8A68>> and <www.backtolifecanada.com>
2. Rue, V.M. et. al. 2004. "Induced abortion and traumatic stress: A preliminary comparison of American and Russian women," *Medical Science Monitor* 10(10): SR5-16. Cited by the Elliot Institute in "Forced Abortion in America."
3. Elliot Institute. "Forced Abortion in America: A Special Report." Accessed on 05/16/2014. <<http://www.stopforcedabortions.com/docs/ForcedAbortions.pdf>>
4. Shostak, A. and G. McLouth. 1984. "Men and Abortion: Lessons, Losses, and Love" *New York: Preager Publishers*. Cited by the Elliot Institute in "Forced Abortion in America."
5. Silverman, J.G. et al. 2010. "Male perpetration of intimate partner violence and involvement in abortions and abortion-related conflict." *American Journal of Public Health*. 2010 Aug; 100(8):1415-7.
6. Siegel, R.B. 2007. "The New Politics of Abortion: An Equality Analysis of Woman-Protective Abortion Restrictions." *University of Illinois Law Review*. Vol. 2007.
7. Hall, M. et. al. 2014 "Associations between Intimate Partner Violence and Termination of Pregnancy: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Public Library of Science: Medicine*. Published 01/07/2014. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1001581
8. Fisher, W. A. et. al. 2005. "Characteristics of women undergoing repeat induced abortions." *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. 2005;172(5):637-41
9. Moore, A. M. et. al. 2010. "Male reproductive control of women who have experienced intimate partner violence in the United States." *Social Science & Medicine*. 70 (11): 1737-1744.
10. Hilberman, E. and K. Munson. 1978. "Sixty Battered Women," *Victimology*, 2: 460-470 (1977-78) Cited by the Elliot Institute in "Forced Abortion in America."
11. Horton, L.L. and D. Cheng. 2001. "Enhanced Surveillance for Pregnancy-Associated Mortality-Maryland, 1993-1998," *JAMA* 285(11): 1455-1459. Cited by the Elliott Institute in "Forced Abortion in America".
12. Tolman, R.M. 1988. "Protecting the children of battered women," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 3(4): 476-483. Cited by the Elliot Institute in "Forced Abortion in America."
13. Saunders, W. and M. Smith. 2014. "Only 16 States Stop Threatening or Intimidating Women into Abortions." *LifeNews.com*. Published on 02/25/14, accessed on 06/17/14. <<http://www.lifenews.com/2014/02/25/only-16-states-stop-threatening-or-intimidating-women-into-abortions/>>

FEMINISTS FOR NONVIOLENT CHOICES

14. Resnick, S. 2012. "Coerced-abortion laws part of new pro-life strategy." *The Colorado Independent*. Published on 08/30/2012. Accessed on 05/19/2014. <<http://www.coloradoindependent.com/124590/coerced-abortion-laws-part-of-new-pro-life-strategy>>
15. Kelleher, J. B. 2012. "Governor signs new law for abortion clinics in Michigan." *Reuters*. Published on 12/28/12. Accessed on 06/17/14. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/29/us-usa-abortion-michigan-idUSBRE8BS00N20121229>>
16. Culp-Ressler, T. 2013. "Forcing a woman to get pregnant isn't a crime, but domestic violence experts want to change that." *ThinkProgress.org*. Published on 12/16/2013. Accessed on 05/20/2013. <<http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/12/16/3070331/reproductive-coercion-domestic-violence-prevention/>>
17. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 2008. "Facts about Pregnancy Discrimination." Last modified on 09/08/2008. Accessed on 05/22/2014. <<http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-preg.html>>
18. Renzema, S. 2007. "Abortion and Child Support: Equal Rights for Men." Published on 02/18/2007. Accessed on 05/21/2014. <<http://voices.yahoo.com/abortion-child-support-equal-rights-men-200610.html?cat=25>>
19. Culp-Ressler, T. 2014 "5 Anti-Abortion Laws Offering Solutions for Problems That Don't Actually Exist." *ThinkProgress.org*. Published on 02/27/14. Accessed on 06/17/14. <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/02/27/3341041/abortion-restrictions-problems-exist/>
20. From the testimony of Theresa Bonopartis as provided to Operation Outcry. <http://www.operationoutcry.com/pdf/TheresaBonopartis-Sep2007_2.pdf>
21. From the testimony of Kelly Roy as provided to Operation Outcry. <http://www.operationoutcry.com/pdf/KellyRoy-June2008.pdf>
22. Finer, L.B. et. al. 2005. "Reasons US women have abortions: quantitative and qualitative perspectives." *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. 2005. Sep; 37(3):110-8
23. Rose, Albany. Personal correspondence on 06/26/14.