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Many in Survey Who Had Abortion Cite Guilt Feelings

March 19, 1989 | GEORGE SKELTON | Times Staff Writer

For a woman who has an abortion, the experience can be traumatic, leading often to feelings of guilt and sometimes even regret about her decision not to bear the child. The father of an aborted fetus typically is nagged even more by guilt and regret.

While the national debate over abortion usually is focused on the highly vocal activists who compete passionately on each side of the emotional issue, the public seldom hears from the women who actually have had abortions. But in a nationwide survey, the Times Poll caught a unique glimpse of their motivations, backgrounds, attitudes and anxieties--for instance, that more than half feel guilty about the abortion and one-fourth regret it.

Women who get abortions, according to this survey, tend not to be members of the underclass, as they often are portrayed. Compared to the average, they are better educated and have higher incomes--42% went to college and 35% earn more than \$40,000.

They also tend to be single, between the ages of 24 and 40 and live in metropolitan areas. They are not very religious. And a higher percentage of women in the West get abortions than do women in other regions.

One-fourth said that someone else in their immediate family also has had an abortion--a sister, a mother or a daughter.

Eight percent of the 2,533 women interviewed by telephone acknowledged having had at least one abortion. But Times Poll Director I. A. Lewis estimated that this 8% represents only a minimum figure for actual abortions, theorizing that many women are reluctant to admit having had one.

In fact, one-fifth of the women in this survey who admitted having had an abortion said that they never had told anybody about it before talking to the Times interviewer. But over half said they had informed their spouse or their parents, or both.

A "sense of guilt about having had an abortion" was felt by 56% of the women. And 26% said they now "mostly regret the abortion."

Among the 1,050 men interviewed in the survey, 7% acknowledged having been the father of an aborted child. Guilt was felt by almost two-thirds and regret by more than a third.

Only 39% of the women believed that abortion is "morally right." About as many, 37%, considered it to be "morally wrong" and 24% were not sure. Roughly a third agreed that "abortion is murder."

But, in answer to another question, roughly three-fourths declared that although "abortion is morally wrong," the decision about whether to have one "has to be made by every woman for herself." A "woman has the right to control her own body," they said.

For most of these women who have had abortions, the issues came down to matters of "human rights" and "a realistic solution--a necessary evil for a personal dilemma."

Asked why they got an abortion, the principal reason cited was that "I was too young." Other major reasons given were that the pregnancy posed a threat to the mother's health, that she could not financially support the child or that there was a flawed relationship with the father.

Before reaching the agonizing decision to have an abortion, the person whom the woman most commonly talked it over with was the father (43% of the time). Parents were consulted less than half as often (20%).

Nearly two-thirds of the women oppose the idea of requiring the natural father's consent before an abortion can be performed. But two-thirds agree that "minors should have to get their parents' permission before they can get an abortion."

More than two-thirds felt that even if abortions were outlawed, it would not reduce the number now being performed in the United States. They apparently felt that women with unwanted pregnancies merely would turn to back-alley abortions.

Asked whether it would be harder for an unmarried woman to rear a child out of wedlock, or give up the baby for adoption, or have an abortion, a majority (52%) said the "hardest" thing would be to hand over the infant to adoption. The easiest was abortion (18%).

A majority indicated they considered motherhood a burden, with 53% agreeing it "can sometimes keep a woman from fulfilling her true potential in life." These women rejected the thesis that "motherhood must always be a woman's most important and satisfying role." Only 32% agreed with the latter statement.

Two-thirds said they would "help" their own daughter obtain an abortion, but more than a fifth declared they would "oppose it."

One-third said that "abortions have encouraged people to become sexually promiscuous."

About half said they were not using any contraceptive when they got pregnant. And in the majority of cases (57%), both sexual partners were single.

The survey was conducted March 3-10. The margin of error was 3 percentage points in either direction.