

The  
Human  
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of  
**abortion**

**A Global Search for Consensus**

**Aníbal Faúndes and José S. Barzelatto**

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Aníbal Faúndes

José Barzelatto

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To Ellen and Juanita, our lifetime companions,  
who helped us understand what it means  
to be a woman in today's world.



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# First Preface

As I was working on this book, I realized how much of my life has been dedicated to dealing with the human drama of abortion. Neither biography nor memoir, this book clearly has its origin in the emotional impact of the suffering of women with abortion complications that I experienced as a young intern at a public hospital in Santiago de Chile in 1953. Witnessing the physical and psychological pain of both younger and older women for weeks on end, listening to their stories, and watching them either die or survive in a severely mutilated state was a strong motivation for me to dedicate a large part of my professional life to finding a way to mitigate their suffering.

For many years I believed that family planning alone was the answer, and I took on the unusual role for an obstetrician (rather than a gynecologist) of working in many different countries in various areas of contraception, from the development of new contraceptive methods to the planning and implementation of nationwide family planning programs. Only after decades of working in the field did it become clear to me that family planning alone was not a sufficient response. I learned that other social initiatives were of equal importance in reducing the number of women who saw abortion as the only way out: the promotion of a fair gender power balance, the availability of sex education for both male and female adolescents, and protection against family and societal rejection for women who choose to keep their babies.

In addition to my belief in the necessity of helping women avoid unwanted pregnancy, I was moved by the social injustice of penalizing women who abort. It is impossible to hear their stories without concluding that these women, far from being criminals, are victims of the ways in which societies are organized. Their biggest sin is being poor, because



even in countries where abortion is legally restricted, women of means can obtain clean, safe abortions.

My heartfelt need to help reduce the suffering caused by unwanted pregnancy and by the criminalization of abortion awakened my realization that the global majority has an incomplete view of the issue and that this widespread dearth of information is the main obstacle to achieving an understanding of and a solution to the problem.

This book, therefore, has the rather utopian intention of influencing politicians and policymakers to adopt and implement social initiatives that have proven effective in reducing abortion and minimizing its consequences on women and on society. Because politicians are moved by public opinion, however, this book has also been written with the hope of reaching a broader audience who will help influence those who have the power to implement social change.

—Aníbal Faúndes

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## Second Preface

As a student and then as a young physician at a university hospital in Chile from the late 1940s to the 1960s, I witnessed the growing epidemic and national tragedy of women who suffered the complications of unsafe abortions, and I was emotionally marked by the experience forever. Although at that time my field of work was internal medicine and I did not have the obstetrical experience of my coauthor, I cared for many women whose late complications following a botched abortion commonly resulted in death. Like most of my colleagues, I was also appalled at the number of women who came to our hospitals to give birth, only to be hurried home within twenty-four hours of delivery after being forced to share a hospital bed with another woman, in order to free beds for the increasing number of women who suffered abortion complications.

At the time, Chile was in the process of becoming industrialized, and low-income women had finally begun to gain access to work in the factories, allowing them to contribute to family income and help increase family status. This new status for women demanded a smaller-family norm, which was facilitated by a progressive drop in child mortality. Women no longer needed to have many children in order to have a few that would survive. In the absence of effective modern contraceptives, the number of abortions increased dramatically, despite the fact that they were legally restricted. The outrage of the Chilean medical profession brought about a government response, which made modern contraceptives freely and widely available through the nation's National Health Service.

Aware that they had been risking their lives, women who had resorted to abortion began using contraceptives as soon as they became available. The results were spectacular. The number of women hospitalized for complications from unsafe abortions, which had been growing

steadily over the previous twenty years, decreased by 50 percent within five years and continued to decrease in subsequent years, as deaths from abortion dropped to one-sixth of their previous level. Within a few short years, the dramatic fall in the number of beds occupied by women with abortion complications meant that the days of two women sharing one maternity ward bed were over.

Chilean society at large and the majority of the country's health professionals were satisfied with the good, albeit partial, results brought about by the accessibility of modern contraceptives, and they pursued the problem of unsafe abortion no further. Abortion was still considered immoral, a sin; legal restriction therefore continued. The tragic consequences for low-income women were ignored. Consequently, unnecessary suffering and death resulting from illegal abortion, although decreased in magnitude, remain a significant social and public health problem to this day.

Since the mid-1960s, my international professional experience has taught me the following: (1) abortion is a global problem, (2) despite characteristics peculiar to different societies, some basic issues are shared, and (3) the number of abortions can be reduced everywhere if we can clarify misunderstandings and thus convert current conflicts into a practical political consensus that will allow the implementation of effective policies.

It is the intention of this book to offer, in a single volume for nonspecialists, the lessons of our experience, both national and international, including all important factors that we have learned about abortion. Our aim is to provide information for public and political discussion, in an effort to enlighten a public debate that has been characterized by extremism and impassioned argument. Both intellectual integrity and mutual respect are needed to fuel a constructive debate.

—José Barzelatto

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# Introduction

Many excellent works on abortion have been published in recent years. Why go to the trouble and effort of writing another book on the subject? We felt an urgent need to do so because we believe that the thousands of pages published in books, in scientific journals, and in the lay press on the subject of abortion do not provide an easily readable, comprehensive view of the issue. We are convinced that providing more factual information is crucial to a better understanding of this personal and social problem, which affects most people directly or indirectly sometime in their lives. Even more important, it is clear to us that without this understanding it will be almost impossible to find a solution to this problem that has such profound physical and emotional implications for so many people in the world today.

Most books published on the subject of abortion concentrate on one aspect of the problem and address an audience already involved in the philosophical, religious, social, or health aspects of the debate. Because these books are not geared toward the general public, most people do not read them and consequently, do not take an active role in the public discussion. This book was written to be accessible to anyone interested in abortion, because we believe this is a subject that affects virtually everyone. There is a need for current and comprehensive information that can help dissipate the prevailing misunderstandings surrounding abortion. We believe that once the “silent” majority is better informed, the cultural changes required in order to reach a political consensus will become possible.

In addition, an accessible and comprehensive review of the abortion issue is essential for nonspecialized opinion leaders and policymakers, who receive most of their information from the opposing views of an

excessively polarized public debate dominated by ideological emotions. It is our view that this situation could be greatly improved if both policymakers and the general public would recognize the false dilemma of having to be either for or against abortion.

Why do we even attempt to take on the enormous task at hand? As our prefaces indicate, we are two physicians from a developing country, both with broad international experience, who have been involved in the problem of abortion since we attended medical school. We have both lived for decades outside our country of birth but remain deeply involved in the human drama of abortion in many different ways and in many different countries around the world. This book reflects what we have learned by personal experience throughout our lives.

*Abortion* is a word that elicits profound emotions in all of us, irrespective of our level of involvement with the issue or the degree of concern shown by the societies in which we live. The twentieth century witnessed a heated rhetorical confrontation between two extreme positions, each of which appeared incapable of taking the other into account or of maintaining a civilized and rational discussion. We postulate that those who adopt such extreme positions, although they claim to represent a large group, actually constitute a relatively small minority. In reality, most people's position with respect to abortion, far from being radical, falls somewhere within a broad range of opinions. Because this less radical majority does not broach the issue with the passion of the extremists, it is less vocal in public. As a result, past and (to an even greater degree) recent public discussions on abortion have been dominated by the two radical extremes.

At one extreme are those who believe that the embryo or fetus must take absolute priority over women's personal decisions and who seem to completely ignore the rights of women. At the other extreme are those who give absolute priority to women's right to decide for themselves whether to continue or terminate a pregnancy and seem to ignore any possible value of the embryo or fetus. These two extremes are represented in the pro-life and pro-choice movements, respectively. Radical pro-life activists consider only the fetus's right to life, disregarding not only the circumstances and quality of the woman's life and the lives of her other children but also the baby's own future. Pro-choice radicals, in turn, negate all value of the embryo or fetus. Neither extreme is open to respectful consideration of the arguments of the other. Any indication that one is willing to pay attention to the arguments of the other is seen as a sign of weakness of conviction, an inroad for the "enemy's"

argument. The controversy is so heated and the emotions are so strong that polarization of public opinion has become very difficult to avoid. It is our argument that this is a false dilemma—that the great majority of people in the world are not indifferent to the suffering of the millions of women who confront the decision to abort every year. The same majority is also not indifferent to the fate of the fetus and sees every abortion as a loss.

The idea that people are divided between those for and those against abortion is simply incorrect. It is, in fact, a great misunderstanding of the real issue. In our experience, the vast majority of both factions is against abortion *per se*. In other words, most people believe that a world without abortion would be a better place for all—but at the same time the vast majority accepts the idea that, under certain circumstances, an induced abortion can be an acceptable moral choice.

If the opposing sides realized the lesser degree of their differences, we believe it would open the door to a constructive dialogue that could lead to a consensus on at least some vital points. It is our contention that once a rational, civilized dialogue is begun, almost everyone—including the less radical of the two extremes—will agree to the promotion and implementation of the social changes that have proven to reduce the incidence and the consequences of induced abortion. We believe that this is a difficult but not an impossible task. The aim of this book is to help initiate such a dialogue.

In addition, this book is of interest not only to students, teachers, and activists involved in human rights issues in general and sexual and reproductive rights in particular but also to those who deal with sex education, family life and religion, and public health problems. This includes societies the world over, because the controversy of abortion is universal.

Throughout this book, we illustrate our points using real-life stories that we have witnessed in various countries. Each situation evolved as described; however, except where we were authorized to relate the stories intact, we have changed names and extraneous details to respect the privacy of those involved. We thank everyone whose story gave us and will, we hope, give our readers, a better understanding of the human drama of abortion.

This book is divided into four parts:

**Part I:** The Human Drama of Abortion describes the main aspects of the complex personal and social problem of abortion. We start by listening

to women explain why they decided to have an abortion and then clarify the meanings of the terms used in relation to the issue. A worldwide review of the problem—its alarming magnitude and its tragic consequences—follows. The section ends with an analysis of why women get pregnant when they do not want to and when pregnancy becomes so unwanted that women decide to abort.

**Part II: The Values Involved** starts by describing the conflicting values faced by health professionals who deal with abortions. It goes on to review the religious and ethical values that influence the behavior of all those involved and ends with an overview of the reflection of these values in the legislation of countries around the world.

**Part III: Improving the Situation**, while taking into account the facts stated in Part I and the values discussed in Part II, reviews the interventions that have proven effective in decreasing the number of abortions and in reducing the human, social, and economic costs. The section ends by describing the paradoxical position of groups that perceive their role as staunch campaigners in the fight against abortion but that remain opposed to many of the interventions which have proven to be effective means of abortion reduction.

**Part IV: Seeking a Consensus** closes the book by analyzing the need for societies to reach a political agreement about abortion. It is our belief that this is an achievable task because it is possible for reasonable people with very different overall views to identify and expand common ideas and shared values that can become the basis for a political consensus. To this end, and based on the evidence described in the first three parts of the book, Part IV identifies nine such significant points and consequent actions that might provide the basis for a social consensus that would allow societies to deal more effectively with the human drama of abortion. The book ends with a commentary on the process required to reach this goal, which is the final aim of this book.