

Legal Abortions in Finland and Some Other Selected Countries

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Introduction

Abortion is probably the oldest and most common method of preventing an unwanted birth. Personal, religious, and social reasons have driven women to resort to abortion in every part of the world at different times. Even though they do occur, abortions have always been the focus of controversy. Some people have been for abortion, some against, and often for the exact same reasons.

Even in modern developed societies people are still divided into two opposing groups according to their attitude towards abortion. Evidently, abortion will always divide people because it is a moral question. It is neither purely a family problem nor a topic of family policy. Abortion is a basic question of human and civil rights, and is also of political importance (Berger-Berger, 73). In the same way as euthanasia arouses controversial feelings at the end of life, abortion arouses them when life begins.

Extreme groups with opposing attitudes towards abortion are represented by pro-life and prochoice activists. In the United States, especially, these groups are joined in an intense conflict. However, they represent a relatively small part of the population. The great majority of the population is much more moderate in its attitude towards abortion.

In most parts of the world abortions have increased during the last few decades. Over 60 percent of the world population lives in countries where abortion is allowed at the request of the pregnant woman or on social grounds. These countries are situated primarily in Europe, North America, and Asia. On the other hand, a good one third of the world population lives in countries where abortion is totally prohibited or can only be obtained to protect the life and health of the woman. Countries of this kind are numerous in South and Central America, in Muslim areas, of Asia and in Africa; some are found in Europe (Tietze, 1983, 7).

The fact that the abortion law has been liberalized in many countries during the last few decades is considered a sign that abortion has been accepted as a part of family planning. It is true that abortion is generally regarded as a secondary contraceptive method, a means which should be resorted to only when other methods have failed or have not been available. Some countries, though, have used abortion as an actual contraceptive method to achieve their population goals. This has been the case especially in countries where the motives of the population to limit family size have been weak and reliable contraceptive methods have not been available. In some countries this has even led to abortions by force.

The goal of family planning is for every child to be born a wanted child. For this reason resorting to abortion at the early stage of pregnancy has sometimes been considered a better solution than giving birth to a child in circumstances which would cause serious mental, economic, and social problems for both the mother and the child. Although abortion is never the best solution for preventing an unwanted birth and contraception should be increasingly emphasized, the possibility of having an abortion has, however, been seen to lead to the easier adoption of other contracep-

tive methods than if such a possibility did not exist, (Callahan-Callahan 1984, 219—221).

Developing contraceptive methods, increasing education on contraception, and focusing it on population groups particularly in need of it at the time, always requires knowledge. Facts concerning the development of abortion figures and the characteristics of women choosing abortion form a central source of information, which is the basis for the further development of research and education.

The aim of this article

The aim of this article is to examine the development of legal abortions by frequency and population group since 1970 after the current Abortion Act came into force in Finland, with other countries used as comparison. Although international comparisons may be risky because of the possible weak comparability of the data, it is believed, however, that this will enable us to see the abortion situation in Finland in the right perspective.

An attempt has been made to select the countries used for comparison according to available statistical data so that they would include, on the one hand, countries pursuing an abortion policy similar to the one in Finland (for example, the Nordic countries) and, on the other hand, countries with different policies. The United States has been chosen as an example of a country where the abortion law is free in principle but where an anti-abortion atmosphere is rapidly gaining ground. Japan represents a country where abortions were used to gain control over rapid population growth and the Federal Republic of Germany is the country with the lowest fertility in Europe. The attitude towards abortion in East European countries differs from the one in West and North European countries. The liberal abortion laws carried out earlier in these countries have later been restricted. In this article these countries are represented by Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, above all because abortion data are most readily available from these countries.

The abortions examined in this article are legal abortions, although this is not always specifically mentioned. It is true that in this respect it is not possible to guarantee the comparability of the international statistical data.

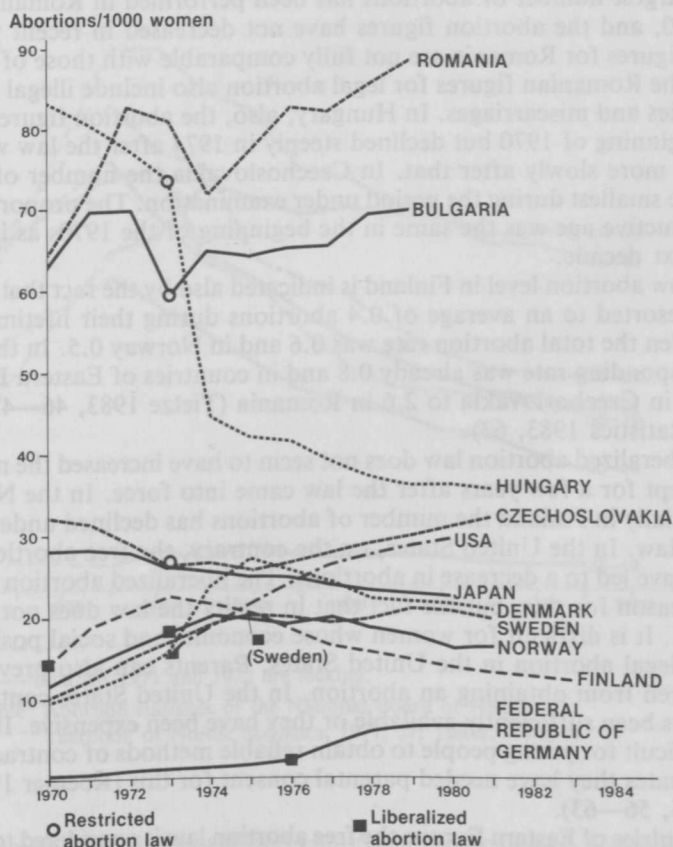
Legal abortions in Finland and some other selected countries

Nearly all abortions performed in Finland are legal today because according to estimates very few illegal terminations of pregnancies have been performed in the last few years. On the contrary, in many countries of comparison quite a number of illegal abortions are performed in addition to legal abortions.

The development of the number of abortions has been favorable in Finland after the enactment of the current Abortion Act. Except for a few years after the Abortion Act came into force, the number of abortions has continued to decrease. From the peak year 1973 onwards the number of abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age has decreased from 22.4 to 12.2 (Figure 1). As the number of 15—44-year-old women has not essentially varied during the period under examination, the decrease illustrated in the figure is caused primarily by the decline in abortions.

Compared with most developed countries, the incidence of induced abortion is quite moderate in Finland, even smaller than, for example, in the other Nordic countries. It is true that the abortion figures have developed in the same direction in Scandinavia. The development of abortions in Finland and Denmark resemble each other the most. In Sweden and Norway no corresponding increase followed the liberalization of the abortion law during the period under examination; the number of abortions remained quite stable. In fact, in recent years the abortion figures have slightly decreased in these countries also.

Figure 1. Legal abortions per 1000 women aged 15—44 in Finland and selected countries from 1970 onwards.



Source: Tietze, 1983, 26—35.

It seems that among the selected countries in the figure it is only in the Federal Republic of Germany that fewer abortions are performed than in Finland. However, apparently only part of all abortions performed in this country with the lowest fertility in Europe are known to the authorities. Many women seek abortions abroad. In fact, there may have been about 15 abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age in the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 1980s (Tietze 1983, 23).

The number of abortions has continued to increase in the United States from 1973 on, that is, during the period from which abortion data are available. According to the estimates of the Alan Guttmacher Institute there already were 30 abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age in 1980 with the corresponding number at 17 in 1973. In Japan where a great number of abortions were performed from the end of the 1940s on and where they reached their peak at the end of the 1950s, the trend has been quite contrary to that of the United States from the 1970s on. Although it was by means of abortions that rapid population growth was made to decrease, abortions have later been resorted to less frequently. It is true that the abortion numbers might in reality be greater than those presented here because legal abortions are not registered in many areas of Japan (Tietze 1983, 24).

The countries of Eastern Europe clearly differ from other countries because of their higher abortion figures. In many of these countries abortion was possible on social grounds or at the request of the woman as early as the 1950s. Abortions were performed in great numbers which again was seen to be connected with the decline

in fertility. This trend led gradually to the restriction of abortion laws in these countries.

The largest number of abortions has been performed in Romania and Bulgaria since 1970, and the abortion figures have not decreased in recent years. It is true that the figures for Romania are not fully comparable with those of other countries because the Romanian figures for legal abortion also include illegal terminations of pregnancies and miscarriages. In Hungary, also, the abortion figures were still high in the beginning of 1970 but declined steeply in 1974 after the law was restricted in 1973 and more slowly after that. In Czechoslovakia the number of abortions was one of the smallest during the period under examination. The proportion per women of reproductive age was the same in the beginning of the 1970s as in the beginning of the next decade.

The low abortion level in Finland is indicated also by the fact that in 1980 Finnish women resorted to an average of 0.4 abortions during their lifetime. In Denmark and Sweden the total abortion rate was 0.6 and in Norway 0.5. In the United States the corresponding rate was already 0.8 and in countries of Eastern Europe it varied from 0.9 in Czechoslovakia to 2.6 in Romania (Tietze 1983, 46—47, Yearbook of Nordic Statistics 1983, 63).

The liberalized abortion law does not seem to have increased the number of abortions except for a few years after the law came into force. In the Nordic countries and especially in Finland the number of abortions has declined under the liberalized abortion law. In the United States, on the contrary, the free abortion law does not seem to have led to a decrease in abortions. The liberalized abortion law is probably not the reason for this, but the fact that in reality the law does not make abortion free to all. It is difficult for women whose economic and social position is weak to obtain a legal abortion in the United States. Parents can also prevent their under age children from obtaining an abortion. In the United States contraceptives have not always been sufficiently available or they have been expensive. It has been especially difficult for young people to obtain reliable methods of contraception because in some states they have needed parental consent for this (Roemer 1985, 245, Jones et al 1985, 56—63).

In countries of Eastern Europe the free abortion law is considered to have markedly increased the number of abortions in the 1950s and 60s. The liberal abortion law, alone, has not been the reason for this, but above all the lack of reliable contraceptive methods. The later restriction of the abortion law decreased the number of abortions for some time but evidently also increased the number of illegal terminations. The abortion figures in East European countries under the present more restricted abortion laws are still markedly higher than elsewhere. It is probable that if people really want to restrict the number of children they have but have no reliable contraceptive methods at their use, they end up resorting to abortion; legally if possible, and illegally if legal access to abortion is denied.

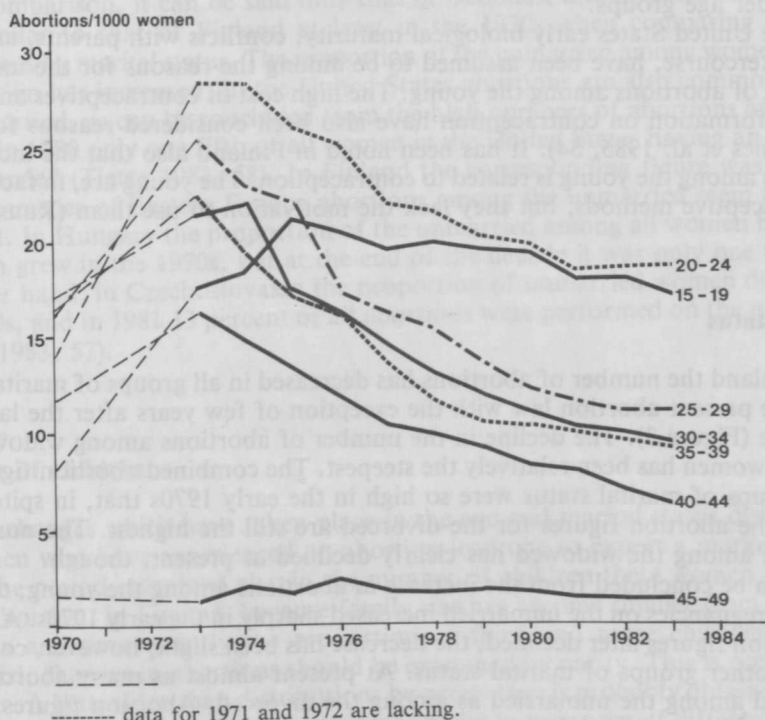
Characteristics of women who have had an abortion

This article will only examine the demographic characteristics of age, marital status, number of children, and previous abortions of the women who have had an abortion because the comparison of regional, social, and cultural factors is not possible.

Age

The number of abortions has developed favorably in Finland. In spite of this a negative feature is that terminations of pregnancies are performed in great numbers on young women. It is true that this phenomenon is not typical only of Finland but

Figure 2. Age-specific abortion rates per 1000 women in 1970—1983.



Source: Abortion statistics of the National Board of Health
Yearbook of Nordic Statistics, 1977, 57; Tietze, 1983, 46

is a feature common to all industrialized countries. According to Tietze (1981, 41), in most areas where abortion statistics for the 1970s are available, the proportion of abortions performed on women under 20 of all abortions has increased during most years.

Figure 2, in which the development of abortion rates in 1970—1983 is illustrated, indicates that, in general, the terminations of pregnancies have, indeed, decreased in all age groups in the beginning of the 1970s but the decline has been slight in the youngest age group of 15—19-year-olds.

When comparing abortion figures by age group in the Nordic countries and the United States to the corresponding ones in Finland in the early 1970s and in the early 1980s, a marked change can be seen. In 1970 there were more abortions in all age groups in Finland than in Sweden and Denmark except among those under 20. In Sweden abortions were most common among the youngest women and in Denmark correspondingly among the 30—39-year-olds. In the United States the number of abortions among the young was unrivalled. More than twice as many pregnancies were terminated among women under 20 than in the other age groups, and in the older age groups the number of abortions was rather low.

By 1983 the situation had changed. In the Nordic countries the abortion figures by age group conformed closely to each other. Finland's abortion figures, which had been the highest, were now the lowest. In all the Nordic countries abortion was most common among the 20—24-year-olds, but in Denmark and Sweden they concentrated in this age group more markedly than in Finland and Norway. In these countries, however, abortions among the youngest age group came second, in Denmark and Sweden correspondingly among the 25—34-year-olds. By 1981 in the United States abortions continued increasingly to concentrate in the young age groups. The total

number of abortions had clearly increased but only a small part of the growth occurred in the older age groups.

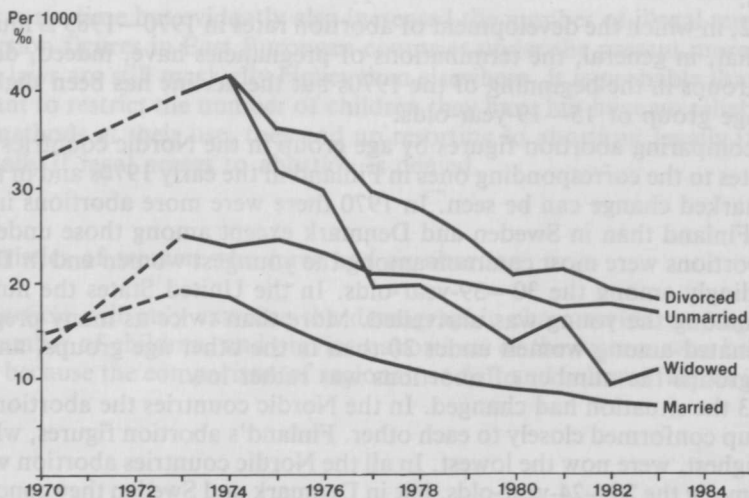
In the United States early biological maturity, conflicts with parents, and early sexual intercourse, have been assumed to be among the reasons for the increasing incidence of abortions among the young. The high cost of contraceptives and insufficient information on contraception have also been considered reasons for abortions (Jones et al. 1985, 54). It has been noted in Finland also that the increase in abortions among the young is related to contraception. The young are, in fact, aware of contraceptive methods, but they lack the motivation to use them (Ruusuvaara, 1983, 5).

Marital status

In Finland the number of abortions has decreased in all groups of marital status under the present abortion law with the exception of few years after the law came into force (Figure 3). The decline in the number of abortions among widowed and divorced women has been relatively the steepest. The combined abortion figures for these groups of marital status were so high in the early 1970s that, in spite of the decline, the abortion figures for the divorced are still the highest. The number of abortions among the widowed has clearly declined at present, though.

As can be concluded from the increase in abortions among the young, terminations of pregnancies on the unmarried increased sharply in the early 1970s. Although the abortion figures later declined, the decrease has been slight, however, compared with the other groups of marital status. At present almost as many abortions are performed among the unmarried as among the divorced. Abortion figures for the unmarried and the divorced are more than double those of the married. The married represent the lowest abortion level, although the figures for the widowed are not much higher.

Figure 3. Legal abortions rates per 1000 women aged 15—44 by marital status 1970—83.



----- Data for 1971 and 1972 are lacking. Data were not available separately on the divorced and the widowed until 1974.

Source: Abortion statistics of the National Board of Health.

Because there are no abortion figures by marital status available for the countries under comparison, it can be said only that in Denmark and Sweden the trend has been similar to that of Finland at least in the 1970s when comparing abortion percentages by marital status. The proportion of the unmarried among women having an abortion has increased. In the United States abortions are also common among the unmarried, as can be concluded from the high numbers of abortions among the young. In 1980 only one fifth of all women in the United States having an abortion were married (Tietze 1983, 58). In Finland the corresponding figure was 35 %.

In countries of Eastern Europe abortions among the unmarried seem to be less frequent. In Hungary the proportion of the unmarried among all women having an abortion grew in the 1970s, but at the end of the decade it was only one fifth. On the other hand, in Czechoslovakia the proportion of unmarried women declined in the 1970s, and in 1981 13 percent of all abortions were performed on the unmarried (Tietze 1983, 57).

Number of children

The changes which have taken place in the age and marital status distributions of women who have experienced an abortion lead one to expect a marked change under the period examined also in the number of children these women had prior to the abortion. In Finland, because family size has become smaller from the 1970s onwards and consequently the proportion of third and more children has also decreased, changes in abortions should be examined by parity. This is not possible, however. A better idea than distributions by percentage is probably obtained by proportioning the abortions to 100 known pregnancies in categories of different numbers of children.

Figure 4 (p. 122) illustrates that in Finland at the end of the 1970s terminations of pregnancies, in which the woman already had either three or four children, were relatively most frequent. According to the Abortion Act one basis for obtaining an abortion is already having four children.

The fewest abortions were performed among women with one child. From 1979 to 1983 no change occurred in the proportions of the abortion figures. The number of terminations decreased during this period in all parities. Only among childless women did the proportion of abortions remain unchanged.

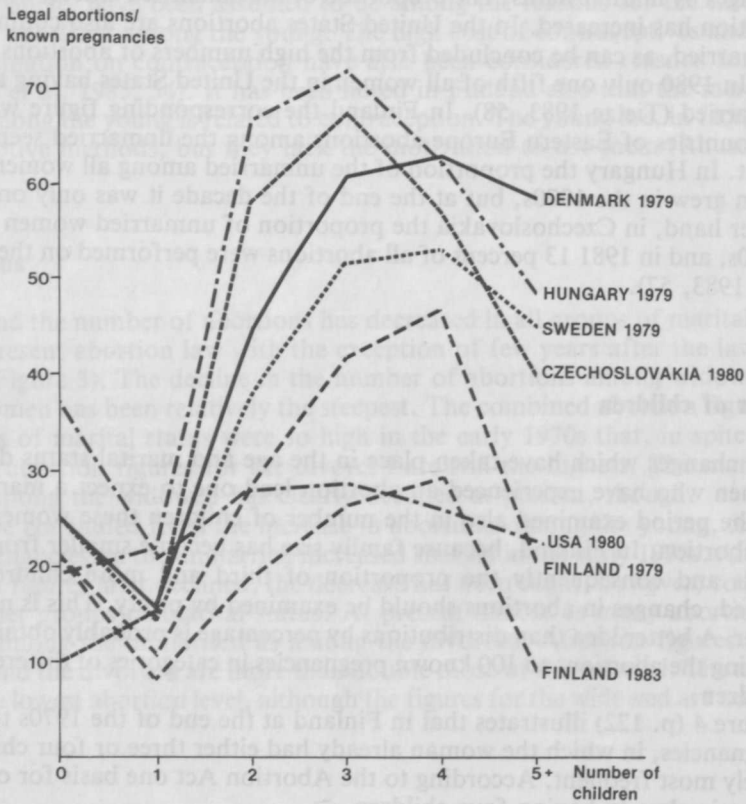
The proportions of known pregnancies in Finland have been compared with the latest possible data for the countries under comparison, whenever data has been available. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, representing Eastern Europe, the proportion of terminations of pregnancies grew as the parity grew so that the peak was reached in the third parity after which the proportion of abortions declined again.

In Sweden and Denmark as in Finland the proportion of abortions was highest after the fourth pregnancy. The proportion of abortions among women with one child was the smallest. In the United States, in contrast to the Nordic and East European countries, more pregnancies of childless women are terminated than in any other parity. This emphasizes the frequency of abortions performed on the young in the United States.

Repeat abortions

It has often been feared that the liberalization of the abortion law would lead to the adoption of abortion as a birth control method, instead of using actual contraceptive methods. It was believed in Finland also that this would happen considering the heated discussion going on when the new abortion law was being prepared.

Figure 4. Proportion of legal abortions per 100 known pregnancies by parity in Finland and selected countries at the end of the 1970s and in the beginning of the 1980s¹



Source: Tietze, 1983, 55—56.

During the years after the law was passed and when the numbers of second and third abortions began to increase, many people considered it a proven fact, that abortion is used as a birth control method.

The rise in the number of second and third abortions was, however, a natural result of the increase in the number of legal abortions. As the number of legal abortions was low before the new law, the greatest part of the abortions performed after the law had come into force were first abortions. As the number of legal abortions increased, so rose the number of women with the risk of having their second or third terminated pregnancy.

Abortion has not, however, evolved into a contraceptive method in Finland, but a means to resort to when other methods have failed or have not been accessible. In 1983 77 % of all abortions were first ones (Table 1). The proportion of women who have had an abortion for the second or third time has increased very slowly in recent years, at times it has decreased slightly. According to the latest statistical data in Finland, only 5 % of all abortions were third or more terminations.

In many countries repeat abortions are more common than in Finland. It has been noted that in countries where the abortion law has not yet been liberal for long a greater number of second or more abortions are performed than in countries already

¹ Proportion of abortions per 100 known pregnancies, that is live births plus legal abortions, ignoring pregnancies ending in stillbirth, spontaneous abortion or illegal abortion.

Table 1. Percentage distributions of legal abortions by number of prior abortions in 1973 and 1983 in Finland.

	0	1	2	3+	Unknown	Total	N
1970—71	36.0	3.5	0.1				
1973	85.4	12.9	1.5	0.2	—	100	23362
1974	81.6	15.7	2.3	0.3	—	100	22846
1975	82.8	14.5	2.4	0.3	—	100	21547
1976	82.0	15.5	2.1	0.3	0.1	100	19818
1977	81.0	15.8	2.6	0.5	—	100	17772
1978	79.8	16.6	2.6	0.6	0.3	100	16928
1979	79.4	16.8	3.0	0.6	0.1	100	15849
1980	78.5	17.5	3.1	0.9	—	100	15037
1981	77.5	17.3	3.3	1.0	1.0	100	14120
1982	77.4	17.8	3.5	0.9	0.6	100	13861
1983	77.2	17.6	3.9	1.1	0.2	100	13360

Source: Statistics of the National Board of Health.

used to free abortion. This has been the case, for example, in the United States where the abortion law was not liberalized until at the end of 1970s, when 30 % of abortions were second or more abortions.

It has also been noted that if the general abortion rate is high more repeat abortions are performed than if the rate is low. In the Nordic countries the abortion figures are comparatively low and consequently the proportion of repeat abortions relatively small. In Norway the percentage of second and more abortions of all pregnancies was 22 and in Sweden correspondingly 27 (Tietze 1983, 63—64).

In East European countries there were numerous abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age and repeat abortions were also common. In Hungary only one half of the abortions consisted of first ones in 1979. One fourth were second abortions and there were also as many third and more abortions. The restriction of the abortion law in the 1970s reduced somewhat the proportion of third and more frequent abortions and increased the proportion of first and second ones (Tietze 1983, 63, 9).

Conclusions

Under the present abortion law, which came into force in 1970, the number of abortions has developed favorably in Finland. The number of abortions has decreased since 1973 year after year. Illegal abortions causing health risks are performed hardly at all. Compared with many other developed countries the abortion situation in Finland can certainly be considered good. In the other Nordic countries the number of abortions has developed similarly but in Finland it is still lower. The number of abortions in the countries of Eastern Europe which restricted their abortion laws in the 1960s and 70s is still considerably higher than in Finland, and in the United States the yearly abortion figures have grown up to the 1980s.

The goal of family planning, for every child to be born a wanted child, is still, however, a distant goal in Finland also. Annually 13000 pregnancies are terminated and in addition approximately one tenth of all children are born unwanted. Especially among the young there are numerous unwanted pregnancies. This is a feature common to industrialized countries and especially dominant in the United States. There the number of abortions performed on women under 20 was twice as high as the corresponding rate in other countries in the beginning of the 1980s. In Sweden and Denmark the number of abortions among the young is proportionally about the same as in Finland; in Norway it is slightly higher. Among the East European countries

the number of abortions performed on the young was low at least in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s.

Because of the increase in the abortions among the young, the proportion of the unmarried and childless among all women having an abortion has grown under the present abortion law. Although the number of abortions has decreased in all groups of marital status during the period under examination because of the reduction in the total amount of abortions, the decrease has been slightest among the unmarried. Pregnancies of childless women are also terminated more often than those of women with one or two children. On the other hand, among the smaller group of women with three or four children abortions are still more common than in the other groups. More than half of all abortions in 1983 were performed on childless women and 60 % of all terminations on unmarried women.

The increase of abortions among the young is a feature common to industrialized countries and thus high abortion rates of the unmarried and childless are common in many of these countries. Especially in the United States substantial numbers of pregnancies of young unmarried women are terminated. There only one fifth of the abortions of 1980 were performed on married women. In East European countries, on the contrary, abortions performed on unmarried and childless women are rather uncommon. At least in the countries used as examples, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the proportion of all abortions performed on unmarried and childless women was small. Although in Hungary there were quite numerous abortions per 1000 15—19-year-olds, the proportion of the abortions of this age group was only 5 % of all abortions.

Abortion has not become a contraceptive method in Finland, although this was feared before the present abortion law came into force. In 1983 for two thirds of all women having an abortion this termination was the first. Only 5 percent of women having an abortion had experienced three or more abortions.

In Finland the present abortion law has been in force so long that the temporary increase in the number of abortions caused by the liberalized law is already over. In the United States, for example, the abortion law was liberalized later and there almost one third of the abortions are third or more abortions. It has also been noted that in countries where a lot of abortions are performed, repeat abortions are also common. For example, in East European countries abortion numbers are high, and in Hungary, for instance, only one half of the terminations were first abortions at the end of the 1970s.

The liberalization of the abortion law in Finland has evidently proved to be correct. The health risks caused by illegal abortions have disappeared and access to abortion has not weakened the use of other contraceptive methods. On the contrary, research results and statistics prove that the use of contraceptives has developed favorably.

Contraception should be continually developed and information focused on population groups needing it the most. Abortion is never the best solution. It allows, however, after contraceptive failure, the termination of unwanted pregnancies and thus difficult psychological, social, and economic problems can possibly be avoided.

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