



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Pro-Choice or Pro-Life, but Pro-Who?



AUSTRALIAN journalist Melinda Tankard-Reist, who draws upon the experiences of more than 200 women to write about the lasting emotional shock and trauma that follows an abortion, shares this excerpt from a woman named Elizabeth:

"The aftermath was a numbness I hadn't anticipated. I was numb, hollow, dead and so heavy with sorrow. The feeling didn't go with time as my delighted mother assured me it would. I grew morose, bitter, very sad, so heavy with sadness that I can't describe it.

I became different... cheap. I'd sleep with almost anyone. I drank heavily. I didn't care what happened to me and I tried several times to commit suicide.

For 10 years this went on. I cried every day... and I hated myself and everyone else. I used to dream about the child I'd lost... I love it, cherish it, yearned for its birth, missed it when it was taken from me and to this day, 26 years later, feel the tragic heaviness of time. My only consolation is that one day when I die, our souls may co-unite."

Psychologists now know the depression and guilt Elizabeth describes is not unique. Similar cases of post-abortion trauma are commonly found in women who were, for one reason or another, pressured into having an abortion, or who had experienced uncertainty or ambivalence about their choice to abort. Why is this important?

The emotive debate

The issue of abortion can be seen in the perennial debate between the pro-life and the pro-choice groups, especially in the United States. Although we in Singapore are spared these open debates, it does not mean that the conversation is free of tension when Singaporeans discuss the issue.

Pro-life statements such as "this is plain murder of a human being"; "life begins at conception"; "you are killing your own child"; or "what kind of mother are you?" may sometimes be heard in such discussions.

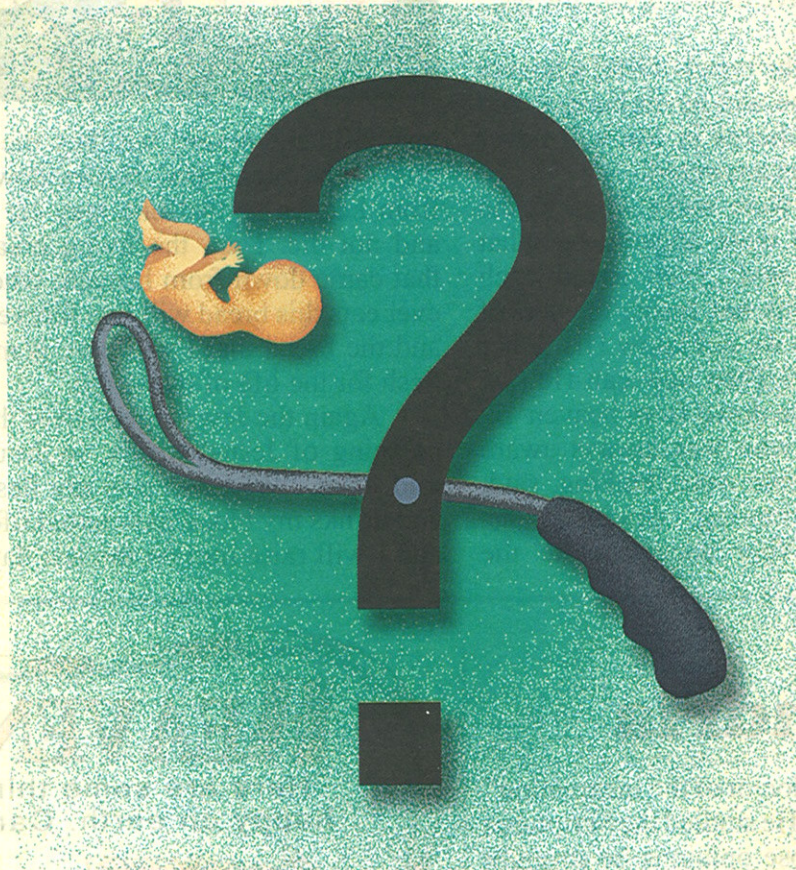
On the flip side, pro-choice advocates might counter with "it's just a blob of cells and not yet a human being"; "it's simply a toss-up between the right of the mother and right of the child, and in this case, since the mother has much more at stake in her life, the mother's right to choose is always more important than that of the child"; or "it is my life and you do not have a right to tell me what to do with my life".

Both sides often end up hurt and angry without any resolution on the issue.

Misunderstanding each other

Another look at the issue may reveal that it is a case of each party misunderstanding the other.

Those who are pro-choice are often thought to be anti-life. Yet, in actual fact, they support abortion not because



Today's article in this continuing series on Values by the Catholic Medical Guild and Caritas Singapore looks at the emotionally charged debate over abortion.

they are so, but because they want women to make their own choices and have their dignity respected.

They argue that if a woman discovers that she is pregnant at a time when she faces tremendous pressures against having the child – financial, health or family problems – should she not have the right to decide what is best for her?

On the other hand, those who preach against abortion can be misrepresented as uncompassionate and uncaring, oblivious to the real difficulties that some mothers face.

In truth, however, most of those against abortion are not puritans who live to condemn others, but genuinely care for the women because they know that going through with the abortion can harm the woman in more ways than one.

Abortion hurts

First, there is physical harm. Though the risk is small, the procedure may potentially cause severe bleeding, infection, perforation, subsequent infertility, or even death, especially if done illegally and in non-sterile conditions.

Then, there is the psychological and emotional trauma as Elizabeth described. The experience of depression on the "anniversary" date of the

abortion is well-documented in books and online. Thousands of women are anonymously sharing their sufferings in websites set up for those with abortion-related trauma.

There is a third dimension of harm: spiritual harm. The act of abortion is the taking of a life in the womb. The mother has to bear the consequences of her choice – deep-seated guilt, anger, resentment or unforgiveness – forever.

Of course, some deny that abortion is the killing of a child. They claim the embryo is not yet a person and therefore no killing takes place. Yet, the increasing awareness of post-abortion trauma tells us there may be something profoundly wrong about the act of abortion.

Not pro-life or pro-choice but pro-woman

Seen in this light, the pro-lifers and pro-choicers have both been misunderstood.

The truth of the matter is that both are really pro-woman: one group wants greater respect for women's freedom, whereas the former focuses ultimately on the good of the woman.

Yet, a truly "pro-woman" approach must necessarily ask this question: Is the quick-fix solution of an abortion worth it, given the harm that could be inflicted on the woman and her child?

Abortion in a Nutshell

What It Is

Abortion is often used to mean the intentional termination of pregnancy by killing and expelling an embryo or a foetus. Technically, this is induced abortion, as abortion may also be spontaneous (also known as a miscarriage).

The Current Landscape

Laws pertaining to abortion are diverse. Many countries (eg United States, United Kingdom) in which abortions are legal require certain criteria to be met for an abortion to take place. In other countries (eg Chile, Bangladesh) where abortions are normally illegal, abortions may be allowed in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the pregnant woman's health.

Singapore legalised abortion in 1970 with the Abortion Act. Anyone can request the procedure provided they are of sound mind and understand the risks and details of the procedures. There is no defined age limit, nor is there a legal requirement for parental consent for minors. The legal time limit for abortion is 24 weeks into the pregnancy.

Worldwide, it is estimated that there are 42 million abortions annually, of which about 20 million occur unsafely. In Singapore, about 12,000 foetuses (24 per cent of pregnancies) are aborted every year, with half of these from married women.

Pro-Choice Arguments

■ **Woman's right.** It is the mother's body – she should decide what happens.

■ **Unwanted babies.** There are already too many unwanted babies in this world. We should not add more. Reasons why a baby may be unwanted: pregnancy caused by rape or incest, baby will have severe disabilities, mother is too young, and parents are poor.

■ **The foetus is not a person.** The baby cannot yet reason and should not be regarded as a person.

■ **Abortions are natural.** Miscarriages do happen naturally. It is not a big deal if induced abortion also happens.

Pro-Life Arguments

■ **Abortion is murder.** Life begins at conception. Abortion is the deliberate act of taking away that life.

■ **Rights of baby.** No civilised society permits one person to intentionally harm or take the life of another person. A baby, no matter how small, is a person. Personhood is not defined by the ability to reason. If it were, then wouldn't it make it legal to terminate the lives of those who are in a comatose state or who are severely mentally retarded since they have little or no rational ability?

■ **Adoption as alternative.** Adoption is a viable alternative to abortion and accomplishes the same result. There are many couples who want to adopt and are unable to.

■ **Medical risks.** An abortion can result in medical complications. An abortion is actually medically more risky than having the child.

■ **Societal consequences.** Abortion is being used as another form of, or backup to contraception. It fosters a permissive society with consequences of higher incidents of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS.

What the Church Teaches

■ **Life begins in the womb.** "From the time the ovum is fertilised, a life is begun which is neither that of the father or the mother; it is rather the life of a human being with its own growth... The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception, and therefore from the same moments, his rights as a person must be recognised among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life."

(Evangelium Vitae, 60)

■ **Procured abortion is killing a human being.** "Procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means that it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth."

(Evangelium Vitae, 58)

■ **Willful abortion is a sin.** "Direct abortion, that is abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."

(Evangelium Vitae, 62)