

A woman with long, wavy, light brown hair is shown in profile, looking down. She is wearing a dark, possibly olive green, jacket. The background is dark and out of focus, with some vertical lines suggesting an indoor setting. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her hair and the texture of her jacket.

# Abortion and Coercion

A BRIEFING

# HAYLEY'S STORY

I had not long turned 16 when I had an abortion. It feels like a bad dream most days now, but it haunted and ate at me for years.

When I was 15, I met Scott\*. He was the cool older guy with the nice-ish car, his own house, and a loud group of friends who all seemed to look up to him in some way – a bit of a ringleader. He already had two children from a previous relationship. He was too old for me at 20; I didn't think so at the time, though. When I was invited to his house for a party by a friend and he looked my way, I was overwhelmed. I didn't think anyone like him would ever look twice at me. I had very low self-worth and a deep need to feel like I belonged somewhere.

When I met Scott's children, I fell into the role of glorified babysitter very easily. I loved playing mum with them. I grew very close to them and them to me over the months we were together. Of course, it was all a fantasy. I was being blatantly used. Scott had countless other sexual partners and made me aware that if I didn't do something for him, then they would.

It was a very abusive relationship, but I didn't know any different after my childhood. It felt like he was all I had. So, I went along with everything he asked of me, like an obedient puppy.

I found out that I was pregnant when I had just turned 16. Of course, Scott didn't want to hear about it. He demanded that I have an abortion. I spoke to my uncle; he called me many hurtful names and threw me out. I went to live with my biological father and his family, but my step mum was pregnant, and they didn't have room for me to stay long-term. My dad tried to get me rented accommodation. I was a child. I was scared. In that moment, I felt more lost and alone than ever. Nobody wanted me around. I wanted Scott back. "I need him" was all I could think. I only felt seen and wanted when I was with him – which was crazy, I know.

My uncle agreed for me to come back. This was a mistake, because Scott lived around the corner and, of course, the abuse started again. He would go between sweet nothings and trying to run me over with his car. I really wanted my baby, but in that moment, I felt like I needed him more. He kept telling me it was just cells, anyway; it wouldn't feel anything or know anything about it. When the time was right, we could have more children.

I booked the appointment. I was 12 weeks pregnant, maybe a few days before. Scott got me to borrow £10 from my uncle for fuel and he and his friend drove me to our nearest clinic about 40 miles away. He left me there and I went through it all alone.

A counsellor had to see me. I told her that I couldn't speak to her because, if I did, I would change my mind. She sent me back to the waiting room. I was given pessaries to put inside my vagina and then I had to wait. I cried the whole time. I just wanted someone to say, "STOP don't do it." But nobody did.

I remember they came to take me in and lay me on the bed to be put to sleep. I was crying so hard. The nurse was stroking my hair and saying, "It will all be ok." The last thing I said before I went to sleep was, "No, it won't. Nothing will ever be ok again."

This story is shared with Hayley's permission.

\*Scott's name has been changed to protect those involved.

We often associate abortion with words like “choice” and “autonomy”. In reality, many abortions take place because a woman feels she has no choice – either because of her circumstances, or because she has been pressured by her partner, family, or even medical professionals.

## **PRESSURE FROM OTHERS**

The reasons women “choose” abortion can be complex, but many women are pressured or coerced by others, to a greater or lesser degree, into undergoing abortions.

A SavantaComRes poll commissioned by the BBC in 2022 found that **15% of women aged 18-44 had been pressured into having an abortion they didn't want.**<sup>1</sup> Additionally:

- A 2023 study found that 61% of women experienced high pressure to abort from people or circumstances.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Another study found that 64% of American women and 37% of Russian women who had abortions reported that they “felt pressured by others”.<sup>4</sup>
- In a survey of women who were dissatisfied with their abortions, 39% reported they were “very much” pressured by others, and a total of 73% reported some degree of pressure from others.<sup>5</sup>

A post-abortive counsellor described coerced abortion as “one of the most unrecognised and insidious forms of domestic abuse”. She said: “Typically 75% of the women who summon up the courage and bravery to make a call for help regarding an abortion were pressurised or bullied into having one, in almost all cases by the man involved.”<sup>6</sup>

Ethicist Daniel Callahan, co-founder and former director of the Hastings Center, wrote: “That men have long coerced women into unwanted abortion when it suits their purposes is well-known but rarely mentioned. Data reported by the Alan Guttmacher Institute indicate that some 30% of women have an abortion because someone else, not the woman, wants it.”<sup>7</sup>

Pressure can come from many sources, including family members, friends, employers, and support agencies. Pressure to abort is not always overt – a lack of emotional support to keep a pregnancy may be experienced as pressure “forcing” a woman to choose abortion.<sup>8</sup>

## **TELEMEDICINE ABORTION**

The practice of early medical abortion at home further increases the risk for women of coerced abortion. If a woman has her consultation regarding an abortion over the telephone:

- She is denied the opportunity to speak to healthcare staff alone, away from those who may be putting pressure on her.
- Her abuser(s) may be present for, and in control of, every step of the abortion – from the phone call to taking the drugs.
- At no point is she provided with a safe space to alert others to the abuse and potential coercion she is suffering.

## **EFFECT ON WOMEN**

Coercion and pressure are well-established risk factors for women coming to terms with their abortion. “Perceived pressure from others to terminate a pregnancy” has been identified as a factor “associated with more negative psychological reactions”<sup>9</sup>; see also [2], [3].

In a study of 987 women who had contacted a post-abortion service, 58% reported “aborting to make others happy”, 74% “disagreed that their decision to abort was entirely free from even subtle pressure from others to abort”, and 28% “aborted out of fear of losing their partner if they did not abort”<sup>10</sup>.

## INFORMED CONSENT

Abortion coercion is not just a tragedy, it goes against a fundamental principle of medical ethics and international law – the principle of informed consent. The NHS states:

“For consent to be valid, it must be voluntary and informed, and the person consenting must have the capacity to make the decision.”

The meaning of voluntary is – “the decision to either consent or not to consent to treatment must be made by the person, and must not be influenced by pressure from medical staff, friends or family.”

These criteria are often not met in the context of abortion. Action is needed to ensure that no woman’s rights are breached.

## CASE STUDY

*A woman shared this about her experience of coerced abortion on a popular forum for mothers:*

“I had an abortion 2 months ago at 10 weeks and have been devastated ever since. I am mid-30s and childless and was delighted when I discovered I was pregnant – although my relationship with the father was and is not stable, I was happy to have the child as a single mum, am financially secure and have a supportive family.

“I wasn’t able to tell the father for some time but his reaction was even worse than I anticipated and in just a few hours he had convinced me to have the termination and one day later I was at the clinic - until you’ve been in that situation it is hard to see how it is possible for an independent and educated woman to be coerced in that way, and I know now I was so vulnerable with the hormones I was really in no fit state to defend my wishes. The clinic (Marie Stopes) was awful - I was sobbing the whole time I was there and barely able to speak, and their ‘aftercare’ was a joke. I know I walked in there and signed the consent but I was in a terrible state.

“I would do anything to turn back the clock now and am scared that I will never recover from this, and it is all I think about.”<sup>11</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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