

Induced Abortion in Japan: From the viewpoint of the media

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Introduction

The media seldom addresses the issue of abortion openly.

In the 1970's, ideas about women's liberation were sweeping the world. At that time, people actively discussed the legality of abortion from the viewpoint of the women's right to choose whether to give birth or not.

The idea of reproductive health and rights was then spread internationally by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994. Religious differences and other factors led to disagreement over the appropriateness of abortion itself in the international community, arousing controversy in the media. However, it did not raise much attention within Japan. Although roughly 220,000 cases of induced abortion were performed legally in Fiscal 2009 in Japan, there was hardly any occasion for those women to honestly speak of their emotional conflict.

As one who has covered the issue of reproductive health in broadcasts, I would like to share my current opinions.

Abortion Issue in Japan: From NHK programs

Searching through newspaper articles within this past year, there were about 50 to 80 articles in

each major newspaper that included the word "abortion." Of those, the most popular subjects concern affairs overseas, such as the pros and cons of abortion that attracted people's attention in the US mid-term elections. Other common subjects included illegal abortion without consent, cases of phone fraud pretending to charge a fee for abortion, damages from sexual assault, and the need for sex education. But not many dealt with the women who were actually involved in abortion. The annual number of cases of legal abortion, one of the national maternal and child health statistics, shows a decreasing trend year after year. Given such situation, newspaper articles seldom mention such women. Many people are surprised when they hear that 220,000 women a year choose to have an abortion. Each woman who chooses to have an abortion must carry various thoughts and feelings, yet the media has not offered the opportunity to ponder this issue.

Listed below are some specific examples from archived programs of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).

- Good Morning Journal: What is going to happen? Eugenic Protection Act (Broadcast Jan 31, 1990)
- Today's Health: Induced abortion and the body (Broadcast Nov 8, 1990)
- Sunday Special: Can we avoid the catastrophe? United Nation's World Population Conference (Broadcast Sep 11, 1994)

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- ETV2000: Series “Wavering Men and Women,” From the NHK’s field survey on sex (Broadcast Apr 17–20, 2000)
- NHK Special: Conversation of “Life”—induced abortion, and the groping by two physicians (Broadcast Oct 1, 2005)
- News Flash National Capital Region: Can’t talk about “abortion”—how to save the solitude of women (Broadcast Oct 28, 2005)

From these programs, I would like to describe the two programs with which I was personally involved.

Around 1990, when the revision of the Eugenic Protection Act (which was re-titled Maternal Protection Act in 1996) was being discussed, there was a movement to shorten the gestational limit for legal abortion from less than 24 weeks of pregnancy to less than 22 weeks because medical progress had reduced the gestational limit of fetal viability. The word “eugenic protection” itself had raised a question, but changing the limit to 22 weeks involved some difficult consequences. The morning talk show *Good Morning Journal: What is going to happen? Eugenic Protection Act* had the effect of informing people that shortening the limit was not an easy matter. A girl who was being interviewed during the program was a victim of sexual assault from her father-in-law, and she had an abortion at an obstetrics located far from home. She was already past the 22nd week of pregnancy, and it was barely before the 24th week when she underwent the procedure.

Abortion is not something a female willingly hopes to have. On the contrary, the women and girls who reached the decision to have an abortion had their own difficult circumstances that led them to make the decision. Thinking about their background, I grieved over the various situations they faced that were not mentioned in the legal and biological arguments, which are remote from reality.

The girl stayed at my home for about a month afterward. I only met the girl while I was covering the story, and she and I had no previous connection at all. But she had no ally and had no place to turn to where she could heal her mental scars and recover. There is no question that an event like this will affect her life. How will she approach sexual behavior from now on? Can she react positively toward getting married, becoming pregnant, and giving birth? Although I was much older and experienced in life, I could not

find the right words to console her. There was no counselor or support system to which she could turn. In actuality, abortion was nowhere near the “choice in life” back then, and the choice of whether to give birth or not hardly applied to the situations of the time (Note: Effective from January 1991, the gestational limit for legal abortion was changed to less than 22 weeks of pregnancy, based on the Ministry of Health and Welfare Undersecretary Notice of March 1990.)

At ICPD 1994, the subject of abortion became the point at issue. In some religions, abortion is completely banned, and abortion as the women’s right in such circumstances was the focus of dispute. In *Sunday Special: Can we avoid the catastrophe?* broadcasted in those days, China’s one child policy was introduced as part of the program, along with a scene in which the village authorities demanded that a woman who was carrying her second child undergo an abortion procedure. I cannot forget the face of the woman as she came out of the village clinic after the procedure. Her expression was somewhat sad and perplexed, it was indescribable. The United Nations do not approve of abortion as a family planning method. Reproductive rights are to promote family planning without resorting to abortion, with the purpose of avoiding risky abortion. The interpretation of abortion itself is entrusted to the legal system of each nation. In some countries, abortion is permitted only when the mother’s life is in danger, even when the mother is the victim of sexual assault. But in some other countries, abortion is legal when the woman requests it. Compared to those countries, Japan is unique in that there are many applicable conditions involving “economic reasons.” However, Japanese people are rarely aware of this uniqueness.

Together with NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, NHK conducted “a survey on sexual behavior and consciousness among Japanese” in 1999. Apparently, this survey was to form the basis of the program *ETV2000: Series “Wavering Men and Women,”* according to its producer. The relationships between men and women were undergoing major changes within Japanese society. This program intended to directly address the issue of sex, which is the origin of human bonds in families and society. Randomly selected 3,600 people between the ages of 16 and 69 were surveyed, of which 2,103 responded. This was

perhaps the first large-scale scientific survey regarding the sexual behavior and consciousness of Japanese people.

Based on this survey, the first episode of the program *ETV2000: Series "Wavering Men and Women"* was produced, under the title of *Abortion rate at 43%—couples that cannot manage birth control*. It turned out that 43% of females who have become pregnant had experienced abortion, which was a shocking figure. (Incidentally, by then it was already known that 36% of minors between the ages of 16 to 19 have experienced sex and that 19% of adults in their 20s, 30s, and 40s were sexless, which are now being raised as problems.) This figure, which was clearly high for an industrially advanced country, had been boosted by the number of married women in their 30s and 40s. Because contraception in Japan was mainly through the use of condoms, the program raised the point that "sex is something in which the male takes the lead, and perhaps the female cannot speak out about birth control in her marriage."

As the reason for abortion, opinions such as "I already have three children" (age 39) and "it's not the right time" (age 25) were introduced during the program. An 18 year-old single female who had no choice but to lose her first baby said, "Why do only women have to go through such things..." feeling heartbroken. Her partner was also 18 years old, and the abortion was for economic reasons. Some also pointed out that the relationship with the partner went downhill afterwards, and others mentioned that they began to distrust men.

The programs that were successively broadcasted in 2005 actually broached the area of personal feelings. *NHK Special: Conversation of "Life"* was produced by a male director and came from the viewpoint of the physicians who had to perform the abortion procedure. On the other hand, *News Flash National Capital Region: Can't talk about "abortion"* was produced by a female director. The former program addressed the obstetricians' wish to persuade pregnant women not to have an abortion if at all possible (although such persuasion rarely works), while the latter described the reality where those women who chose abortion cannot speak about their feelings and keep them bottled up inside. Both programs mentioned the data from the Ministry of Health and Welfare of Japan that 1 out of 6 females have

experienced abortion, on the premise that it is an issue that involves many people. Especially *Can't talk about "abortion"* openly addressed women's conflict, standing close to the feelings of women that had not been voiced before.

The voices of real women who underwent abortion were introduced in this program. One woman consulted a friend and was told angrily, "Why didn't you use contraceptive methods?" When one woman finally visited the obstetrician, she was taken to the operation room before she had sufficient time in the interview to organize her thoughts—this woman still carries an internal conflict. "Giving birth to another baby after having an abortion did not heal my mental scars." "I named the unborn baby, and I still remember." "My husband seems to have forgotten about it, and I cannot forgive him for that." The importance of counseling was conveyed in order to address these women's feelings.

The female director who produced the program shared several insights of those women's conflicts over abortion. *Because the decision had to be made quickly, I am not sure if my choice was correct. I am not convinced. I cannot ask for advice from anyone. My partner thinks differently. I don't feel the obstetrician is on my side. I just don't get the idea of informed consent. There is no counseling service available. I can't trust men. I'm sexless. Can I get pregnant after an abortion? Will my previous abortion affect my next baby?*

According to the general study report of "Comprehensive study for reducing induced abortion based on national status survey" (chief researcher: Yuji Taketani) (conducted as part of the Integrated Research Project on Children and Families, funded under the Fiscal 2008 Health, Labour and Welfare Scientific Research Grant), when the women had an abortion, they felt "sorry for the fetus" (45.1%) or "a sense of overwhelming remorse" (16.4%), and only 13.1% said "I thought it was the necessary choice for my life." A system to support these women's feelings should be considered.

Concluding Remarks

In 2010, NHK broadcasted *Is it safe? "Sex" surrounding children* in the morning talk show *Asaichi*. As mobile phones and the Internet become popular, the situations that are happening to teens are far beyond what adults imagine.

There are girls who actually believe that “you cannot get pregnant the first time you have sex.” There are young teenagers who frequently exchange e-mails with men they meet over the Internet, who have sex immediately after meeting, which can lead to pregnancy and abortion.

The number of abortions across age groups is decreasing in Japan, except that abortion at the

age 14 or less is increasing. The figure was 308 in Fiscal 2005 and 390 in Fiscal 2009, so it increased by 1.3-fold. School education on sex and contraception is insufficient. In a society flooded with information, sending messages specifically for teens is critical in order to convey the significance of protecting their own body.

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