

Socially Inappropriate Motherhood: Cross-Cultural Approaches to Sexual Violence-Related Pregnancies (SVRP)

Sydney Dawson¹

¹ University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT Motherhood and childbearing are culturally prestigious, a consequence related to gender roles, life milestones, social function, and population growth. However, external forces such as the community and the state have often overlooked power over the construction of socially acceptable forms of reproduction. Sexual violence-related pregnancies (SVRP) provide unique insight into social constructions of what is deemed as acceptable forms of pregnancy and motherhood, and understandings of the children—sometimes invoked as “monster babies” (Muller, 2016)—that come from these circumstances. This review seeks to examine the relationship between state and community understandings of appropriate motherhood, sexual violence, and gendered perceptions of “good” or socially supported motherhood. SVRP represents an intersection between stigmatization, social support, and criminality in conversations of reproductive health and decision-making, which will be demonstrated using abortion laws as a cross-cultural lens through which to understand the policing of SVRP comparatively between the United States, Australia, Nicaragua, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, the contentious nature of abortion debates and legislation will be utilized as a lens to understand which forms of motherhood and childbearing can be considered state and community sanctioned and which are unsupported. This review will include discussions of difficult topics such as sexualized and gender-based violence, abortion, unwanted pregnancies, and reproductive coercion which may be distressing to readers.

INTRODUCTION

Gender roles have many different expressions across the world, some moulded by colonization and imperial projects, and others shaped by time and the historicity of culture (Nafziger, 1999; Terman, 2018). However, despite inherent changes in gender's social meaning and expectations over time, motherhood is an element of the life-course that holds extensive meaning and reflects intricate understandings of social integration, adulthood, responsibility, and social roles. While these roles and responsibilities have significant variation on a micro-scale, they are contextually shaped by social and political systems much larger than individual subjects. Not all forms of motherhood are perceived equally, and not all pregnancies are recognized in the positive light that often colours social understandings of childbearing. The pregnancies and forms of motherhood marked by social undesirability vary cross-culturally, but remarkable similarities can be seen even within these differences. This essay investigates motherhood and pregnancy through the following questions: Under what circumstances might motherhood be constructed as socially, legally, or personally inappropriate? Furthermore, in what contexts might pregnancy become stigmatized or discouraged sociopolitically, and what effects does this have on conceptions of motherhood? Incest taboos, one-child policies, or extra-marital conception all serve as excellent examples of society and the state's ability to police certain forms of childbearing, but there is unique insight to be drawn from case studies of sexual violence-related pregnancies (SVRP).

This examination aims to outline the social construction of sanctioned motherhood cross-culturally, using abortion laws, societal stigma, and interpersonal consequences as lenses through which to understand the ways that certain pregnancies and mothers are constructed as less desirable than others. In this way, social and legal bias towards the termination of these pregnancies shapes the construction of SVRP as a negative and socially inappropriate form of childbearing and motherhood. Abortion laws provide crucial insight into ideologies that discourage the continuation of a pregnancy under certain situations and reflect what forms of motherhood are considered socially unacceptable or non-normative. A cross-

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Correspondence
Address correspondence to **Sydney Dawson** at
sydney.m.dawson@gmail.com

cultural literature and policy review relying on case studies is constrained in its capacity for generalization, and must be considered within the frame of the examples given as a theoretical discussion with limitations. However, by examining both global abortion legality in SVRP and multiple previously-documented community perceptions of children conceived through sexual violence, it becomes clear that these pregnancies are heavily stigmatized in many global contexts. Through a comparative examination of global policy and case-studies of the United States, Australia, Nicaragua, and The Democratic Republic of Congo, legislative and cultural relationships with SVRP suggest that they are marked as non-normative, and their termination is differentially privileged over other forms of pregnancy. SVRP are granted comparatively flexible options for termination globally and have low community support in many cultures (Greenhalgh, 2011; Kjelsvik et al., 2018; Muller, 2016; Rouhani et al., 2015; Tarzia et al., 2019; UN, 2020). This indicates that these pregnancies are constructed as problematic and are indirectly or directly encouraged to be terminated by means of special abortion status and community pressures to varying degrees.

BACKGROUND

Gender Ideologies and Global Policy

Despite the third wave of feminism's immense impact on contemporary critiques of gender roles and their relation to violence, the integration of historical conceptions of gender performance in social worldviews persist. Feminist theorist Barbara Welter seminally describes these historical understandings as "the cult of true womanhood"(1966), a phrase that identifies a framework of gender separatism and prescribed feminized characteristics pervasive in the westernized world. This work has since faced critiques (Roberts, 2002) but remains an identifiable pillar in second-wave feminist literature. The cult of true womanhood especially emphasizes women's supposedly inevitable roles as homemakers and mothers, a concept not exclusive to Europe and North America (Welter, 1966). In a global context, caregiving has diverse labour divisions; however, the incorporation of Christian dogma on a global scale inspired a widespread adoption of westernized 'good-womanhood' ideologies, which can be seen from social opinion to public policy across the world. Notably, western religions' pervasiveness constructed a standpoint in which human life begins at conception and terminating a pregnancy transgresses moral standards (BBC, 2014; Ladriere, 2013). Due to the effects of colonialism and globalization, this cultural understanding is far-reaching and serves to reinforce ideas that portray abortion as largely undesirable and immoral. In Carol Gilligan's 1982 book, *In A Different Voice*, it is noted women may have a socialized tendency to weigh abortion options in terms of care obligations, gender role fulfillment, and personal responsibility rather than simply making decisions based on a "formal logic of fairness" (1982, p.73). In legal systems that have historically been laden with non-secular ideologies (Nafziger, 1999), Gilligan's notation of abortion legislation as a "logic of fairness" is particularly interesting. The author suggests that while abortion is still subject to various policing in much of the world (UN, 2020), there are instances in which withholding this option would be considered unfair or even unethical. In 2020, the United Nations reported that the most common circumstances of permissible abortions globally are cases in which the procedure would be considered lifesaving for the woman, and further noted that 61% of countries would allow

abortion in cases of rape or incest (UN, 2020). The recent overturning of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case in the United States reaffirms that despite deep cultural reservations that may exist regarding abortion access, these two circumstances may 'justify' the procedure in even the most pro-life legislatures, with 73% of Americans agreeing termination should be legal in life-saving circumstances, and 69% in cases of rape (Pew Research Center, 2022). The implication of this number correlates with the idea that abortion in situations of sexual assault may qualify as exceptionally ethical or fair (Greenhalgh, 2011). For instance, despite Peru's criminalization of SVRP abortion, prison time for this offence is significantly reduced compared to abortions under other circumstances like socioeconomic strain or mental health (UN, 2020). Furthermore, the UN reports that the "majority" of countries consider abortion in cases of sexual assault permissible within a window of 13-24 weeks gestation (2020, p.26), encompassing the milestone at which a fetus would widely be considered viable outside of the womb (Breborrowicz, 2001). Considering the moral implications of late-gestation abortion that underwrite this legal and social discourse, these findings are remarkable in demonstrating that the termination of SVRP is granted an elevated status. For instance, abortion on request often allows a maximum of only 12 weeks gestation (UN, 2020, p.26). Operating off the notion that legislative policy can partially represent the opinion of the state (Erikson, 1976; Wlezien & Soroka, 2016), these numbers affirm, on a global scale, that SVRP are given special status via state-sanctioned access and prolonged time limits for abortion services. In this way, the message of these policies suggests that these pregnancies are socially inappropriate, and they should be allowed more flexibility and access to termination. If the pregnancies are socially unwanted, their termination may be facilitated (to some degree) by the state through increased late-term abortion availability and legislation which formally validates community understandings of SVRP as non-normative and challenging.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

SVRP Stigma and United States Contextualization

Despite special exceptions in abortion legislation for SVRP, the lack of societal support for these pregnancies and motherhood reflects stigma surrounding SVRP. Prewitt (2010) posits that approximately 25,000 women in the United States become pregnant through sexually violent circumstances annually and that cases in which the woman decides to continue the pregnancy and raise the child are highly stigmatized. She describes a culture of societal judgment and claims from the public that these women resent or dislike their child, that their motherhood serves as re-traumatization, or accusations that their experience of sexual assault has been exaggerated or falsified (Prewitt, 2010). This stigma can lead to personal implications in the mother's life, such as discrediting their court cases and losing certain legal protections like alternative custody arrangements (Prewitt, 2010). It is understood that access to community and social support is a significant factor in women's decision to seek abortion services (Kjelsvik et al., 2018). This correlation suggests that low access to support systems may create circumstances in which continuing a pregnancy can be incredibly difficult and sometimes even impossible. The importance of this connection is the implication that outward rejection of a pregnancy by a woman's support network may be a strong influence on her choice to terminate a pregnancy. Research also suggests that the public sees these birth

circumstances as a complicator to healthy relationships between parents and children, even in adopted families (Goldberg, 2019). Some anecdotal evidence exists which claims that these children may be ostracized by their extended families and thought to carry negative traits related to paternal criminal violence (Muller, 2016). It is widely recorded that westernized discourses of sexual violence rely heavily on rape myths and victim-blaming rhetoric, and that this cultural hostility can isolate victims and discourage them from seeking support from legal and personal resources (Baxi, 2014). In an American context, it seems that SVRP and the children that come from these circumstances are made to be vulnerable, particularly in their instances of familial and community rejection and lack of social support.

Reproductive Coercion and Australian Case-Study

In situations with complicated abortion legality, there can be pressures from community and family members to terminate a SVRP due to negative conceptions and stigma surrounding the pregnancy. For example, Tarzia et al. (2019) affirms that reproductive abuse in cases of sexual assault is a significant concern observed by healthcare practitioners in Australia. Tarzia et al. defines reproductive abuse or coercion as attempts by outside parties to "control a pregnancy outcome (forcing a woman to terminate a wanted pregnancy or to continue an unwanted one)" (2019, p.457). Notably, instances of this form of abuse within the context of sexual assault were common in healthcare staff's recorded responses, suggesting that women seeking abortion services in Australia are doing so under community or family pressure in considerable numbers. In fact, Tarzia et al. estimate that upwards of 24% of women attending general practice clinics have experienced reproductive coercion, a percentage supported by their research; they report a social worker, among others, confirming this estimation: "I would say it's probably about a quarter of the women that we speak to" (2019, p.1400). This research suggested that cultural stigma surrounding intimate partner violence and sexual assault made women vulnerable to coerced abortion regardless of their personal preference for the pregnancy (2019). Xenos and Smith (2001) further suggest that notions of sexual assault in Australia tend to place responsibility on victims, hold "unfavourable attitudes" towards them (2001, p.1113), and perpetuate stereotypes rooted in outdated understandings of women's gender roles – all of which contribute to a culture of silence and stigmatization of victims. Based on these findings, Australia's social understanding of pregnancy and motherhood in contexts of sexual assault is similar to perceptions in the United States, where American ideologies of women's roles as carers are outweighed by negative stigma and hostility towards victims of sexual assault and SVRP. In this way, while abortion legality has significant variation throughout Australia (Tarzia et al., 2019; Zielinski, 2019), it seems that the lack of public support for this form of pregnancy and motherhood may be expressed through coerced abortion. While the Australian state's inconsistent abortion laws may not solely compel the idea that these pregnancies are socially inappropriate, the societal understanding of these pregnancies as unwanted is expressed through reproductive abuse and a culture of silence that discourages victims from raising the child due to enmity.

"Monster Babies" and a Nicaraguan Case-Study

Even in situations where social notions of morality are reflected in strict abortion criminalization, the lack of community and social support for SVRP demonstrates these pregnancies' status as

socially inappropriate and undesirable. Examinations of socially unsupported pregnancies in these contexts can turn to family and community support as a measure of the social validity of the pregnancy. Pregnancies which are spurned by these support systems or encouraged to be aborted can be read as manifestations of public opinion on the fetus's personhood and the pregnancy's social standing, regardless of national legislation. Examining a Latin American context, Luffy et al. (2019) emphasize that in Nicaragua, where abortion is completely criminalized (UN, 2020), women who seek abortion services to terminate SVRP face massive social and medical stigma. Mendoza-Cardinal (2016) argues that understandings of abortion in Nicaragua generally understand the procedure as "not simply the removal of a fetus, but a rejection of motherhood" (p.ii), which transgresses dominant ideologies surrounding women's roles and parenting (Mendoza-Cardinal, 2016). Luffy et al. indicate that widespread understandings of sex and gender within marital scopes lead victims of sexual violence to have little support from the public in cases of SVRP (2019). They affirm that complicated cultural and religious understandings of gender roles and marital entitlement obscure understandings of this violence and the choice to raise children from SVRPs (2019). Children conceived through sexual assault are generally awarded a deviant status in Nicaragua, even being titled "monster babies" colloquially in the country (Muller, 2016). Luffy et al.'s case study of a 19-year-old woman who became pregnant after a sexual assault depicts a culture of humiliation and silence surrounding sexual violence, which influenced her decision to seek abortion services (Luffy et al., 2019). This young woman further expressed her concern that revealing her assailant's identity would lead to the disintegration of the social support network she would rely on to raise the child (Luffy et al., 2019). When between 70-80% of sexual violence is committed by someone known to the victim (Cotter & Savage, 2019; RAINN, 2013), disclosing the paternity of a child conceived by sexual assault can considerably complicate the support available to victims in all pregnancy outcomes. Luffy et al. suggest that this woman's testimony may reflect a culture that polices and stigmatizes SVRP and motherhood more than the rape or assailant themselves (2019). So, in a national context that considers abortion a rejection of morals and gender expectations (Mendoza-Cardinal, 2016), one could argue that the societal stigma surrounding motherhood of children conceived by sexual assault outweighs both the social and legal discourses surrounding abortion and pregnancy in Nicaragua.

"Bad" Children and a Democratic Republic of Congo Case-Study

Similarly, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been a site of research on the acceptance of SVRP and children conceived by sexual assault. Rouhani et al. found that "even when mothers are accepted by their communities after sexual assault, the acceptance may not extend to their children" (2015). This research further posits that children born under these circumstances face name-calling, social rejection, discrimination, and low community support (Rouhani et al., 2015). The authors suggest that in cases of high public stigma, parenting indexes used to measure a positive mother-child relationship were diminished (2015). Rouhani et al. note that with this pervasive stigma comes higher rates of PTSD and other mental health struggles, as well as effectively serving as a form of secondary trauma in and of itself (2015). In these cases of low community and family support towards the SVRP (and the children born from these

circumstances), mothers were more likely to report that they considered the child a burden, an unwanted responsibility, and internalized narratives that their child as "bad" or "deviant" (Rouhani et al., 2015). While this research aims not to generalize the nature of these complex relationships, it does suggest that abortion and abandoning children from SVRP at birth are common choices in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Rouhani et al., 2015). This can be interpreted alongside the data mentioned above as a reflection of low community acceptance and high stigma, which aid in constructing SVRP as non-normative and socially undesirable. Burkhart et al. explains that legal abortion in the Democratic Republic of Congo exists only under strict measures. But, nonetheless, women who become pregnant after experiencing sexual violence frequently seek informal or naturopathic channels of pregnancy termination, such as herbal abortives, and these methods are sometimes aided or procured by family members (Burkhart et al., 2016). The women surveyed in this research indicated that abortion was often preferable in cases of SVRP but that it was not always an option due to maternal fatality risks and religious ideologies (Burkhart et al., 2016). Interestingly, this research reported healthcare professionals aiding in abortions outside legal guidelines (Burkhart et al., 2016). This informal medical assistance has implications on understanding these pregnancies as socially inappropriate compared to other pregnancies, a notion which a participant affirmed: "to terminate a pregnancy from sexual violence is not a problem because it's from a bandit" (Burkhart et al., 2016). This comment confirms that the personhood of fetuses conceived through sexual assault is differentially constructed; while terminating a fetus conceived under non-violent circumstances would be considered a "problem", SVRP may be constructed as inherently bad and therefore a preferable candidate for abortion. These abortions may be given more ethical leeway due to a cultural understanding that they are unwanted and unsupported by the community.

CONCLUSIONS

The notion that women should fulfill roles of caring and motherhood are elements of gender ideologies that extend globally (Terman, 2018). These ideologies bring forward biased conversations of morality; pregnancy is often considered a significant life milestone and marker of status, and forms of contraception such as birth control, condoms, and abortion, face varying degrees of social stigma due to religious and gendered ideologies. However, despite these persistent philosophies, some forms of pregnancy and motherhood are undeniably rejected by state and social bodies. SVRP are pregnancies fraught with stigma, ranging from victim-blaming and anti-survivor rhetoric to notions that children born under these circumstances are socially tainted or a constant trauma to their mothers. This stigma manifests itself in community and social responses to these pregnancies worldwide, and there is copious evidence that social constructions of these pregnancies as unwanted influence rates of termination and social consequences for victims of sexual violence. These trends in public rejection of SVRP can be seen more broadly in global policy, as more than 60% of countries consider abortion in cases of sexual assault deserving of privileged access to termination in comparison to abortions on request, which are considered less "fair" (Gilligan, 1982; UN, 2020). It can be understood that pregnancies which receive termination coercion

or encouragement, or privileged legal flexibility for abortion are pregnancies which are comparatively unwanted by the state and community bodies. In conclusion, while continued understandings of women's ultimate purpose as mothers and child-bearers can be found in many global contexts through religion and gendered stereotypes, safe and equal access to abortion is a fundamental step towards reproductive justice. SVRP can be used as a lens to understand that women's experiences of sexual violence can be exacerbated by legal systems and cultures which continue to disempower their ability to make choices about their bodies and lives.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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