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Illegal Abortion: Truth vs. Fiction

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Introduction

Abortion has remained one of the most contentious issues in American political discourse since the Supreme Court legalized the procedure in the 1973 decision *Roe v. Wade*. Numerous emotional, statistical, and even Biblical arguments have been formulated in debates over this topic. However, arguably the two most common assertions supporting abortion are that thousands of women perished due to unsafe abortions prior to *Roe v. Wade*, and that laws restricting or outlawing abortion are ineffective in reducing abortion rates. As an example, former President of Planned Parenthood Leana Wen made the following claim in May 2019: “Before *Roe v. Wade*, thousands of women died every year – and because of extreme attacks on safe, legal abortion care, this could happen again right here in America.”¹ Nevertheless, this assertion is contradicted by the best available evidence. Numerous studies demonstrate the success of abortion bans in dramatically reducing abortion rates. Similar studies also show that more modest restrictions, such as parental involvement laws, informed consent requirements, and restrictions on public funding of abortion have been associated with more modest, yet still statistically significant reductions in abortion rates. Furthermore, Scripture overwhelmingly supports the value of life in the womb and calls on Christians to protect vulnerable life. In the face of the best available scientific evidence, as well as Biblical commands, Christians must be proactive in ending abortion throughout society.

Moral Clarification

Before the statistical falsehoods of these common pro-abortion claims are examined, a moral framework must be established. The claim that abortion should be made legal since illegal abortions are dangerous to women likely assumes that the unborn are not human. Such an assumption contradicts the overwhelming support in the field of embryology² and in Scripture that unborn life is indeed human. However, if a person making this argument assumes the humanity of the unborn, then they are implying that one life is worth more than another and that they have the legal authority to decide who lives and who dies. In effect, such people are claiming that since some people may be harmed while trying to kill others, these actions must be made safe and legal. Even some pro-abortion figures see the logical and moral absurdity of this argument. Pro-abortion advocate Mary Anne Warren noted that “the fact that restricting access to abortion has tragic side effects does not, in itself, show that the restrictions are unjustified, since murder is wrong regardless of the consequences of prohibiting it.”³

Maternal Deaths and Abortion

Many public figures in the abortion lobby, such as former Planned Parenthood President Leana Wen, incorrectly claim that thousands of women died every year because of complications

¹ Glenn Kessler, “Planned Parenthood’s false stat: ‘Thousands’ of women died every year before Roe,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/29/planned-parenthoods-false-stat-thousands-women-died-every-year-before-roe/>.

² “Life Begins at Fertilization with the Embryo’s Conception,” *Princeton University*, <https://www.princeton.edu/~prolife/articles/embryoquotes2.html>.

³ Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2009), p.158.

arising from illegal abortions prior to the legalization of abortion.⁴ This claim was fabricated by two leading figures in the movement to legalize abortion: Dr. Larry Lader and Dr. Bernard Nathanson. These two men worked for the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, which is now known as the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL). While Dr. Nathanson committed a multitude of abortions himself, he became a pro-life advocate after he was horrified by the sight of one of the abortions he performed. Afterwards, Nathanson admitted that “when we spoke of [deaths due to illegal abortion], it was always 5,000 to 10,000 per year. I confess I knew the figures were totally false.”⁵ Nathanson is not the only one to recognize the false nature of this claim. In 1960, Mary Calderone, a former medical director at Planned Parenthood, said that, “abortion is no longer a dangerous procedure...in 1957 there were only 260 deaths in the whole country attributed to abortions of any kind. 90 percent of all illegal abortions are presently being done by physicians.”⁶

Research indicates that in the 25 years preceding the legalization of abortion, the average number of annual maternal deaths from illegal abortion was 250, with the high being 388 in 1948. In 1966, which was before the first state legalized abortion on demand, the number of maternal deaths had declined to 120. Dr. Christopher Tietze, a prominent statistician affiliated with Planned Parenthood, has asserted that these are accurate figures within a 10% margin of error.⁷ A 1975 report from the National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Medicine, came to a similar conclusion about illegal abortions. This report stated that the estimate of 5,000 to 10,000 deaths resulting from illegal abortion each year was “hardly plausible, considering that the total number of deaths of women aged 15-44 from all causes in the United States is approximately 50,000 annually, and the total number of deaths due to abortion reported by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) has been below 500 since 1958 and below 100 since 1971.”⁸ The Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood, reinforced these findings. While this organization claimed that there were 2,700 maternal deaths in 1930 and 1,700 deaths in 1940 resulting from illegal abortions, the incidence of these deaths declined dramatically with the rise of antibiotics.⁹ Accordingly, only slightly more than 300 maternal deaths resulting from illegal abortion occurred in 1950. This survey estimated that illegal abortion deaths declined to less than 300 in 1959 and less than 200 in 1965.¹⁰

It is worth noting that in 1972, the year before abortion was legalized nationwide, 39 women died from illegal abortions, while 24 died from legal abortions. The following year, 19 women died from illegal abortions, while 25 died from legal abortions.¹¹ Also, many pro-abortion figures assert that abortion restrictions will increase the maternal mortality rate. However, this assertion is not supported by real-world evidence. Due to numerous Supreme Court rulings, abortion remains legal throughout most of a woman’s pregnancy in the entire

⁴ *Live Action*, “The Pro-Life Reply to: ‘Women will die from illegal abortions,’” June 25, 2019, Video, 4:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1s9WOBihWU&list=PLRCroccSjXWRos6E6HjlqHHd_kgm7o&index=3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Randy Alcorn, *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments*, (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2000), p. 173-174.

⁸ Carole Novielli, “Don’t be fooled: Abortion bans didn’t result in thousands of deaths,” *Live Action*. May 20, 2019. <https://www.liveaction.org/news/fooled-abortion-bans-didnt-thousands-deaths/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

United States, with abortion even being permitted up until the moment of birth in 8 states.¹² However, the U.S. maternal mortality rate is 14 per 100,000 live births¹³, which is a high figure when compared to other industrialized nations. It is substantially higher than the rates in Poland and Malta, two countries with strong restrictions on abortion. In Poland, abortion is illegal in all cases except for rare exceptions, yet the maternal mortality rate is 3 per 100,000 live births. In Malta, this rate is 9 per 100,000 live births, even though abortion is illegal without exception.¹⁴

While the deaths from illegal abortion prior to *Roe* were highly exaggerated, many women still died from legal abortions in the United States after *Roe*. Two recent examples are Tonya Reeves and Cree Erwin, both of whom died from legal abortions that were committed at Planned Parenthood clinics.¹⁵ Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found the following death statistics resulting from abortion in the several years following *Roe*: 1974 – 6 from illegal abortions, 26 from legal abortions; 1975 – 4 from illegal abortions, 29 from legal abortions; 1976 – 2 from illegal abortions; 11 from legal abortions; 1977 – 4 from illegal abortions, 17 from legal abortions; 1978 – 7 from illegal abortions, 9 from legal abortions; 1979 – 0 from illegal abortions, 22 from legal abortions.¹⁶

While the CDC has indicated a substantial decline in the number of abortion-related deaths in more recent years, other sources have observed such deaths as continuing unabated for many years following *Roe v. Wade*. The *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* claimed that “the New York City Department of Health reported seven legal abortion-related deaths that occurred between 1980 and 1985. The cause of death in all cases was attributed directly to general anesthesia.”¹⁷ Additionally, four abortion-caused deaths occurred in just one Florida clinic between 1979 and 1983. Also, in 1986, four doctors and researchers put forth a study which claimed that no less than 193 deaths from legal abortion occurred between 1972 and 1985.¹⁸ One researcher even claimed to have uncovered evidence of 300 women who have died from legal abortion.¹⁹ Furthermore, a 1978 Chicago Sun-Times investigation of abortion clinics in Chicago revealed that twelve women had died as a result of legal abortion, but that abortion was not listed as a cause of death in any of these cases. This means that there were 12 unreported abortion deaths in just one city, when only 21 deaths from legal abortion were reported throughout the entire country the previous year.²⁰ Finally, Dr. Dennis Cavanaugh wrote the following in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*:

“There has been no major impact on the number of women dying from abortion in the U.S. ...After all, it really makes no difference whether a woman dies from legal or illegal abortion, she is dead nonetheless. I find no comfort in the fact that legal abortion is now the leading cause of abortion-related maternal deaths in the U.S.”²¹

¹² Amanda Prestigiaco, “These 8 States Allow Abortion Up to the Moment Of Birth,” *Daily Wire*. January 30, 2019.

<https://www.dailywire.com/news/these-8-states-allow-abortion-moment-birth-amanda-prestigiaco>.

¹³ *Live Action*, “The Pro-Life Reply to: ‘Women will die from illegal abortions.’”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Novielli, “Don’t be fooled: Abortions bans didn’t result in thousands of deaths.”

¹⁷ Alcorn, *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments*, p. 175-176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

The claim that women would ignore abortion restrictions if it became illegal again does not appear to be on solid ground, since one survey found 72 percent of women who have had abortions claimed that they would not have done so if the procedure had been illegal.²² Also, the total number of abortions committed prior to abortion's legalization was much lower than in post-*Roe* America. Researchers Barbara Syska, Thomas Hilgers, and Dennis O'Hare estimate that the number of illegal abortions which occurred annually prior to 1967 ranged from 39,000 in 1950 to 210,000 in 1967. The annual mean during this time frame was 98,000 abortions each year.²³ However, the abortion rate has skyrocketed since its legalization in 1973. This dramatic increase can be observed most drastically in the years immediately following *Roe v. Wade*. In 1973, there were almost 800,000 which occurred throughout the United States. The abortion rate that year was 16.3 abortions per 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 44. By the late 1970s, there were approximately 1.5 million abortions that were committed annually. The abortion rate had risen to 29.3 per 1,000 women ages 15-44 by 1980.²⁴ In the past 47 years, over 60 million abortions have collectively taken place in the United States.²⁵

The history of abortion legality in Poland demonstrates that making abortion illegal again would not harm women. During the Cold War, Poland, along with many other nations under the control of the Soviet Iron Curtain, legalized abortion for the first three months of pregnancy. These abortions were supported by state funds. Between 1960 and 1985, the official number of abortions committed annually in Poland ranged from 135,000 to 170,000. However, with the advent of the Solidarity Independence movement and the influence of the pro-life Pope John Paul II, the number of annual abortions in the country had declined to 59,417 by 1990.²⁶ After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the implementation of strong pro-life laws, the number of induced abortions in Poland fell to 253 by 1998. The reasons given for these abortions were as follows: 199 were committed to save the "life and health" of the woman, 45 were committed due to fetal impairment, and 9 were committed due to rape or incest.²⁷ Contrary to the expectation of pro-abortion figures, there have been 25% fewer miscarriages and 30% fewer women dying in Poland than there were when abortion was legal in the country. In an annual report in the late 1990s, it was revealed that 21 women died from pregnancy-related complications. However, none of these deaths were listed as being caused by illegal abortion.²⁸

Effectiveness of Abortion Bans

Pro-abortion figures frequently assert that banning or restricting abortion is pointless since such laws do not impact abortion rates in any significant way. As an example, a 2012 and 2016 study from the U.K.'s medical journal *The Lancet*, as well as a March 2018 Guttmacher Institute survey titled, "Abortion Worldwide 2017: Uneven Progress and Unequal Access," evaluates abortion data from a wide variety of countries. These three studies note that global abortion rates have declined substantially since the early 1990s. They also assert that abortion rates are falling at a faster rate in developed nations with legal abortion than in developing

²² Alcorn, *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments*, p. 158.

²³ Klusendorf. *The Case for Life*, p.158.

²⁴ *Live Action*, "Debunking 2 big myths on abortion bans," July 12, 2019, Video, 2:06, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2087847091511627>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Alcorn, *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments*, p. 174-175

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

nations with abortion bans. However, the Guttmacher study only lists seven countries as having significant legal protections for the unborn, while 94 developing countries heavily restrict abortion.²⁹ These countries are primarily located in Africa, Latin and South America, and the Middle East. Not only do these developing nations constitute a substantially larger sample size than the seven listed in the survey, but they have a much higher poverty rate as well. In none of these three studies did the authors adequately adjust for differences in poverty, demographic trends, economic growth, or other key factors.³⁰

A study that did take these factors into consideration was authored by Philip Levine and Douglas Staiger and was published in the *Journal of Law and Economics* in 2004. Unlike the three other studies, this study examined how changes in abortion laws affected the incidence of abortion. Examples of such changes in abortion laws abound in Eastern European countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, abortion was illegal in Romania during the Soviet era. However, in 1990, it became legal upon request for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.³¹ Also, Albania and Bulgaria's restrictions on abortion were repealed in 1991 and 1989, respectively.³² On the other hand, Poland made its abortion laws stricter during this period. While abortion had been legal in Poland for the first 12 weeks of a woman's pregnancy during the Soviet era, most abortions were deemed illegal in the country in 1993.³³ The authors of this *Journal of Law and Economics* study adjusted for factors such as economic growth, inflation, and the number of women in each country of childbearing age. As a result, they found that significant legal restrictions on abortion, such as those in Poland, lead to abortion rates being reduced to 5% of what they otherwise would have been. In countries where abortion is legal only for medical or social reasons, abortion rates are 25% lower than similar countries where abortion is legal on demand.³⁴

The increase in abortion rates following the liberalization of abortion laws is a fact that can be observed in the United States. In the U.S., the move towards legalizing abortion began in 1967, when Colorado expanded the legal availability of abortion, even though it was not legal on demand at this time. However, abortion was widely legal in Alaska, California, Hawaii, New York, and Washington by the end of 1970. In New York, there was no in-state residency requirement for obtaining an abortion. Accordingly, 58% of abortions in New York between 1971 and 1972 were performed on women from other states.³⁵ In 1973, abortion was legalized nationwide by means of the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*. As a result, the abortion rate increased from 13.2 per 1,000 women of childbearing age in 1972 to 19.3 per 1,000 in 1974.³⁶ Following this legalization, public support for legal abortion, as well as the number of abortion clinics and the abortion rate, all continued to increase. As an example, by 1980, the abortion rate was 29.3 per thousand women of reproductive age, constituting a 52% increase since 1974.³⁷

²⁹ Michael J. New, "How the Legal Status of Abortion Impacts Abortion Rates," *Charlotte Lozier Institute*, May 23, 2018. <https://lozierinstitute.org/how-the-legal-status-of-abortion-impacts-abortion-rates/>.

³⁰ New, "How the Legal Status of Abortion Impacts Abortion Rates."

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Effectiveness of Abortion Restrictions

Complete abortion bans are not the only effective measure for reducing abortion rates. Parental involvement laws, informed consent requirements, and limits on abortion funding also help to achieve this end. A 2009 literature review from the Guttmacher Institute identified 16 peer-reviewed studies detailing the effects of parental involvement laws. Dr. Michael J. New found three additional studies dealing with these laws. Each one of these 19 studies noted a decline in the in-state abortion rate for minors in states with parental involvement laws. This decline ranged from 13% to 42%, with the average range being 15-20%.³⁸ While some studies claim that such laws lead to an increase in minors seeking out-of-state abortions, others find little to no evidence to support this claim.³⁹ On this note, two prominent studies have asserted that parental consent laws in Massachusetts and Texas have resulted in the in-state abortion rate declining more than the out of state abortion rate increased. Respectively, these studies are, “Parental Consent for Abortion: Impact of the Massachusetts Law,” which appeared in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 1986, and “Changes in Abortions and Births and the Texas Parental Involvement Law,” which appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 2006.⁴⁰ The Massachusetts study found that in the year that Massachusetts’s parental involvement law went into effect, between 50 to 100 minors gave birth rather than have abortions. Additionally, the Texas study found that the birth rate for 17-year-old women increased by two percent following the implementation of the law. These findings are in keeping with results from other studies.⁴¹ For example, a 2003 *Journal of Health Economics* study found that parental involvement laws reduced the pregnancy rates of women between the ages of 15 and 17 by four to nine percent. Additionally, a 2008 *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* study found that these laws actually decrease the gonorrhea rate for women under 20 by 12-20%. Finally, a study published in the journal *Economic Inquiry* found that the number of women between the ages of 15 and 17 who committed suicide fell by 11-21% in the aftermath of the adoption of these laws.⁴²

Informed consent laws require women seeking abortions to be given information about fetal development, health risks surrounding abortion, and information about sources that can support single mothers. These laws are also effective in reducing abortions. Three studies examined Mississippi’s 1993 informed consent law and concluded that it resulted in a statistically significant reduction in the abortion rate.⁴³ Also, Dr. Michael J. New conducted two studies in 2010 and 2014 that used data from almost every state over a 21-year timeframe to determine the effectiveness of pro-life laws. The first study found that the 33 state-level informed consent laws reduced abortion rates by an average of 0.74 to 1.10 abortions per 1,000 women of childbearing age. This corresponds with a 3.7% to 5.6% reduction in the national abortion rate. New’s 2014 study analyzed informed consent laws, which require women to view color photos of fetal development prior to the abortion procedure. These requirements were found to reduce abortion rates by 2-7%. Also, informed consent laws that require two separate visits to the abortion clinic reduce abortion rates by 7-12%.⁴⁴

³⁸ New, “How the Legal Status of Abortion Impacts Abortion Rates.”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Restrictions on public funding of abortion lead to a significant reduction in the abortion rate. A 2009 Guttmacher Institute literature review of 18 peer-reviewed studies, which analyzed the impact of state-level restrictions on Medicaid funding of abortions, found this to be true.⁴⁵ More specifically, fifteen of these studies found there was statistically significant evidence that abortion rates declined following a reduction in Medicaid funding. In North Carolina, abortions were publicly funded throughout the 1990s by means of a state abortion fund that often ran out of money. When funding was unavailable, 37% of women who would have had an abortion carried their child to term.⁴⁶

The decline of abortions following public funding restrictions is not a phenomenon exclusive to state-level legislation. Between 1973 and 1977, the federal government spent approximately \$50 million annually to fund approximately 300,000 abortions each year through Medicaid.⁴⁷ To counteract this public funding, Republican Illinois Representative Henry Hyde proposed an amendment to achieve this end in 1976. At the time, Hyde said that the United States “cannot in logic and conscience help fund the execution of these innocent, defenseless human lives.”⁴⁸ His amendment has subsequently been referred to as the Hyde Amendment, and it has been passed onto every annual spending bill since 1976. Dr. Michael J. New claims that this amendment saves approximately 60,000 lives every year and over 2 million lives over the course of the past several decades.⁴⁹

Biblical Support for the Unborn

According to Scripture, life undoubtedly begins in the womb. Jeremiah 1:5 records the Lord saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”⁵⁰ Isaiah 44:2 states, “thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun who I have chosen.”⁵¹ Finally, Psalm 139:13-16 proclaims:

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”⁵²

Since the Bible clearly affirms the reality of life in the womb, and since pro-life laws have been demonstrated to be effective in reducing abortion rates, Christians are called by God to fight abortion both personally and legally throughout society.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Arina Grossu, “The Hyde Amendment has saved 2 million lives. Democrats want to kill it,” *The Federalist*, September 30, 2016. <https://thefederalist.com/2016/09/30/hyde-amendment-saved-2-million-lives-democrats-want-end/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Jeremiah 1:5.

⁵¹ Isaiah 44:2.

⁵² Psalm 139:13-16.

Scripture also repeatedly calls for Christians to support the helpless and needy. Matthew 7:12 records the Golden Rule: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”⁵³ Matthew 18:10 and 14 note, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven; so it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”⁵⁴ Isaiah 1:17 commands: “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”⁵⁵ Finally, Psalm 82:3-4 proclaims, “give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”⁵⁶ These verses highlight God’s calling for His people to care for one another, especially those who cannot help themselves. The unborn are the pinnacle of the helpless, as they cannot defend themselves in word or deed; as such, it is the responsibility of the Church to protect children in the womb so that they may have the opportunity to live and grow.

Conclusion

Claims of thousands of women dying from illegal abortions each year are nothing short of inaccurate scare tactics that contradict objective reality. Not only did a small fraction of this number perish due to illegal abortions, but many maternal deaths occurred due to legal abortions in the years after *Roe v. Wade*. Additionally, contrary to the assertions of pro-abortion figures, laws that either restrict or outlaw abortion led to a substantial decline in the abortion rate. Furthermore, the Bible unequivocally assigns precious value to unborn life and commands believers to fight on behalf of the needy and helpless. For all of these reasons, born-again believers must be motivated by scientific data and Scriptural commands to abolish abortion throughout society. Such a task will not come easily. However, Christians can rest assured that through God’s all-redeeming strength, anything can be accomplished. Like God said to Joshua before the march on Jericho: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”⁵⁷ Christians should not shy away from issues such as abortion; rather, Christians should face them head on, reflecting the love and just nature of God to all.

⁵³ Matthew 7:12.

⁵⁴ Matthew 18:10,14.

⁵⁵ Isaiah 1:17.

⁵⁶ Psalm 82:3-4.

⁵⁷ Joshua 1:9.

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