Abortion in Romania: The Consequences of Pronatalist Policy during the Ceaușescu Era | Anna Jasmine Kirkorian

Questions about whether, how and when to reproduce are fundamental to a conception of human rights since they deal so intimately with bodily integrity and individual autonomy. Nevertheless, many countries today have enacted or are seeking to enact restrictive reproductive policies ranging from a complete ban on abortion in Poland to decreased access to abortion services in the United States. Romania provides an extreme case study of the unintended consequences of restrictive fertility control.

The human rights movement grew as a response to the atrocities committed during the two world wars of the 20th century. The signing of various international conventions over the course of the century, the most prominent of which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, indicated a profound shift in the conception of individual rights and governmental obligations to ensure each citizen’s ability to exercise these rights. A right is the “legal or moral entitlement to do something or refrain from doing something or obtain or refrain from obtaining an action, thing or recognition in civil society.” Generally, each right is accompanied by a corresponding obligation on the part of the society to ensure the function of the right. Each government has a corresponding obligation to ensure that people can exercise their reproductive rights. According to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo on October 18, 1994:

Reproductive rights [are] the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so; the rights to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health; and the right to make decision concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence.

This conference marked the first time a body of representative nations was assembled to discuss issues of population and development within the framework of human rights. Thus, the definition of reproductive rights, agreed upon by all participants, represented an important step forward in the reaffirmation of a basic human right that has been largely ignored throughout the world, particularly with respect to women’s access to adequate reproductive health services including contraceptive education and accessibility, pre- and post-natal care and access to abortion.

Romania, under the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, presents an extreme example of the potential short and long-term consequences of ignoring the basic human right of freedom of reproductive and sexual choice. From 1966-1989, Romania was the focus of one of the most stringent population policies in the entire Soviet Union. Population policy refers to interventions that are designed to directly influence the development of the population or that
create conditions for the development of the population in accordance with the long-term objectives of the state. Pronatalist population measures are those that deliberately attempt to maintain a positive growth of fertility, typically by increasing the birth rate.²

In Romania, each citizen’s basic right to procreative autonomy was bypassed in favor of government control of reproduction in order to achieve the political pronatalist goal of increasing fertility. In 1966, following Ceauşescu’s promotion to head of the party, abortion was banned and the importation of contraceptives was discontinued. These coercive laws brought the state directly into the intimate lives and bodies of its citizens.³ The private act of reproduction was recast as a political duty essential to the survival of the state, and the replenishment of the labor force.

Furthermore, the state either ignored sexual education altogether⁴ or else engaged in a deliberate campaign of misinformation regarding the risks of contraception, thus violating the right of individuals to “have information, education and means” to exercise their reproductive rights. As a result of the lacking or erroneous sexual education during the communist era, many individuals today still are not fully informed about sexual health including the risks and benefits of different contraceptive methods.⁵

Despite coercive state-sponsored demographic policy, individuals, especially women, in communist Romania continued to exercise their reproductive rights to “decide… the number, spacing and timing of children.” The banning of legal abortion, and the lack of access to contraception, led to the use of clandestine abortion as the primary fertility control method in a population with no history of contraceptive use and suffering from widespread economic deprivation. Clandestine abortions are those performed outside of the medical sphere, typically by untrained individuals in unsanitary conditions. Thus, one of the short-term consequences of the restriction of reproductive rights was the extremely high rate of maternal mortality during the communist period, 87% of which was associated with illegal abortion. In fact, at its height, Romania had the highest maternal mortality in all of Europe by a factor of ten.⁶

Immediately following the revolution and deposition of Ceauşescu in 1989, abortion was legalized and contraceptives began to be imported. Legal abortion rates reached the highest level in the entire world with approximately four abortions for every live birth. The transition from clandestine to legal abortion was accompanied by an immediate and significant drop in maternal mortality. Nevertheless, one of the long term consequences of restrictive fertility policy has been the elevated abortion rates in Romania.⁷

The objective of this project was to identify the factors behind the elevated abortion rate in Romania. After extensive interviewing of women and doctors in Romania, it became clear that the interaction of three crucial factors, namely the use of abortion as the primary fertility control method during the communist era, the inadequacy of current sexual education and current widespread poverty, is responsible for the elevated abortion rate in Romania today.

Abortion is one of the safest surgical procedures, carrying a far lower risk of complications than childbirth for example.⁸ Abortions are performed by the introduction of an
instrument, or chemical agent, into the cervix in order to promote dilation. Once the cervix is successfully dilated, the contents of the uterus are removed, typically by suction. Despite their relative safety when performed by trained professionals in sanitary conditions, abortions still represent invasive surgical procedures that require anesthesia. When these risks are compared to the minimal risks associated with the use of modern contraceptive methods, such as oral contraceptives or condoms, it is clear that reducing the abortion rate in Romania is a legitimate public health goal to be pursued by the Romanian government and international aid organizations.

One of the most important steps that has been taken by the Romanian government in order to lower the abortion rate is the implementation of a sexual education curriculum by the Ministry of Education in 2003. Following the revolution, Romania experienced an influx of Western culture via television, radio and news issues as well as the complete overhaul of the market from a planned economy to a market economy. As will be discussed below, the transition to a market economy was accompanied by a steep rise in poverty throughout the country. As a result of these cultural and socioeconomic changes, young people, especially adolescents, are starting their sexual lives at a younger age. Consequently, they are more likely to have premarital sex, multiple partners, unintended pregnancies and incidence of STDs. In such a climate, systematic sexual education has an increasingly important role to play in the evasion of these negative health consequences. Similarly, considering the lacking or erroneous information of the communist era, sexual education is crucial in any program to decrease the abortion rate.

The final factor contributing to the elevated abortion rate is the widespread economic hardship in Romania today. The transition from a planned, centralized economy during the communist era to a market economy following the revolution in 1989 was accompanied by a great deal of social, political and economic upheaval. One of the most significant outcomes of this transition period is the vast increase in poverty levels in Romania. Poverty levels rose from 7% in 1989 to an estimated 44% in 2000. The most important factors causing the increased poverty are the decline in economic activity, the rise in unemployment, steep levels of inflation leading to decreased real wages and purchasing power, and unequal income distribution. For example, certain segments of the population, such as women, children, single parent families, large families and the elderly, are more likely to receive lower wages, to be unemployed and to live in poverty. As was the case during the communist era, women are concentrated in the low-income sectors in the economy such as education and culture, health and social issues, and agriculture. Women make up 78% of unpaid homeworkers. The growing income disparity fundamentally affects a woman’s ability to exercise her reproductive rights by limiting her ability to purchase contraceptives and to access other reproductive health services.

Poverty is perhaps the most difficult of the three factors discussed to combat. The importance of poverty in affecting a woman’s abortion decision in Romania should be seen
against the backdrop of the historical use of abortion as a fertility control method and the lack of sexual education. When considered in this context, the decision to forgo buying a pack of contraceptives and risk having an abortion might be a reasonable choice.

Although the abortion rate in Romania remains among the highest in Europe it has continued to fall since its peak immediately following the revolution. Decreasing the abortion rate in Romania, and indeed throughout the world, is an important public health goal. By identifying the three factors that interact to produce this elevated rate, namely the reliance on abortion as the primary fertility control method during the communist era, the lacking sexual education and growing poverty that disproportionately affects women, we can begin to identify aspects of programs that could successfully reduce the abortion rate.

However, it is important to understand the basis of our commitment to decreasing the abortion rate in Romania. Our commitment is based on a conception of human rights that holds the right to reproductive freedom and choice as fundamental. Women living in poverty who have no choice but to have an abortion due to socioeconomic reasons are just as limited in their reproductive freedom as women living in countries where abortion is illegal. That said, Romania provides an extreme but important case study of the potential long-term impact of restrictive fertility policy. Many nations throughout the world are choosing to enact laws that restrict individual’s reproductive choices. Whenever such laws are being considered, it would be wise to consider the historic and present difficulties of Romania, which are largely a result of the coercive economic and social policies brought about during the Communist era.

References:

5. Romanian Reproductive Health Survey, 1999
7. The primary religion in Romania is Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The subject of religion is not discussed at length in this thesis simply because the interviews, and previous research, indicate that religious factors do not have an important role in woman’s abortion decisions. Thus, while many of the women characterized abortion as a sin [păcat], they continued to make use of the procedure considering that socioeconomic considerations were more pressing than religious ones.
9. Romanian Reproductive Health Survey1999