

Characteristics of Women Who Seek Induced Abortions in Developing Countries

Sophia Chae, Sheila Desai, Marjorie Crowell, and Gilda Sedgh
Guttmacher Institute

Abstract

In 2008, more than three-quarters of abortions occurring worldwide took place in developing countries. In the developing world, abortion incidence varies across subregions, due to differences in rates of unintended pregnancy, and in probabilities of terminating an unintended pregnancy. Our paper aims to understand the characteristics of women seeking induced abortions in developing countries. We use data from nationally representative surveys, national official statistics, studies of abortion patients, and other sources to examine whether abortion incidence varies by women's age, wealth, parity, education, and residence in more than 54 countries. Preliminary results based on evidence from Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon, and Ghana indicate that women who are young, wealthy, educated, and living in urban areas account for a larger share of all abortions and have higher abortion rates than their counterparts. These findings have implications for programs aimed at reducing the incidence and consequences of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion.

Introduction

Worldwide, an estimated 43.8 million abortions took place in 2008, with more than three-quarters of abortions occurring in developing countries.¹ In the developing world, abortion incidence varies widely across subregions. Even within countries, differences in abortion levels exist by population sub-groups. Differential abortion levels may stem from variation in the levels of unintended pregnancies, and the probability that a woman with an unintended pregnancy will obtain an abortion. This paper aims to understand the characteristics of women seeking induced abortions in developing countries. Knowledge of the characteristics of women who choose to get abortions can shed light on which subgroups of women are especially in need of services to help reduce the incidence and consequences of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions.

Data and Methods

The present study uses data from a number of sources, including national statistics, nationally representative surveys, community surveys, and studies of abortion patients, to examine the characteristics of women seeking abortions. We use national statistics in countries where official abortion data exist. Only a few developing countries compile statistics on abortions performed, and even fewer provide information on the characteristics of women who obtain abortions. In the countries with restrictive abortion laws, the national statistics are limited to legal procedures. As a result, this analysis also utilizes data from nationally representative surveys such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Maternal Health Surveys (MHS), and Reproductive Health Surveys (RHS), each of which include abortion data on women of reproductive age. We also incorporate data collected from community-based surveys, which are similar to nationally representative surveys but are limited in scope to a cross-section of women from a particular region/province, city, or urban/rural area. Finally, we use data collected in studies of abortion patients. In countries where abortion is legal, these studies typically include women who go to a health facility to seek an abortion, whereas, in countries where the procedure is illegal or highly restricted, they focus on women seeking postabortion care.

Our study focuses on data collected between 2000 and 2014. We examine characteristics of women seeking induced abortion in developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. For national statistics and studies on abortion patients, we use data on abortions that occurred in the same year that the data were collected. For nationally representative surveys and community-based surveys, we use data on abortions that occurred in the three year period before the survey was conducted, unless otherwise specified. Because some of the characteristics we examine are only measured at the time of the survey, we focus on recent abortions for this study. This also minimizes the possibility that characteristics changed between the abortion and the time of the survey.

Our study examines five different measures of abortion: percentage distribution of abortions, abortion rate (number of abortions per 1000 women), abortion ratio (number of abortions per 100 live births), number of abortions per 100 pregnancies, and percentage of women who had an abortion. Pregnancies are comprised of all births, abortions, and miscarriages. Using findings from life tables and clinical studies, we estimate that the incidence of miscarriage equals 10% of abortions and 20% of births.

We study whether these measures vary by women’s sociodemographic characteristics, including age, wealth, marital status, parity, education, and residence. Unless otherwise noted, we examine characteristics at the time of abortion.

We expect some level of underreporting in all of the abortion data, thus the rates, ratios, and percent of pregnancies that end in abortions will also represent underestimates of true incidence. If underreporting is not differential according to women’s characteristics, the percent distribution of abortions across characteristics will not be biased. However, these distributions may partly reflect the distribution of the underlying population of women of reproductive age.

Preliminary Results

Our preliminary results focus on three Sub-Saharan African countries: Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon, and Ghana, where Demographic and Health Surveys have collected data on recent abortions (in the three year period preceding the survey). The highest proportion of abortions occur among women who are young, wealthy, married, have secondary education, and live in urban areas (Table 1). In all three countries, close to half of all reported abortions occurred among women with two or more children. Ghana is the only country where 40% of abortions occurred among women without children.

In Table 2, we present abortion rates (number of abortions per 1000 women) for the three year period preceding the survey. Overall, we observe higher abortion rates among women who are young, have primary and secondary education, and are residing in urban areas. Abortion rates appear to differ by wealth, marital status, and parity across the three countries. While abortion rates gradually increase by wealth in Ghana, we observe no difference in abortion rates by wealth in Congo and Gabon. In Gabon, abortion rates are similar among married and unmarried women; however, in Congo and Ghana, abortion rates are higher among unmarried women. There are also differences in abortion rates by parity. In Congo and Gabon, abortion rates are highest for women with only one child while in Ghana, abortion rates are similar across parities.

Abortion ratios (number of abortions per 100 live births) are higher among women who are unmarried, educated, and living in urban areas (Table 3). We also observe a number of differences by country. In Ghana, abortion ratios are highest among women who are young, wealthy, and childless. In Congo and Gabon, in contrast, we find very little difference in abortion ratios by age and wealth and the highest abortion ratios among women with one child.

In Table 4, we present information on the number of abortions per 100 pregnancies. We only present statistics from Ghana because information on pregnancies was not collected as part of the surveys in Congo and Gabon. In Ghana, we observe a higher number of abortions per 100 pregnancies for women who are young, wealthy, unmarried, without children, educated, and living in urban areas.

Finally, in Table 5, we present the percentage distribution of women who had a recent abortion. In all three countries, the percentage of women who reported an abortion is generally higher among women who are in their twenties, more educated, and living in urban areas. Very little difference is observed by marital status. We do find, however, several differences in

characteristics by country. While a higher percentage of wealthier women in Ghana reported getting a recent abortion, no difference is observed by wealth in Congo and Gabon. In addition, women with one or more children are more likely to have had an abortion than women without children.

Next Steps

Our preliminary analyses reveal variation in abortion levels by a number of sociodemographic characteristics. Overall, we find that women who are young, wealthy, educated, and living in urban areas account for a substantial share of all abortions. As next steps, we plan to expand our analysis to include data from more developing countries. We will organize the estimates according to the type of data source and expected quality of reported abortions or biases associated with each source; we will elaborate on the strengths and limitations of this study and the data on which it is based; and we will discuss the policy and program implications of the findings.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of abortions, by women's characteristics, according to country and year

	<u>Congo 2012^b</u>	<u>Gabon 2012^b</u>	<u>Ghana 2007^c</u>
Total (Abortions)	766	538	397
Age			
15-19	20.3	19.5	23.7
20-24	33.2	30.7	33.0
25-29	23.5	23.3	19.9
30-34	13.0	15.4	12.0
35-39	7.8	7.5	8.9
40-44	2.0	3.1	1.9
45-49	0.3	0.5	0.7
Wealth ^a			
Lowest	7.8	14.6	7.6
Second	19.3	21.2	6.9
Middle	22.5	21.4	20.2
Fourth	25.7	22.5	30.0
Richest	24.7	20.3	35.3
Marital Status ^a			
Married	56.9	56.1	51.4
Unmarried	43.1	43.9	48.6
Parity			
0	22.6	26.0	40.9
1	27.8	29.4	14.4
≥2	49.6	44.5	44.7
Education ^a			
None	1.9	0.8	7.6
Primary	23.3	17.1	22.1
Secondary	70.8	73.7	67.9
Higher	3.9	8.4	2.3
Residence ^a			
Urban	80.2	89.2	60.7
Rural	19.8	10.8	39.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

^a Characteristic measured at the time of the survey.

^b Calculations based on the most recent abortion in the three year period before the survey.

^c Calculations based on all abortions in the three year period before the survey.

Table 2. Abortion rate, by women's characteristics, according to country and year

	<u>Congo 2012^b</u>	<u>Gabon 2012^b</u>	<u>Ghana 2007^c</u>
Age			
15-19	27.8	21.8	16.7
20-24	48.4	38.5	24.7
25-29	36.1	34.4	15.9
30-34	25.2	26.4	11.1
35-39	18.1	17.6	9.4
40-44	7.2	8.8	2.6
45-49	1.4	2.7	1.5
Wealth ^a			
Lowest	13.4	25.9	6.3
Second	28.6	28.1	5.5
Middle	31.6	25.5	14.5
Fourth	33.9	25.7	18.7
Richest	33.4	22.8	20.5
Marital Status ^a			
Married	26.6	25.4	11.1
Unmarried	32.4	25.6	19.1
Parity			
0	24.4	20.4	13.9
1	42.4	39.1	15.1
≥2	26.3	23.5	13.6
Education ^a			
None	9.3	4.6	3.9
Primary	28.5	20.4	15.0
Secondary	31.5	29.5	19.3
Higher	20.3	20.6	9.4
Residence ^a			
Urban	33.7	25.6	19.5
Rural	18.2	24.4	9.6
Total Abortion Rate ^d	0.8	0.8	0.4
General Abortion Rate ^e	28.8	25.5	13.9

^a Characteristic measured at the time of the survey.

^b Calculations based on the most recent abortion in the three year period before the survey.

^c Calculations based on all abortions in the three year period before the survey.

^d Total abortion rate refers to the total number of abortions a woman will have in her lifetime if current levels persist.

^e General abortion rate refers to the total number of abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age in a population per year.

Table 3. Abortion ratio, by women's characteristics, according to country and year

	<u>Congo 2012^b</u>	<u>Gabon 2012^b</u>	<u>Ghana 2007^c</u>
Age			
15-19	18.8	19.2	19.9
20-24	21.8	22.6	13.2
25-29	15.6	18.3	7.4
30-34	12.3	15.6	5.7
35-39	12.5	15.1	7.1
40-44	11.9	15.8	3.9
45-49	15.1	34.8	4.6
Wealth ^a			
Lowest	6.0	12.6	3.2
Second	14.0	17.8	3.0
Middle	18.6	19.4	9.7
Fourth	22.9	20.7	15.4
Richest	25.4	25.4	21.1
Marital Status ^a			
Married	12.3	14.6	5.6
Unmarried	31.5	29.1	41.8
Parity			
0	15.9	18.1	17.1
1	20.3	24.8	7.1
≥2	15.6	16.4	7.5
Education ^a			
None	4.6	2.6	2.2
Primary	12.7	11.8	9.1
Secondary	20.3	23.3	15.9
Higher	17.0	21.1	13.6
Residence ^a			
Urban	21.6	19.8	17.9
Rural	8.8	12.9	5.6
Total (Births)	5843	3856	4010

^a Characteristic measured at the time of the survey.

^b Calculations based on the most recent abortion in the three year period before the survey.

^c Calculations based on all abortions in the three year period before the survey.

Table 4. Number of abortions per 100 pregnancies, by women's characteristics, according to country and year

	<u>Congo 2012^b</u>	<u>Gabon 2012^b</u>	<u>Ghana 2007^c</u>
Age			
15-19	-	-	15.2
20-24	-	-	10.4
25-29	-	-	6.0
30-34	-	-	4.7
35-39	-	-	5.6
40-44	-	-	3.0
45-49	-	-	3.5
Wealth ^a			
Lowest	-	-	2.9
Second	-	-	2.6
Middle	-	-	7.8
Fourth	-	-	11.5
Richest	-	-	14.2
Marital Status ^a			
Married	-	-	4.6
Unmarried	-	-	25.2
Parity			
0	-	-	12.6
1	-	-	5.7
≥2	-	-	6.2
Education ^a			
None	-	-	1.9
Primary	-	-	7.3
Secondary	-	-	11.8
Higher	-	-	9.3
Residence ^a			
Urban	-	-	12.9
Rural	-	-	4.7
Total (Pregnancies)			5040

^a Characteristic measured at the time of the survey.

^b Information on pregnancies was not collected.

^c Calculations based on all abortions in the three year period before the survey.

Table 5. Percentage of women who reported having a recent abortion, by women's characteristics, according to country and year

	<u>Congo 2012^b</u>	<u>Gabon 2012^b</u>	<u>Ghana 2007^c</u>
Age			
15-19	6.6	5.2	2.2
20-24	20.6	18.2	6.6
25-29	20.5	17.6	5.3
30-34	14.9	14.2	2.9
35-39	9.5	9.2	2.5
40-44	6.0	7.0	1.5
45-49	2.7	2.9	0.4
Wealth ^a			
Lowest	6.1	10.9	1.5
Second	11.9	12.8	1.4
Middle	15.3	12.1	3.5
Fourth	14.5	11.2	4.5
Richest	15.9	11.4	4.9
Marital Status ^a			
Married	13.6	13.1	2.9
Unmarried	12.3	10.0	4.0
Parity			
0	7.9	7.3	3.6
1	17.5	15.6	4.6
≥2	13.7	12.7	2.9
Education ^a			
None	4.5	6.1	1.0
Primary	12.1	8.6	3.6
Secondary	14.1	12.9	4.5
Higher	13.5	12.9	2.8
Residence ^a			
Urban	15.1	11.9	4.6
Rural	8.5	10.2	2.4
Percentage	13.0	11.7	3.4
Total (Women)	10819	8422	10370

^a Characteristic measured at the time of the survey.

^b Calculations based on abortions that occurred in the five year period before the survey.

^c Calculations based on abortions that occurred in the three year period before the survey.

References

- 1 Sedgh, G. *et al.* Induced abortion: incidence and trends worldwide from 1995 to 2008. *The Lancet*, 2012, 379(9816), 625-632.