



**Women's Forum's Response to 9am with David and Kim – Interview with Anne O'Rourke – 16/09/09**

Women's Forum Australia (WFA) wishes to make comment about a number of the issues raised in the segment with Ann O'Rourke on the issue of abortion and decriminalisation in Queensland.

Women's Forum Australia believes that the abortion decriminalisation debate is a highly polarizing distraction from the more important question: what motivates women to have abortions? Research has exposed the social and economic pressures that conspire against genuine choice and drive many women to the abortion clinic: financial concerns, uncaring or violent relationships, unsupportive work places, schools and universities.<sup>1</sup> Women need an abortion debate about the real issue: what can our families, our communities, our governments and our culture do to remove the barriers to motherhood so that women can freely choose to complete their pregnancies?

A debate which treats abortion 'like any other medical procedure' trivialises women's experience of abortion. Abortion is not the equivalent of a tonsillectomy. A woman knows that abortion is much more than that because it involves a decision about her baby. This is why women who are pregnant in difficult circumstances often experience distress and ambivalence about the option of abortion.

There is substantial evidence of physical and psychosocial harms associated with abortion. Of particular mention is the fact that 10-20% of women suffer from severe negative psychological complications after abortion, despite the frequent presence of immediate relief soon after the abortion.<sup>2</sup> With at least one in four Australian women undergoing abortion, this represents a large proportion of the Australian population. Even higher numbers of women experience emotional distress associated with abortion.<sup>3</sup> WFA believes that public debate should be informed by the facts about the physical and psychological risks of abortion.

Women's Forum Australia also wishes to highlight that there is no clear evidence that a positive association exists between access to contraceptives and sex education and the

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<sup>1</sup> see various studies cited in Ewing S (2005) *Women and Abortion: An Evidence Based Review*, Women's Forum Australia, Sydney at 2 – 10.

<sup>2</sup> Coleman PK, Reardon DC, Strahan T and Cogle JR, 'The Psychology of Abortion: a Review and Suggestions for Future Research', *Psychology and Health* 2005; 20(2): 237-271 cited in Ewing S (2005) *Women and Abortion: An Evidence Based Review*, Women's Forum Australia, Sydney at 17.

<sup>3</sup> see for example Soderberg H, Janzon L and Sjoberg NO (1998) 'Emotional Distress Following Induced Abortion: a Study of its Incidence and Determinants Among Abortees in Malmo, Sweden'. *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Biology* 79:173-8, cited in Ewing S (2005) *Women and Abortion: An Evidence Based Review*, Women's Forum Australia, Sydney at 18.

rate of abortion.<sup>4</sup> Partly this is because the reasons women have abortions are often far more complex than simply not intending to become pregnant.<sup>5</sup> International research reports that repeat abortion is associated with increased use of contraception, particularly oral contraception.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a recent study commissioned by Marie Stopes International, one of the largest abortion providers, reported that 60% of women surveyed who experienced unplanned pregnancy were using at least one form of contraception at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Results of a literature survey on the effectiveness of sex education show that programs such as the 'safe sex' programs that focus on avoiding or minimising harm have not been shown to be effective. Similarly there is little evidence that abstinence-only programs are effective. However, programs that present the facts and have values and behavioural components, like the pledge or delay-first-intercourse programs, have been shown to have some success.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, sex education and contraception are not the simple answer to abortion.

Women's Forum Australia is also concerned by O'Rourke's misleading emphasis on teenage girls seeking abortions. Most abortions conducted in Australia involve women over 18 who have left school, and not teenage girls.<sup>9</sup> The South Australian Department of Health reported in 2007 that 26.1% of terminations were performed on women aged 30-39. Similarly, just over 30% of women who chose to terminate their pregnancy at an Australian Marie Stopes Clinic were in the 30-to-40 age group.<sup>10</sup> This underscores the need for social policy initiatives which address the underlying reasons women seek abortion so that all women are free to choose motherhood.

At present only 22% of Australians think they are very well informed on the topic of abortion.<sup>11</sup> There is extensive research about the motivators for abortion and its health impacts. A good debate is an informed debate and the Australian community deserves nothing less. Australian women deserve more than what is too often the one and only

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<sup>4</sup> Larsson M, *et al.* (2002). 'Reasons for pregnancy termination, contraceptive habits and contraceptive failure among Swedish women requesting an early pregnancy termination.' *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand* 81:64-71

<sup>5</sup> Bankole A, Singh S and Taylor H, 'Reasons Why Women Have Induced Abortions: Evidence from 27 Countries', *International Family Planning Perspectives* 1998; 24(3) cited in Ewing S (2005) *Women and Abortion: An Evidence Based Review*, Women's Forum Australia, Sydney at 2.

<sup>6</sup> Fisher WA *et al* (2005). Characteristics of women undergoing repeat induced abortion. *Canadian Medical Journal* 172(5):637-41, March 1.

<sup>7</sup> cited in Illsey, Y (October 2009) 'The Hardest Choice' in. *Madison Australia*, New South Wales: Hearst Magazines International, at 76-80.

<sup>8</sup> Fleming J & Tonti-Filippini N (2007) *Common Ground? Seeking an Australian Consensus on Abortion and Sex Education*, New South Wales: St Paul's Publications

<sup>9</sup> Fleming J 'Analysis of new data: sex education, counselling, RU-486 and stem cell research' in J Fleming and N Tonti-Filippini (2007) *Common Ground? Seeking an Australian Consensus on Abortion and Sex Education*, St Pauls Publications: New South Wales, at101

<sup>10</sup> Illsey (October 2009), at 78

<sup>11</sup> Fleming J & Ewing S (2005) *Give Women Choice: Australia Speaks on Abortion*, South Australia: Southern Cross Bioethics Institute, at 11

option of abortion. We need to ensure that no woman ever feels she must choose between her own welfare and that of her unborn child.

Women's Forum Australia is an independent women's think tank that undertakes research, education and public policy development about social, economic, health and cultural issues affecting women. Women's Forum Australia promotes initiatives that work to improve the lives of all women, especially women from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. We advocate an evidence based approach to public policy formulation and challenge Australians to engage critically in debate about women's issues.