

From Unwanted Pregnancy to Wanted Child

Labels, data, and good news from unexpected sources



Who decides if a child is unwanted? The United Nations Population Fund is committed to “delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted.”

What are UN agencies doing to ensure that children are wanted?

Pregnancies are labeled “unwanted” by researchers, not by mothers:

- If a woman ever told a survey she wanted to stop having children, any later pregnancies are automatically considered “unwanted.”¹
- The assumption is that her desires never change.
- Nevertheless, researchers consistently complain that women’s views change, and regard it as a flaw (see reverse).

Researchers label pregnancies as “unwanted” even when a mother states that she wanted and loves her child. Surveys can be manipulated to show a high rate of unwanted pregnancies depending on what questions are asked. According to one study:²

- Only **5.9%** of pregnancies were called unwanted when women were asked about a specific pregnancy.
- In contrast, **30.4%** of children were classified as unwanted when women were asked about their theoretical ideal vs. actual family size.
- That rose to **54.8%** when women were asked about their ideal vs. actual number of boys vs. girls.

“Unwanted” is a label that doesn’t stick. Study in Bangladesh: more than 60% of women who originally said they wanted no more children classified subsequent births as wanted (or at worst, mistimed).³

Even mothers who were turned away from abortions end up wanting their children.

- 95% end up bonding with their babies (US study).⁴
- 38% later denied having sought an abortion (Czech study).⁵

Wanted pregnancies can result even from sexual violence.

In the US, the abortion rate on children conceived in rape⁶ is not so dissimilar to the abortion rate for unintended pregnancies overall⁷ (50% vs. 40%).

**Unwantedness is not a life sentence.
It should not be a death sentence.**

Unwanted pregnancies often result in wanted children. Why don't the experts see this as good news?

“Women sometimes express regret over a successful abortion, but only very rarely express regret over bearing a child to term...a parent *might even fail to regret* the birth of a child who was wrongfully conceived and wrongly brought to term...”

– Bennett Foddy, Ph.D., Associate Editor, Journal of Medical Ethics (British Medical Journal)
“Highlights From This Issue” J Med Ethics December 2012 Vol 38 No 12 (emphasis added)

“Respondents are less likely to report a birth as unwanted or unintended once the child is born than before pregnancy occurs...Additional research is needed to determine how much the rationalization of births as wanted distorts the true level of unintended pregnancy.”

– Rebecca Callahan, Ph.D. and Stan Beck, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University
Measurement of Unintended Pregnancy in Rural Bangladesh. Presented at Population Association of America 2013 Annual Meeting; see also ref. 3, below

“Since many parents have a propensity for retroactively rationalizing unwanted births as ‘wanted,’ these estimates must significantly understate the extent to which US couples fail in controlling their fertility.”

– Frederick S. Jaffe, Vice President, Planned Parenthood-World Population, Founder of Guttmacher Institute
Toward the Reduction of Unwanted Pregnancy Science, New Series, Vol. 174, No. 4005 (Oct. 8, 1971), pp. 119-127

“She is more than my best friend, more than the love of my life...She is just my whole world.”

– “S,” turned away from an abortion clinic because of gestational limits, became a mother at 24

Sources:

¹ Bongaarts, J. The Measurement of Wanted Fertility. *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 487-506

² Ballweg, JA. Unwanted Pregnancies and Unwanted Fertility: Conceptual Variations *Population and Environment*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Sep., 1987), pp. 138-147

³ Callahan, RL. Reproductive intentions in rural Bangladesh: A longitudinal analysis. Doctoral Dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 2012.

⁴ Lang, Joshua. “What Happens to Women Who Are Denied Abortions?” *New York Times Magazine*, June 12, 2013

⁵ David, HP. Born Unwanted, 35 Years Later: The Prague Study. *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 14, No. 27, Human Resources for Sexual and Reproductive Health Care (May, 2006), pp. 181-190

⁶ Holmes MM, Resnick HS, Kilpatrick DG, Best CL. Rape-related pregnancy: estimates and descriptive characteristics from a national sample of women. *Am J Obstet Gynecol*. 1996 Aug;175(2):320-4

⁷ Guttmacher Institute: Induced Abortion in the United States, February 2014



805 3rd Avenue, Suite 1440
New York, New York 10022
(212) 754-5948
info@c-fam.org

www.c-fam.org