

# A PSYCHOSEXUAL STUDY OF ABORTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

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## INTRODUCTION

MAN, through the ages from primitive, non-literate societies to advanced, industrialized and sophisticated societies, has attempted to control conception by a variety of largely crude methods, failing which he tried to interrupt pregnancy. Although abortion was and is widely practised, attitudes toward abortion have ranged over a wide spectrum, from approval, bordering on encouragement, to total prohibition and condemnation.

The term 'abortion' in both the legal and obstetric context is generally applied to the premature expulsion of the product of conception, that is, before twenty-eight weeks of pregnancy (the period after which the foetus is considered viable). The W.H.O. Scientific Group on Spontaneous and Induced Abortion (1969) defines 'induced abortions' as those initiated by deliberate action, undertaken with the intention of terminating pregnancy; all other abortions are considered as spontaneous even if an external cause is involved.

The current trend towards liberalization of abortion laws in many countries throughout the world has generated a wealth of data on the incidence of abortion and it is revealed that abortion has been the most widely practised method of fertility control in virtually every country, no matter what its culture, politics or religion.

## Induced Abortion in Malaysia

The laws regarding abortion in Malaysia are stringent within the context of the Penal Code, where sections 312-316 and 511 define induced

abortion as an act that is illegal and punishable. Thus, the Malaysian woman, who is intent on getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy will need to seek the services of back-street abortionists and *bomohs* in unhygienic surroundings, using various roots, herbs and twigs as abortifacient.

The West Malaysia Family Survey (1966) revealed that at least 1% of the women admitted to having one induced abortion during their reproductive life. The Report on Maternal Health and Early Pregnancy Wastage in Peninsular Malaysia (FFPA, 1977) shows that 18% of the induced abortions were performed with the help of medicine and herbs by non-doctors.

## Abortion-Seeking Behaviour

Psycho-social research in human fertility-regulating behaviour is gradually attracting the interest of a wide spectrum of behavioral scientists. Available information on the characteristics of abortion-seekers is fragmentary and studies are scanty. Another dimension of abortion, that is, sexual relationship, is even more neglected. If one wishes to place abortion within its psychosocial context, it emerges as one stage and one alternative strategy in a series of events, decisions and pathways that begin with sexual relationship.

In the context of current social demand and in the absence of any such studies, it seems at present relevant to study abortion in its psychosexual context. This study therefore attempts to get a 'feel' of the phenomenon, preliminary information and to form new hypothesis for future empirical investi-

gations. Thus, it is purely an exploratory study which attempts to describe the various socio-demographic, sexual and personality characteristics of women, seeking abortion at the University Hospital, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

## METHOD

This study encompassed forty-two subjects picked randomly from those who came to seek termination of their pregnancies at the University Hospital during the period of July 1977 to October 1977. The data was obtained on two sets of questionnaires, a structured questionnaire containing items relating to (i) socio-demographic factors and (ii) sexual-relationship and the Eysenck Personality Inventory (E.P.I.), a standardized personality inventory. Interviews were conducted by the interviewers who were proficient in both the Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia dialects, besides English.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic Profile

#### Ethnic Group :

Women of all ethnic groups were recorded to have sought abortion to terminate their pregnancy. Table I shows that there were 17 (40%) Chinese,

15 (36%) Malays, 6 (14%) Indians and 4 (10%) Others.

#### Age Distribution :

The greatest proportion of women seeking abortion were in the 28-32 age group with a mean age of 29, which is slightly lower than the mean age of 31.1 years for all ever married females in the reproductive age in Peninsular Malaysia. The mean age for various ethnic groups is also shown in Table I.

#### Marital Status :

There were 37 (88%) married women, 2 (5%) were separated and 3 (7%) were single. Both the separated women and two of the single women were Malays, while the other single woman was a Chinese (Table I).

#### Education :

The majority of the women in the sample had some form of formal education. Twenty-three (55%) had gone to a secondary school, 3 (7%) had been to the University and only 2 (5%) were illiterate (Table I).

**Table I**  
**Distribution of Respondents by Mean Age, Marriage, Occupation and Education.**  
**(Socio-Demographic Variables)**

Item	Malay (N=15)	Chinese (N=17)	Indian (N=6)	Others (N=4)	Total (N=42)
(i) Mean Age	27	31	28	32	29
(ii) Marital Status					
Married	11	16	6	4	37
Separated	2	0	0	0	2
Single	2	1	0	0	3
(iii) Occupation					
Housewife	5	7	3	1	16
Working	10	10	3	3	26
(iv) Education					
None	1	1	0	0	2
Primary	5	4	1	0	10
Secondary	7	9	4	3	23
University	1	2	0	0	3
Other	1	1	1	1	4

### Occupation and Income :

Twenty-six (62%) of the women were employed and 16 (38%) were housewives (Table I). The largest number of subjects, that is, 17 (40%) came from the income group of \$150-\$350, 11 (26%) belonged to the bracket of \$351-\$500 and 8 (19%) came from the income group of above \$800. There were 4 (10%) subjects who came from the below \$150 income bracket.

### Religious Background :

All the subjects professed to belong to some religion, with one exception who called herself a free-thinker. Sixteen (38%) were Muslims, 11 (26%) were Buddhists, 9 (22%) were Christians and the remaining 5 (12%) were Hindus.

### Sexual Profile

The present study attempts to explore a few aspects of female sexual behaviour without formulating any hypothesis on the relationship, if any, between abortion and sexual behaviour as such. The results on sexual profile include data on the following aspects: pre-marital sex, forms and frequency of sexual intercourse, sexual satisfaction and orgasm, sexual frustrations and maladjustments and birth-control and sexual intercourse.

Table II  
Sexual Profile

Item	Yes	No	Total
Pre-marital sex	6	36	42
Orgasm experience	28	14	42
Enjoy sex	37	5	42
Husband ejaculates too quickly	20	22	42

### Pre-Marital Intercourse :

In the present sample, 6 (14%) subjects reported having experienced pre-marital intercourse and 36 (86%) denied ever having experienced pre-marital intercourse (Table II). There were no differences in terms of ethnic groups.

### Forms of Sexual Intercourse :

The most common position in this sample was the 'face-to-face' and more popularly known 'missionary' position. Sixteen (38%) practiced rear-entry position and oral-genital stimulation besides the common 'face-to-face' position.

### Duration and Frequency of Intercourse :

Six (14%) of the subjects reported the duration of intercourse to be less than five minutes, while 3 (7%) reported it to be more than half an hour. Twenty-one (50%) responded with the duration ranging from ten minutes to half an hour. Eleven (26%) reported the duration to be five minutes only.

Frequency of intercourse in itself does not tell very much on one's sexual responsiveness. However, the discrepancy between the actual and preferred frequency could be an important indicator. Twenty-one (50%) subjects reported the average frequency of intercourse per month to be 5-14 times, 13 (31%) had intercourse 1-4 times a month and 6 (14%) reported it to be 15-34 times per month. There was one woman who responded the frequency of intercourse to be 35 and above per month, and one subject who denied having any intercourse at all. There were no significant differences between the actual and preferred frequency of intercourse as reported by the subjects.

### Orgasm and Sexual Satisfaction :

In the present study, 28 (67%) women said that they had experienced orgasm sometime or other and 14 (33%) subjects denied ever experiencing an orgasm. There were 37 (88%) women who responded that they enjoyed sexual intercourse (Table II). However, there were only 15 (36%) women who achieved complete sexual satisfaction and 8 (20%) of the subjects had little or no satisfaction at all.

### Sexual Frustrations and Maladjustments :

This section includes items like - 'husband being too demanding', 'any unsatisfactory things in sexual-intercourse', 'desire for intercourse with other than husband', and 'sexual attraction towards own sex'. As shown in Table III, 16 (38%) subjects complained that their husbands were too demanding in bed. As for 'unsatisfactory things' in their sexual experience, 20 (47%) subjects said that their spouses ejaculate too quickly, 11 (25%) complained of too frequent intercourse, 8 (19%) objected to some of the practices during intercourse and 3 (6%) complained of difficulty in erection on the part of their spouses.

When asked whether they ever experience a desire for sexual intercourse with other than husband, 32 (76%) subjects said 'never,' 4 (10%) said that some times they had a desire for intercourse with other than their husbands and 6 (14%) reported this desire to be very rare.

As far as the attraction towards their own sex was concerned, 8 (19%) subjects admitted being sexually attracted to their own sex from 'sometimes' to 'frequently'. Among Malays, there were 7 (47%) women who said that they felt sexually attracted to women. None of the Indians or others experienced this attraction towards their own sex.

**Table III**  
**Sexual Frustrations and Maladjustments**

Item	No. of Responses
(i) <i>Husband too demanding</i>	
Yes	16
No	26
(ii) <i>Unsatisfactory things</i>	
Too little enthusiasm	2
Difficulty in erection	2
Ejaculated too quickly	17
Intercourse too often	9
Practices - objectionable	7
(iii) <i>Desire for intercourse other than husband</i>	
Frequently	0
Sometimes	4
Rarely	6
Never	32
(iv) <i>Sexually attracted to own sex</i>	
Frequently	2
Sometimes	6
Rarely	3
Never	31

*Birth-Control and Sexual Intercourse:*

Table IV shows that 33 (79%) subjects were practising some form of contraception and 9 (21%) did not use any method to avoid conception.

In spite of the fact that most of the women were using some form of contraception, 24 (55%) subjects felt unsafe during intercourse, 15 (34%) subjects said that it spoils the sexual pleasure and 19 (46%) subjects had definite fears of getting pregnant during intercourse.

Consistent and regular use of contraceptives is important for effective birth-control. Four (10%) subjects admitted that they frequently forget to take necessary precautions, 12 (28%) said 'sometimes' and 26 (62%) responded 'rarely' or 'never'.

Thirty-five (83%) subjects indicated a desire to have more children and only 7 (17%) subjects said that they do not wish to have any more children.

**Table IV**  
**Birth Control and Sexual Intercourse**

Item	No. of Responses
(i) <i>Methods Used</i>	
Pill	16
Condom	8
IUD	1
Withdrawal	3
Safe Period	4
Others	1
None	9
(ii) <i>Feel Unsafe</i>	
Yes	24
No	18
(iii) <i>Spoils Sexual Pleasure</i>	
Yes	15
No	27
(iv) <i>Fear of Pregnancy</i>	
Yes	19
No	23
(v) <i>Forget to take necessary precautions</i>	
Frequently	4
Sometimes	12
Rarely	15
Never	11

**Personality Profile**

The Eysenck Personality Inventory (Form A), was used to study the personality profile which measures the personality dimensions of Extraversion and Neuroticism as defined within Eysenck's personality theory.

Table V presents the mean scores for all the ethnic groups on the N (Neuroticism), E (Extraversion) and L (Lie) Scales - which show high standard deviations for all the groups.

On the N Scale, the Chinese scored the highest mean score of 13.29 which is higher than the mean score of 12.86 for the total group; though not statistically significant.

On the E Scale, the Malays scored the highest mean score of 14.31 which is higher than the mean E score of 11.37 for the total group. This difference was found to be statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). Indians scored the lowest mean score of 9.37 and when compared with the mean score for Malays, the difference is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

With the exception of Malays, the rest of the ethnic groups had higher mean score on the N than the E Scale and the mean N score for the total group was found to be higher than the mean score on the

**Table V**  
**Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Various Ethnic Groups (N=42) on**  
**Eysenck Personality Inventory (Form A)**

	Malay		Chinese		Indian		Others		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Neuroticism (N)	12.81	4.92	13.29	3.18	12.17	3.79	12.25	6.06	12.86	4.31
Extraversion (E)	14.31	3.99	9.65	3.37	9.33	4.82	10.0	1.22	11.37	4.36
Lie Score (L)	4.56	1.97	4.06	1.86	4.00	1.15	3.75	1.09	4.21	1.79

E Scale, though these differences are not statistically significant.

The mean L score for the total group was within the range required for the validity and reliability of the responses.

## DISCUSSION

### Socio-demographic Characteristics

Though the size of the sample was relatively small due to the legality of the issue and the nature of the study, the findings on the socio-demographic variables are comparable to the ones made by FFPA (1976). There is a higher proportion of Chinese and Indians when compared to the community group distribution, though the trend is not unexpected as the respondents were from urban areas where there is a greater concentration of Chinese and Indians. The majority of the women went through some form of education and were working women who came from lower income groups. Age and marital status is an important characteristic, as most of the women were married with an average age of twenty-nine and had children, which is contrary to their American counterparts as reported by Tietze and Lewit (1973) in their findings in "The Joint Program for the Study of Abortion" (JPSA) where the typical patient was young in her early twenties, single and pregnant for the first time. This nullifies the fallacy that only young, unmarried women seek abortion and abortion law reforms may encourage immorality. Though the majority of the women belonged to some religious group, the degree to which they practiced their religion was not assessed. Religion was found to be related to the rate of abortion in the FFPA Survey (1976) where those who actively practiced their religion had lower induced abortion rates.

### Sexual Profile

With the now ready availability of controlling conception by a multitude of techniques and devices as well as the concern over the need to control population, there are broad changes in human values

regarding sexual activity and freedom. Sex is not considered to be restricted for procreation alone. However, the question of female sexuality has rarely been explored and thus far there is no published work on the nature of female sexual behaviour in Malaysia. Being purely an exploratory study, an attempt has also been made to study few characteristic patterns of female sexuality in the present study.

Most of the women were frank and readily discussed the intimate aspects of their sexual experience. Many of them admitted pre-marital sex and experiencing sexual attraction towards their own sex in spite of the strong social and moral convictions. The women in the present sample are found to be quite active in their sexual life, and there is a fair amount of sexual experimentation. There is ample evidence that all cultures experiment with coital positions. Apart from providing variety, experimentation with coital positions helps make intercourse a more deliberate and purposeful event, instead of a mechanical act leading to procreation alone.

If orgasm is chosen as a unit to quantify human sexual behaviour, then almost one-third of the respondents had never experienced orgasm which is somewhat close to the Kinsey's findings where about 30% either never achieve orgasm or do so occasionally (Kinsey *et al.*, 1953), while Shere Hite (1977) in her nation-wide study of female sexuality found that for over 70% of the women, intercourse did not regularly lead to orgasm. However, it must be added at this point that sexual responsiveness and orgasm-capacity need to be considered separately. While the majority of the respondents enjoyed sexual intercourse, a considerable number of them were unable to achieve complete sexual satisfaction.

In the light of evidence mustered by Masters and Johnson (1966) that the physiological processes involved in the female orgasm are analogous to

those in the male orgasm, the fact remains that women have more orgasm difficulty and less sexual satisfaction. Beside the stringent sexual controls to which women have been subjected to from early childhood, it also appears from the study that sexual frustration is evoked by the poor performance of their partners, where almost half of the respondents complained that their partners ejaculate too quickly.

Another factor that makes the sexual act a serious menace, is the risk of impregnation. There are frequent assertions in the literature that fear of pregnancy inhibits women and prevents them from experiencing sexual stimulation positively (Landis *et al.*, 1950; Terman, 1938; Rainwater, 1965; Farber *et al.*, 1966). In spite of the fact that most women were using some form of contraception, a large number of them felt unsafe during intercourse and consequently found that it spoils their sexual pleasure.

Though the respondents were seeking the termination of their pregnancy, the majority of them showed a desire to have more children in the future and therefore abortion was found necessary only because of contraceptive failures.

#### **Personality Profile:**

The subjects were assessed on the personality dimensions of Extraversion and Neuroticism. Neuroticism (N) is defined as the "general emotional liability of a person, his over-responsiveness and his liability to neurotic breakdown under stress." Extraversion (E) refers to the "outgoing, uninhibited social proclivities of a person." (Eysenck, 1959).

The E.P.I. also incorporates a lie scale by the use of which the subjects showing "desirability response set" may be eliminated. However, such subjects in this study, though few, were retained since the tendency to have a high L score may in itself be an interesting trait (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1963).

The results on the personality inventory show the total sample to be more introverted and slightly more neurotic than the Eysenck standard group. These findings are comparable with those in the study by Olley (1971) who measured 370 women on Cattell's 16 PF test at Aberdeen and found that the personality pattern of women who sought abortion was found to be more "neurotic" than the general population. However, it would be premature to come to such a conclusion in the present study in the absence of a control group.

There were significant differences within the various ethnic groups on the two personality dimensions. Malays were found to be more extroverted

than others and they also scored a higher mean lie score indicating a tendency to respond in a more desirable manner. Chinese showed a higher mean N score indicative of an overall unstable, neurotic traits compared to the rest of the group.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In the absence of precedent studies on the subject, it is difficult to compare the personality profile of the abortion-seekers in this sample except to merely state the characteristics that were found to be significant in this study. Far from pretending to be a complete study in itself, this effort will hopefully provide a basis for further research into the subject. It is pertinent to note that some of the characteristics of abortion-seekers that were revealed in this study may have definite implications in terms of existing legislation on abortion in Malaysia. For instance, the significant percentage of married women who sought abortion despite wanting to have children in the future, may warrant a case for a limited legalization of abortion in this country. The high incidence of patients coming with incomplete and septic abortions further substantiates the need for such law reform.

A final point and amongst most significant which must be considered, is the fate of children born to women who have been refused an abortion. Psychiatric literature abounds with research and case-histories documenting the immediate and long-term effects of unwantedness upon the child, if not directly, it is communicated inevitably, though unconsciously, in his mother's behaviour and response.

#### **SUMMARY**

Forty-two women who sought to terminate the unwanted pregnancy were interviewed to assess their socio-demographic characteristics, sexual profile and personality profile. They were found to be from all the major ethnic groups, majority of whom were married, working women with secondary education and an average age of twenty-nine years. Though a large percentage of them professed to enjoy sexual intercourse with their husbands, many of them had not experienced orgasm, failed to derive complete sexual satisfaction and enumerated among some of the unsatisfactory things in their sexual experience like 'husband ejaculates too quickly.' Some of them acknowledged being sexually attracted to their own sex, most of them being Malays. Though the majority of the respondents used some form of contraceptives, many of them felt unsafe during intercourse and found it to be interfering with their sexual experience. On the personality test, they were found to have traits of 'Introversion' and 'Neuroticism' with an exception of Malays who were more extroverted than the rest of the sample.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the research assistants Miss Chan Lay Lan and Mrs. Phyllis Xavier for their invaluable assistance in interviews and analysis of the data, and Mrs. Kassim for interviewing the Malay speaking subjects.

We would also like to thank Encik Wan Ibrahim for providing us with a complete translation of questionnaires into Bahasa Malaysia and Professor Deva Dass, Department of Psychological Medicine, for his encouragement, and advice in the preparation of the questionnaires.

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