

Awareness about Abortion among the Students in Malaysia

DOI: 10.52629/jamsa.v10i1.423

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Abstract:

Objectives Malaysia's law and regulation on abortion ties in closer to the Islamic beliefs which vary from western countries such as the United States. However, misinformation and anti-abortive myths are heavily propagated through channels such as family and friends. This research aims to investigate the students' knowledge of abortion laws and to discern between the facts and myths concerning abortion.

Study design This was a cross-sectional study of English-speaking students aged 18 and above in Malaysia. Data was collected and interpreted through online resources such as Google Forms, Google Sheet & Google Feedback. This investigative study focuses on primary questions catered towards abortion.

Results Based on the results of 195 students, majority (113/195; 57.9%) felt that it would be illegal for her to get an abortion if mother is healthy, while (112/195; 57.4%) felt that if her life, or was the result of rape, or was the result of incest, it would be legal for her to get an abortion. For three out of the assessed myths, students are unable to discern and remain uncertain. Most students (92/195; 47.2%) are personally against abortion and feels that the government should not prevent a woman from making the decision herself. While (85/195; 43.6%) believe that having an abortion is morally acceptable and should be made legal. The remaining (18/195; 9.2%) believes that abortion is morally wrong and should be made illegal.

Conclusions Malaysian students have a very minimal level of comprehension regarding the country's abortion laws, all the while remaining unclear of the misconception and facts of abortion.

Implications: Present abortion policies and guidelines will remain redundant unless they are actively endorsed to HCPs and incorporated into legal medical facilities as well as incorporating sexual education into curricular activities, making it vital.

Keywords: Abortion Awareness, Malaysia, Students, Abortion, Awareness

Introduction

Pregnancy can be a time of joy, hope, and excitement for a mother, but it can also be a period of tremendous fear and stress since it can be dangerous for both the mother and her child, as it is a life-changing experience for the majority of women. This is true regardless of whether the pregnancy is intended or unplanned.

Abortion may be a course of action to an unwanted pregnancy. The consensus is that society would allow abortion in "hard" conditions, such as sexual assault, incest, or danger to the pregnant woman's health and welfare, in which case abortion may be performed. But not in milder circumstances such as economic difficulties, resentment towards the unborn child, potential birth deformities, or contraception malfunction. Although abortion can be done for a variety of causes, one of the most common is when a woman's health is in jeopardy.

The topic chosen is an unplanned pregnancy. An unwanted pregnancy is defined as a pregnancy that was not planned for or not desired by either of the couple at the time of conception. On some occasions, it is due to an abnormality of the fetus or of an illness in the mother (1). There will be 3 outcomes from an

unwanted pregnancy, which would be the continuation of pregnancy, abortion, or unsafe abortion.

Abortion is described as the removal of an embryo or fetus that is in the stage where it is incapable of independent survival (500 gms or 22 weeks' gestation) (1). Natural cases without the intent to terminate the pregnancy, it would be called a spontaneous miscarriage. However, if there is intent of terminating a pregnancy due to medical reasons, such as an infection, an ectopic pregnancy, or postpartum psychosis, where the gynecologist deems that the pregnancy threatens the wellbeing of the mother, abortion can be allowed in a case-by-case basis (2).

In Malaysia, abortion law states that the termination of pregnancy is permitted to save a woman's life and preserve her physical and mental health. It is stated in the Penal Code 574 Section 213, which was amended in 1989 (2).

However, that is the only exception for abortion in Malaysia. Therefore, abortion in Malaysia is mostly illegal and the issues arise when there are no facilities to provide care and consultation to couples or mothers that have unwanted pregnancies with invalid complications like social stigma and economic difficulties.

Unfortunately, the abortion mortality rate accounts for 13% of global maternal mortalities (1). This is due to the combination of restrictive laws and unsafe abortion procedures done by untrained practitioners that may chronically disable or cause death to the mother (1).

Federation of Reproductive Health Associations, Malaysia (FRHAM) reported that (5,512/90,032; 6.1%) of abortion done in Malaysia were by the younger population aged less than 24 years old (3). There are possibilities that there are some areas in which the younger population of Malaysia lacks in the understanding of the laws: the interpretation of the law about abortion and whether the law allows abortion; if so, what kind of circumstances? (4). Will knowledge and understanding lower the incidence of mortality induced by unsafe abortion? Thus, this next section of the research would lead to the aims and objectives of the research to assess the level of understanding of abortion of students and their personal attitudes towards the matter.

Methodology

Survey Background

To assess the level of understanding regarding abortion among students

in Malaysia, a survey is conducted online via Google Forms.

Survey Goals

The purpose of the research is to assess the level of knowledge among students regarding the terms, medical facts, abortion laws in Malaysia, myths regarding abortions and personal attitudes about abortion.

Survey Target Population

The required data was collected from 195 students in Malaysia over the age of 18 years old.

Survey Content

The relevant data were gathered using an existing five-part survey template that was sampled and changed accordingly (5). The first part of the survey included demographic information (sex and age group). The second, third and fourth parts were respectively related to assessing the knowledge regarding abortion laws in Malaysia, abortion myths and finally the search terms used on Google. The fifth part of the survey summarizes the personal attitudes to abortion and experiences on the matter. The survey consisted of 19 questions. The first 9 questions (yes/no/don't know) were related to the level of awareness of the abortion law in Malaysia followed by 2 questions about medical insurance coverage for

abortion. The next 5 questions were statements that were closer to the truth about abortion where 2 opinions were to be chosen and 1 (don't know/not sure) was given. Next, 1 open-ended question was asked on the term used for searching abortion clinics on the internet. Lastly, 2 questions about personal attitudes and experiences on abortions were asked.

Survey Timing

The survey was conducted for a period of 1 week from the 13th of April 2022 to the 20th of April 2022.

Survey Method

The survey was conveyed online via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram & Instagram which directs responders to the Google Form link containing the survey.

Survey Data Collection

Google Forms Feedback & Google Sheets.

Survey Language

English

Results:

The total number of respondents is 195 from the survey. Out of 195, 124 are female and 71 males.

Count of Sex

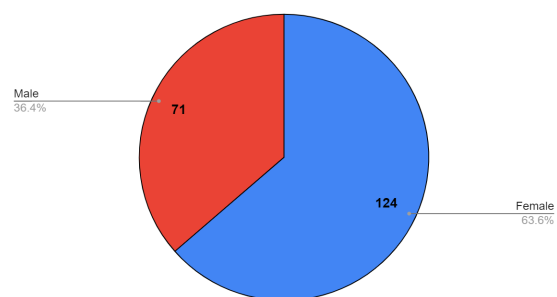


Figure 1 Count of Sex

The majority of the respondents are aged between 18-30 years old (n=178), with the highest number of respondents from the individual age group of 22 years old. Minority groups are aged between 31-65 years old (n=17).

Age of responders

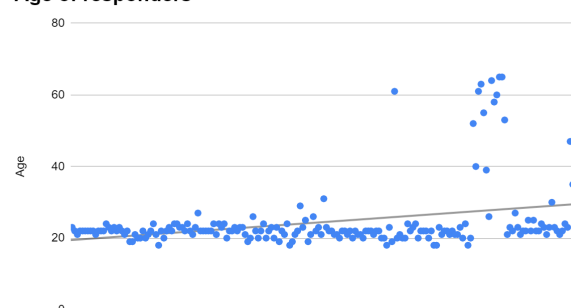


Figure 2 Age of Respondents

The purpose of constructing this set of questions regarding abortion laws was to gauge Malaysian students' level of understanding concerning abortion law and it might have an effect on the public.

The majority (113/195; 57.9%) felt that it would be illegal for her to get an abortion if mother is healthy, while (112/195; 57.4%) felt that if her life, or was the result of rape, or was the result of incest, it would be legal for her to get an abortion. Next, the majority (100/195; 51.2%) believes that there is a law that requires a doctor to review a script or specific information with women prior to an abortion. Majority (103/195; 52.8%) believes that there is a law that requires minors to get parental consent and/or notify their parent(s) before an abortion.

However, respondents (113/195; 57.9%) are uncertain whether there is a law requiring women to have an ultrasound before an abortion and (89/195; 45.6%) are also unclear whether there is a law that requires a married woman to have their husband's consent before an abortion. Majority (144/195; 73.8%) does not believe that it is legal to have an abortion based on whether the woman wants a boy or a girl and (93/195; 47.7%) thinks it is illegal to have an abortion because the fetus has Down syndrome. Lastly, majority (110/195; 56.4%) were not sure if there is a law that requires a woman seeking an abortion to wait a specified period between receiving counseling and when the procedure is performed.

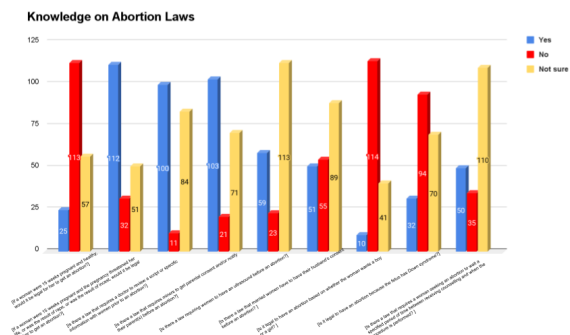


Figure 3 Knowledge of Abortion Laws

Results showed (58/195; 29.7%) answered correctly 'No' to [Does medical insurance cover abortion]. Majority of the answers were (81/195; 41.5%) 'I don't know'.

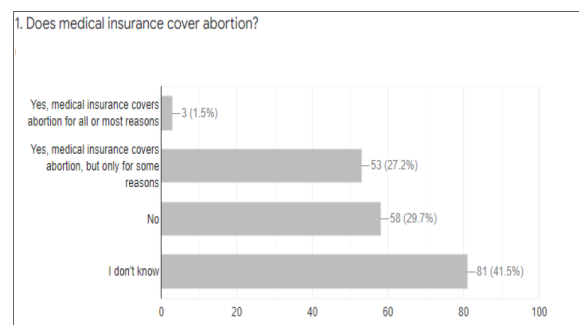


Figure 4 Responses for the question 'Does medical insurance cover abortion?'

Results showed (58/195; 29.7%) answered correctly 'No' to [Does medical insurance cover abortion]. Majority of the answers were (81/195; 41.5%) 'I don't know'.

A follow-up question [If answer to question 1. was 'Yes, medical insurance covers abortion, but only for some reasons', under what circumstances does it cover abortion?] and the majority (26/53; 49.1%) answered 'All of the above'.

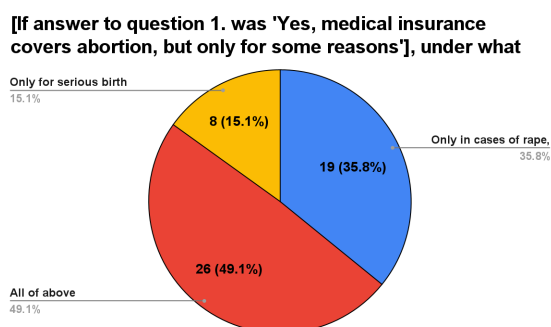


Figure 5 Follow-up result

Results showed the majority of students answered 'Not sure' for the following 3 questions about (safety, breast cancer and regret) with 36.4%, 53.8% & 43.6% respectively. Majority answered inaccurately (66.7%) to the question relating to depression and lastly the majority answered accurately for infertility questions (35.4%).

Google Term Results: Most average terms used: were "Abortion clinic" (17), followed by "Abortion clinic near me" (11). The word 'Abortion' and 'Clinic' was the most common word used in the result. The frequency of the word 'abortion' (165/195; 84.6%),

and 'clinic' was used (126/195; 64.2%) in the response registered.

Most students (92/195; 47.2%) are 'personally against abortion and the government should not prevent a woman from making the decision herself'. While (85/195; 43.6%) believe that 'having an abortion is morally acceptable and should be made legal'. The remaining (18/195; 9.2%) believes that abortion is morally wrong and should be made illegal.

Personal Attitude: Which of the following statements about the issue of abortion comes closest to your own view?

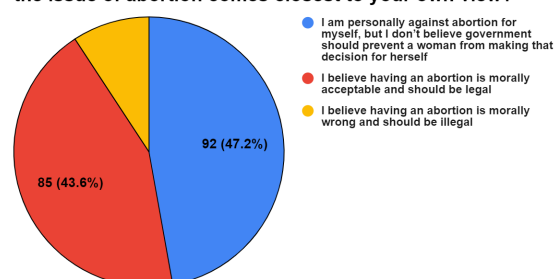


Figure 7 Personal Attitude towards abortion

Results showed that the majority (178/195; 91.3%) have not accompanied someone else to obtain an abortion.

Count of Have you accompanied someone else to obtain an abortion?

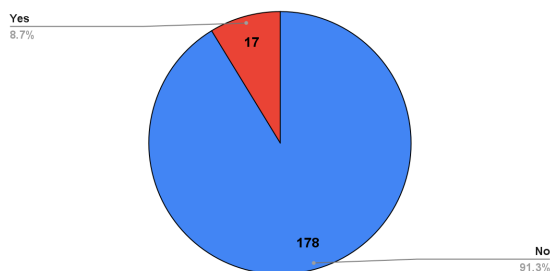


Figure 8 Personal experiences

Discussion

Only several students were precise in their facts pertaining to the security and legal implications of the matter at hand in this evaluation of students over the age of 18 based on their understanding of Malaysian abortion laws. Major national research in the United States yielded identical findings (5).

Nearly identical to other investigations, our results of the research demonstrate that students have a minimal level of understanding of abortion laws. The bulk of students are uninformed that abortion is prohibited in Malaysia, and they are also oblivious that medical coverage does not support abortion. The lack of information about abortion services and abortion opinions continues to be a taboo topic in Malaysia, therefore students are incapable of discerning appropriately.

Not only that, but doctors also working in the government healthcare industry were accused of being condescending and seeing abortion as a heinous crime (6). Women were instructed and warned to keep the pregnancy going and then offer the kid up for adoption shortly afterwards. Sexual education, which includes birth control procedures, was not taught in Malaysia until recently (6,7). In biology, ethics, and religion classes, only a few parts of sexual education were explored (6).

Other comparable survey investigations that were done based on peer research had revealed that acquaintances were the key resource of knowledge, regarding women's reproductive health, for 64.4 percent of high school seniors in a study of 1,034 secondary students (6). Since the majority of the women in this study seemed to obtain their information through friends and family, it's possible that inaccurate sexual and reproductive health information was disseminated through these channels (6).

There have been previous investigations on the myths and misconceptions and actual truth surrounding abortion (5). In line with other findings, the statistics reveal that irrespective of gender, students'

perceptions of abortion's impact on women's safety, psychological well being, and sexual wellness are mingled with incorrect anti-abortion beliefs and clouded with ambiguity. A significant proportion of students in the survey believed that abortion causes detrimental psychological effects like depression, although this has been debunked in both the short and long haul (5).

This research, although produced hard facts and collected information, still has several drawbacks. Firstly, attributable to the fact that it is still during Covid-19 travel mobility and interpersonal limitations, the quantity of the intended demographic was quite small. This rendered it challenging to acquire satisfactory conclusions. Furthermore, because respondents' responses revealed poor standards of healthcare awareness and education, the research findings were perhaps skewed toward 'Not sure' because survey participants didn't comprehend some of the phrases employed in the questionnaire.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that we live in an era where knowledge is freely attainable at our disposal, the bulk of Malaysians are still unsure about the country's abortion policies and guidelines. There appears to be a

lack of understanding and a conventional societal prejudice that has not been alleviated, and when younger generations assume leadership roles, the ancient mentality persists.

Amid efforts to promote knowledge and understanding and set rules on abortion, women's accessibility to legal abortion facilities in Malaysia still needs to be improved. It also shows Malaysia's pledge to advance women's privileges to universal sexual and reproductive health treatments. Current protocols will be ineffective unless they have been aggressively publicized to HCPs and integrated into real medical treatments, as well as embedded into sexual education essentials. Hospitals and medical practitioners must also be qualified and endowed with the necessary information, capabilities, and funds to provide secure abortion procedures.

Malaysians must also be enlightened and notified of their constitutional privileges to protected, ethical abortions, as well as where to locate these facilities. In addition to the Ministry of Health, continuous intergovernmental endeavors to overcome these hurdles and increase women's accessibility to legal abortion services in Malaysia must engage the law enforcement

agencies, social ministries, nursing and medical institutions, and women/health NGOs.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Availability of data and material

Not applicable.

Conflict of interests

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

A Ambi was the sole contributor of the manuscript

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434