

THE FUTURE OF ABORTIONS IN RUSSIA

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Abortion culture

For a long time Russian families control the number of births, this practice in Russia has a long history. Very low birth rate confirms that. Since mid 1960s Russian total fertility rate is below replacement level. Most Russian couples plans not only a number of offspring, but the timing as well. The question is: what do they do to implement their intentions, what method of birth control do they use? Do they plan a pregnancy or a birth? The latter case means that undesirable pregnancy could lead to *induced abortion*. It is widely believed that unlike in other countries, couples in Russia for decades were practicing the second option. In the former Soviet Union the concept of abortion culture had been invoked to describe this experience. In 1965, when net reproduction rate for the first time after the war fell down below 1, there were 278 abortions per 100 deliveries. In 1964 Russian women performed the record high annual number of 5.6 million of abortions. In 1970-1980s the annual number of abortions in the country exceeded 4.5 million. Enormous level of abortions happened together with virtually full absence of family planning services, lack of information on contraception, and poor supply of contraception. There was no sexual education at all.

Many things changed in Russia in 1990s, birth control experienced huge changes too. All time since the downfall of communism the number of abortions steadily reduces (fig. 1). Apparently Russian couples substitute abortion with family planning, using more and more effective contraception.

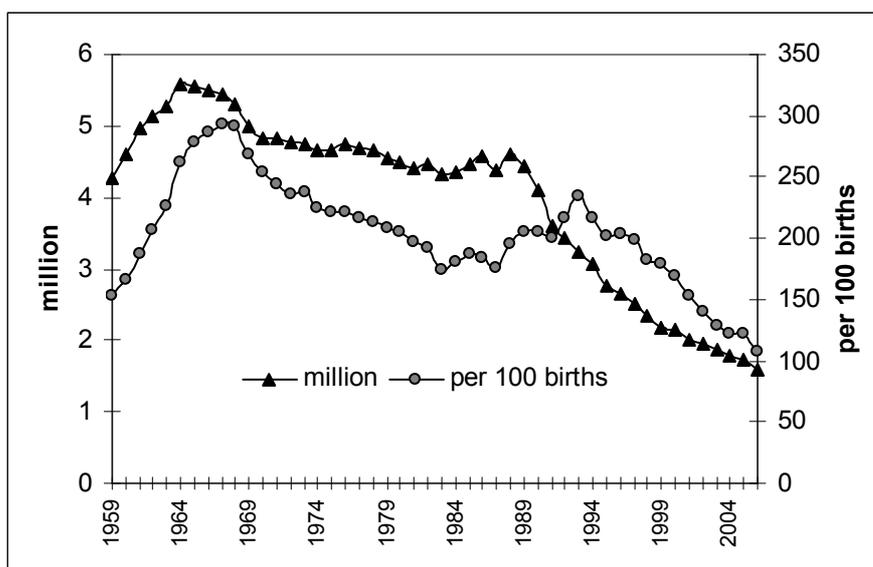


Fig. 1. Abortion dynamics, Russian Federation. 1959-2006

From 1990 to 2006 the number of abortions had been reduced by 2.6 times, and abortion rate per thousand of women of reproductive age by 2.8 times (tab. 1). Average annual decrease rate

equals six per cent. In 2006 RosStat¹ reported 1582.4 thousand abortions, or 40.3 per thousand of women of reproductive age, and withholding spontaneous abortions – 36.0 per thousand. All age groups of women enjoy these improvements (tab. 2). Teenagers show the fastest reduction in both abortion and birth rates.

Table 1. Abortion, basic indicators. Russian Federation

Year	Number of abortions				Percentage of abortions of all pregnancies*
	thousand	Per thousand of women aged 15-49		Per one hundred of live births	
		Total	Without spontaneous abortions		
1990	4103.4	113.9	n/d	206.3	67.4
1995	2766.4	72.8	67.9	202.8	67.0
2000	2138.8	54.2	49.8	168.8	62.8
2001	2014.7	50.9	46.7	153.6	60.6
2002	1944.5	49.0	44.6	139.2	58.2
2003	1864.6	47.0	42.7	128.6	56.3
2004	1797.6	45.5	41.1	122.0	54.9
2005	1732.3	44.1	39.8	121.2	54.8
2006	1582.4	40.3	36.0	106.9	51.7

*Due to data limitation total number of pregnancies = abortions + live births.

Source: Russian Statistical Yearbook / RosStat. – Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service. 2007, p. 278.

The total abortion rate, an integrated parameter independent of age structure of women, in 2006 was 1.4 abortions per woman of reproductive age, for comparison: in 1991 it was 3.4.

Table 2. Abortions by age group

	Number of abortions per thousand of women of age:			Total abortion rate
	15-19*	20-34	35+	
1991	69.7	152.5	50.5	3.39
1995	57.1	122.4	33.1	2.62
2000	36.0	97.6	23.8	2.00
2001	34.2	91.0	22.1	1.87
2002	32.7	87.1	21.1	1.79
2003	30.8	82.3	20.4	1.69
2004	29.5	78.5	19.6	1.62
2005	29.3	74.8	19.0	1.55
2006	28.9	66.2	17.8	1.40
2006/1991, per cent	41	43	35	41

* Including abortions before age 15

Source: Russian Statistical Yearbook / RosStat. – Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service. 2007, p. 278.

Remarkable reduction in abortion level sometimes raises doubts – it might represent only growing incompleteness of their count, particularly, because of development of a private or commercial rendering of the medical aid. Probably, part of commercial abortions really does not get in official statistics (though the law requires to report), but this unlikely undercount might not be so great to deny essential decrease of abortions in Russia.

Prevalence results of representative sample surveys confirm the official data on abortion incidence. Comparison of abortion parameters, obtained in three sample surveys (1988-1989,

¹ Federal State Statistics Service.

1996, and 2000) undertaken in different regions of the country, with official figures revealed little difference².

Russian medical community shares wrong but very popular opinion about the rise of the first pregnancy abortions. Actually, the statistics give evidence to the contrary. In six recent years the respective rate per thousand of women of reproductive age has decreased by twenty two per cent and per thousand of women of age interval 15-24 - by twenty seven per cent, with ninety percent of aborted first pregnancies belonging to the latter (tab. 3). Although the proportion of abortions among *primigravida* women among total number of abortions does not decline.

Table 3. Aborted first pregnancies, including mini-abortions, Ministry of Health and Social Development data

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Percentage of the first pregnancies in an abortion total	10.4	11.0	11.3	11.0	11.1	10.8	11.3
Aborted first pregnancies per thousand of women 15-49	5.2	5.2	5.1	4.7	4.5	4.11	4.06
Aborted first pregnancies in the age group 15-24 per thousand of women 15-24	15.8	15.4	14.8	13.6	12.9	11.8	11.6

Despite positive dynamics, abortions still outnumber births. In 2006 there were 107 abortions per 100 births or more than a half of pregnancies have been interrupted by abortion. Russian women have very small desired family size and often use ineffective contraception. Thus high abortion rate is a natural backup for contraception failure. As a result the number of abortions remains high. Induced abortion remains one of the most acute public health problems in Russia.

Women at risk

Age distribution of aborting women in Russia essentially differs from many western countries where the problem of unplanned pregnancy and abortion, first of all, concerns teenagers and young unmarried women. Whereas in Russia abortion is a common method of birth control used for both postponement of a birth and stopping bearing children at all. For example, women in England and Wales, the USA, Canada, Finland perform a half of all abortions before age 25, in Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Netherlands and Denmark - over 40 per cent, whereas in Russia - only a third part. However Russia's abortion rate for the given age interval outstrips all named countries (fig. 2).

² Philipov D., Andreev E., Kharkova T., and Shkolnikov V. (2004). Induced Abortion in Russia: Recent Trends and Underreporting in Surveys // *European Journal of Population*, 20: 95-117.

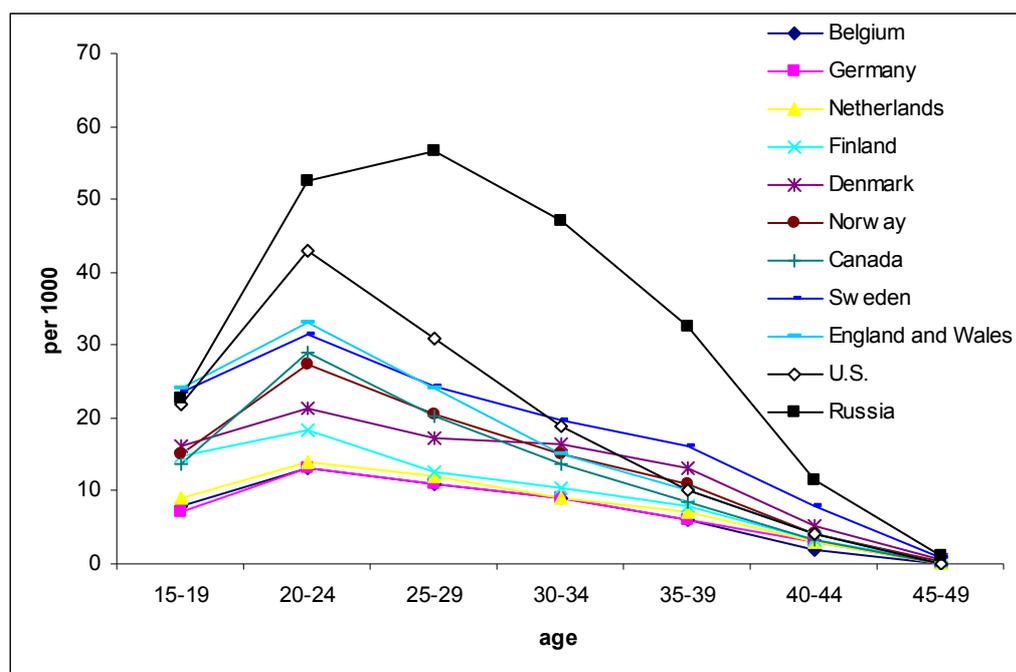


Fig. 2. Age-specific abortion rates in Russia* (2006) and some other countries (last available data), per 1000 females of respective age

*Ministry of Health and Social Development data, without spontaneous abortions.

About a half of abortions in Russia occurs at the age interval from 20 to 29 years, more than twenty per cent - at 30-34 years, slightly less than twenty per cent - at 35 and elder, and the rest of nine or ten per cent - at the youngest age group (up to twenty).

According to the Ministry of health and social development data, mean age at abortion in 2006 was 28.7 years, while mean age at birth was 26.6 years. During a recent decade mean age at abortion had been growing, since abortions fell down faster at younger ages. Young couples more likely use modern, effective methods of contraception. At the same time, probably, younger women more often use private clinics where abortions could partly drop out from official registration. But it is only an assumption.

Table 4. Age schedule of abortions, %. Ministry of Health and Social Development data

Year	Age interval							Total
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
1996	10.1	27.0	27.4	18.7	12.0	4.3	0.6	100
2000	8.9	26.0	26.3	20.8	12.5	4.9	0.5	100
2001	9.1	25.9	26.0	20.9	12.8	4.9	0.5	100
2002	9.1	25.6	25.9	20.9	13.1	4.9	0.5	100
2003	9.1	25.1	25.7	20.9	13.7	4.9	0.5	100
2004	9.1	24.5	25.7	21.0	14.1	5.0	0.5	100
2005	9.4	24.1	25.6	21.1	14.3	5.1	0.5	100
2006	10.1	23.6	25.3	20.9	14.4	5.1	0.5	100

The official abortion statistics is scarce. In particular, available data do not allow decomposing females who make abortion by social groups. Sample surveys might help, but there has been no nationally representative family planning or fertility regulation survey in Russia. Some questions relating to this subject sometimes were included in other survey questionnaires.

Recently they were included into “Parents and children, men and women in family and society” (Russian Generations and Gender survey, RusGGS) questionnaire³. The information received from this survey essentially supplements official statistics.

First of all, it confirmed high prevalence of pregnancy interruption in Russia. The elder the respondent the less likely she has no abortion. By their thirty approximately a half of women had at least one abortion, and by fifty seventy percent of women had at least one abortion and a half - two or more abortions (tab. 5).

Table 5. Abortion indicators. RusGGS-2004

Respondent age at interview	Mean number of abortion per a woman	Percentage of women with at least one abortion	Percentage of women with at least two abortions
18-19	0.1	8.5	2.3
20-24	0.3	21.7	6.8
25-29	0.8	40.4	18.5
30-34	1.3	53.5	34.4
35-39	1.6	59.2	39.9
40-44	1.8	66.0	44.0
45-49	2.0	69.6	50.4
18-49	1.3	50.6	31.9

Note: The number of abortion had been calculated indirectly by subtracting number of births from number of pregnancies of a respondent, N=3829.

The average woman born between 1955 and 1964 (aged 40-49 at the moment of interview) has finished her reproductive "career" having four pregnancies during her fertile life span and two of them had been aborted. Mean number of abortions per woman of that age group is 1.9. Thirty two per cent of these women have no abortion experience (while only five per cent have no birth experience). Twenty per cent of women had one abortion during their lives, nineteen per cent — two abortions and 28 per cent have three or more abortions (fig. 3). Thus a half of women belong to high risk group: they have two or more abortions, and they made ninety per cent of abortion total.

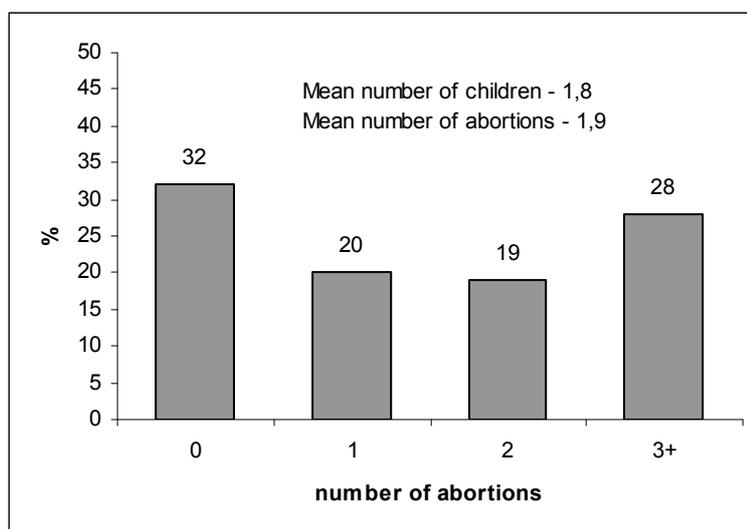


Fig. 3. Women aged 40-49 by abortions during their lives, %. RusGGS-2004

³ RusGGS was carried out in June-August 2004 by Independent Institute for Social Policy (Moscow) sponsored by the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation and Max-Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock, Germany. The sampling covered 11261 respondents aged from 18 to 79 years from 32 regions of Russia ensuring the survey representativeness on a country scale.

GGG data allow revealing social distinctions between women in relation to abortions. Firstly, all social groups have high prevalence of abortion. Four groups of women are less likely to abort⁴:

- higher educated;
- living together with partner within registered marriage (comparing to cohabiting partners);
- users of modern contraception;
- living in Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

Official statistics confirm the fourth point: in 2006 the number of abortions per thousand of women of reproductive age was 15 in Moscow and 28 in Saint-Petersburg with national average of 40.

Right to abortion

Russia has one of the most liberal legislation in relation to abortion in the world. The Foundations of the health care legislation of the citizens of the Russian Federation (article 36) establishes the right of a woman to terminate her pregnancy till the twelfth week at her own will, till 22nd week - with so called social indications, and on any term of pregnancy on medical indications.

Despite wide prevalence of abortion practice, the attitude to abortion of the majority of population seems to be negative. The section «Value Orientations and Attitudes» of Russian GGS contained a question: Do you agree with the statement «Abortions without medical indications should be restricted or forbidden by law». Forty five per cent of respondents agreed and thirty two disagreed with this statement (tab. 6). Twenty three per cent had no clear position. It is a sign of the social split into two almost equal parts.

Table 6. Answers to the question if respondents agree with the statement «Abortions without medical indications should be restricted or forbidden by law», %. RusGGG-2004

	Females	Males	Total
strongly agree, agree	43	48	45
neither agree nor disagree	21	25	23
disagree, strongly disagree	36	26	32
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Men oppose the woman right to abort more definitely than women. At all ages the proportion of opponents is greater than that of supporters. But it is best visible at the edges of age scale (youngsters and elders). Women share this age pattern. That means that the most vocal opponents are those for whom abortion is not a personal problem, but a problem of somebody else.

The opposition to the right to abort coincides with:

- stronger religious beliefs, although even these people do not fully agree with the ban - 20-30 per cent oppose the statement;
- lower educational level, 51% of those with education less than secondary and 37% of those with higher education support the statement;

⁴ We should note that the survey fixed social characteristics of respondents at the moment of interview and not at the moment of abortion.

- residence at countryside (48% agree), while only 36% of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg population agree with abortion restriction;
- larger family size of own family and parent family which probably represent a propensity to more traditional values;
- number of performed abortions, those who perform abortions are proponents of their right.

Abortion issue is a harsh dividing wall within Russian society. Other questions concerning values and attitudes revealed more homogeneity. People mostly agree that: «A child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily», «A woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled», «It is all right for a couple with an unhappy marriage to get a divorce even if they have children», and disagree that «Marriage is an outdated institution». No association had been found between attitude toward abortion and other values and attitudes.

Thus, the significant part of the population disapproves abortion. It might be regarded as a favorable environment for further reduction of a level of induced abortions in Russia. At the same time many couples do not follow a path of responsible reproductive behavior. High prevalence of abortions indicates huge number of mistimed and unplanned pregnancies.

The RusGGS survey shows that public consciousness does not discriminate between individual and/or family choice on one hand and legal right on the other. Probably, recent vigorous antiabortion advocacy of clerics and so called "patriotic" forces aimed on moral shape of compatriots to overcome depopulation has born its fruits. Nevertheless the history knows many examples of sad consequences of abortion bans. The 1936 USSR ban of abortion did not raise birth rates as authorities expected. Instead of that number of crimes increased. Many parameters of health of mother and child worsened. Number of killed infants soared up twice. In 1940 fourteen per cent of murdered in cities of Russia were children before age 1. Maternal mortality increased twofold, the proportion of causes related to abortion of maternal mortality became seventy per cent.

Abortion must be safe

There is no population free of abortions. However, in many countries the level of abortions is much lower than in Russia. Russian medical community promotes a point of view on abortion as on mutilating health operation. Here is a Soviet period piece: «Almost each third woman after abortion has complication, and in case of the first pregnancy - almost every second. Abortion leads to emotional stress which breaks all mental and physical processes in an organism, deteriorate outcomes of the consequent pregnancies. It is proved that abortion is the basic cause of gynecologic diseases. ... In the scientific literature there are numerous data on increase of risk of occurrence of oncological diseases in female sexual sphere caused by induced abortions»⁵. Little changed since then: «Frequency of the early, deferred and remote complications after abortion vary from 16 to 52 per cent, and remote complications are more severe»⁶. «Abortion frequently causes infecundity, miscarriage and other complications of pregnancy and delivery, leads to higher maternal and perinatal mortality. ... Abortion in an anamnesis leads to twenty per cent higher hazard of miscarriage and abnormality of delivery. Perinatal mortality is 10-12 per cent higher in case a woman had an abortion»⁷.

⁵ Шнейдерман Н.А. Откровенный разговор: Рождаемость и меры ее регулирования. М, Мысль, 1991, с. 60.

⁶ Шарапова О.В., Баклаенко Н.Г. Медико-социальные и правовые аспекты аборт в Российской Федерации // Планирование семьи, 2003, №3, с. 5-6.

⁷ Кулаков В., Орлова О. Репродуктивное здоровье в Российской Федерации // Народнонаселение, №3, 2004.

Compare above with some American piece: «The risk of abortion complications is minimal; less than 0.3% of abortion patients experience a complication that requires hospitalization. Abortions performed in the first trimester pose virtually no long-term risk of such problems as infertility, ectopic pregnancy, spontaneous abortion (miscarriage) or congenital malformation (birth defect), and little or no risk of preterm or low-birth-weight deliveries. Exhaustive reviews by panels convened by the U.S. and British governments have concluded that there is no association between abortion and breast cancer. There is also no indication that abortion is a risk factor for other types of cancer. In repeated studies since the early 1980s, leading experts have concluded that abortion does not pose a hazard to women's mental health»⁸.

The strongest antiabortion arguments in the USA are more likely in religious, moral, and psychological spheres, rather than in medical.

The WHO brochure says: «Procedures and techniques for early induced abortion are simple and safe. When performed by trained health care providers with proper equipment, correct technique and sanitary standards, abortion is one of the safest medical procedures»⁹.

Global medical science develops new technologies, introduces new substances, and abortion making is not an exception. It seems that Russia stands aside of that global trend. Instead of improving quality of medical aid, our medical officials try to minimize their own risk. Recent Ministry of Health Order introduced an «Informed voluntary consent to carrying out induced abortion in the first 12 weeks» (of 17.05.2007) which warns a woman about possible serious consequences down to removal of her uterus, thus removing any responsibility from medical staff.

According to the WHO recommendations manual or electric vacuum aspiration together with a medical method of abortion (a combination of mifepristone followed by a prostaglandin) are most appropriate techniques in the first trimester. In Russia ¼ abortions are performed with vacuum-aspiration. And currently the safest technique - medical abortion - had been used in 16.7 thousand cases (in 2006) with total number of abortions being 1.6 million. The most widespread method in Russia is curettage; according to the WHO it should be used only where vacuum aspiration or medical methods of abortion are not available.

Thus, one of the most urgent tasks for the Russian public health is quality improvement of induced abortion technique.

Conclusion

Extending practice of modern contraception use in Russia revealed itself in a continuous trend of abortion reduction. «The abortion culture» of Soviet times is being destroyed. At the same time transition to modern type of fertility regulation, with minimum number of undesired and mistimed pregnancies, stays far from end. The number of induced abortions remains high. Principal cause of a high level of abortions is ineffectively used contraception. Survey data show that higher education and registered partnership (opposite to cohabitation) lead to wider and proper use of more effective contraception.

The Russian society despite wide abortion prevalence strongly disapproves this practice. Unfortunately, a big part of population might support an abortion ban, which would be extremely harmful to public health. Russian medical authorities instead of disseminating safe and effective methods of abortion tend to restrict access to them. In order to reduce prevalence of abortions it is wiser to promote sexual education and family planning services which enable couples to avoid

⁸ Boonstra H et al., *Abortion in Women's Lives*, New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2006.

⁹ World Health Organization. *Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems*. 2003, p. 14.

unwanted pregnancies rather than intimidate the society with evil abortion followed by terrible complications to health.