

Beyond the Laws: The Mental Health Consequences of Restricting Abortion Access in India

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In: *Book of Abstract REVA University*. edited by DR. C Chamundeshwari Associate Professor, Dept of English, REVA University, Bengaluru, India. ISBN 978-93-341-7423-6.

The legal and social environment surrounding abortion in India plays a critical role in constructing women's life experiences. People who seek abortions often face poorer mental health due to factors like poverty, trauma, and abuse. Various motivations drive women to abortion-seeking: unintended pregnancy, family planning, health issues, unfortunate life circumstances. Findings by Rajkumar (2022) suggest a complex interplay between abortion access and mental health, influenced by broader societal factors. Ambiguous and restrictive abortion laws can lead to delays in accessing services, forcing women to go for unsafe abortions or continue unwanted pregnancies. The lack of clear guidelines and the reliance on judgment from healthcare providers and society can further exacerbate mental health challenges. The Supreme Court has been recently criticized for having a very narrow focus when referring women for abortion on grounds of health, by disregarding the mental health of the pregnant woman and autonomy. The court had taken earlier stances which accorded mental health some precedence in abortion decisions. But it may perpetuate a harmful double standard if it holds the fetus's well-being above that of the woman's mental health, in violation of reproductive rights and undermining the mental health of women. This paper aims to understand the mental health consequences of these restrictive abortion laws and its impact on women's mental health. It will explore how societal stigma, legal restrictions, and healthcare provider attitudes contribute to these negative outcomes. Ultimately, this research seeks to inform policy recommendations that promote women's reproductive health and mental well-being.

Keywords: Abortion, mental health, abortion laws, reproductive rights