Reactions and reflections in men, 4 and 12 months post-abortion

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Background: In general, men involved in legal abortion constitute an invisible group and there is scarcely any knowledge about their experiences and opinions. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to increase knowledge about reactions and reflections by means of a prospective study of men’s attitudes and feelings towards abortion.

Methods: Twenty-six men answered a questionnaire before abortion, and participated in interviews at the time of abortion and 4 and 12 months post-abortion.

Results: Nearly all of the men were happy with the women’s decision to have an abortion at both follow-ups. They experienced the abortion as a relief and a responsible act. Simultaneously, abortion could also be experienced as a painful and ethically problematic act. Overall, most men had only positive experiences post-abortion, such as a feeling of maturity. More than half of those who accompanied their partners to the hospital felt that the staff did not have a welcoming attitude. It was also found that 1-year post-abortion, more than a third consistently did not use a reliable contraceptive method.

Conclusions: There is a need for further studies concerning men’s experiences and reactions in the context of abortion and it is of fundamental importance that a gender perspective is incorporated into this specific field of reproductive health research.

Key words: male, legal abortion, follow-up, reactions, attitudes, contraception, gender

INTRODUCTION

Men involved in abortion constitute an almost invisible group, and studies that investigate men in the abortion situation are rare. This is even more relevant in the case of men’s reactions post-abortion. Male involvement is usually examined indirectly by asking the women what they think about their partner’s attitudes and opinions. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge about the opinions and experiences of the men themselves. Many studies have reported that the women discuss their decision to have an abortion with their partners but many de facto seem to make their decision alone.1–3

The position of men in relation to pregnancy is one of exclusion, as reflected by the fact that there is not even a term for men involved in a pregnancy. They can be defined as the ‘impregnator’, the ‘father-to-be’ or the ‘man whose partner is pregnant, gives birth or has an abortion’. Furthermore, the Swedish abortion law grants the woman the legal right to abortion, on demand up to the end of the 18th week of pregnancy.4 Thus, the male has no formal right or power to decide whether or not a pregnancy should be terminated. However, (if he knows about the pregnancy) he can influence the pregnant woman in many ways, e.g. by exercising power, taking a standpoint, or supporting or threatening her in her decision-making process. He can also avoid any...
participation whatsoever and even abandon her. There is a study on men that shows that they consider themselves responsible, together with their partners, for preventing unwanted pregnancies and for choosing to have an abortion. Then again, two other studies which included both women and men, showed that the sexes had somewhat differing opinions about the decision-making process, and that two-fifths of the women and about half the men stated that the woman’s decision weighed most heavily. Many women in the latter study declared that their partner’s attitude to the pregnancy played an important role in their choice. However, half of the women stated that they would have chosen abortion regardless of the partner’s attitude. In a previous study of 75 men we found that most men (even those who declared that they had not taken any specific standpoint, but left it to the woman to decide) wanted the women to terminate the pregnancy. Furthermore, we could see that most men (57%) experienced both ‘positive’ (such as relief, release and responsibility) and ‘painful’ (such as anxiety, guilt and grief) feelings in the face of abortion. Among the rest, 29% reported only ‘painful’ and 13% only ‘positive’ feelings.

Reactions post-abortion cannot be separated from experiences of the decision-making process before abortion. Concerning women, many studies indicate that the predominant feeling, both short- and long-term, after abortion is relief. However, we have not found any longitudinal study on men’s reactions post-abortion. Therefore, the present study aims to increase knowledge about men’s reactions and reflections post-abortion by means of a prospective study of their attitudes and reactions both before and 4 and 12 months after, legal abortion.

METHODS

This study on men is part of a larger project, which included a questionnaire and an interview study with women applying for legal abortion. The study was carried out at the Norrlands University Hospital in Umeå, Sweden. Over a period of 9 months in 1995, two experienced social workers asked 250 women consecutively applying for legal abortion if they were willing to participate in the study. As most women came to the clinic without their partner, only a few men (n = 17) could be asked personally about their willingness to participate in the study. Women who visited the clinic alone (without the man involved) were asked to give a questionnaire to the man by whom they had become pregnant. Information about the study and a prepaid envelope were enclosed with the male’s questionnaire. In addition, all men were asked if they also wanted to participate in a longitudinal interview study. In total, 51 of the participating women and 28 of the 29 who declined to participate in the study did not want to give a questionnaire to the man involved. Thus, the maximum number of men who might have been asked to participate was 171. However, firstly, it is impossible to know how many of these 171 women actually gave the questionnaire to their man and secondly, no information can be obtained concerning the number of men who actually refused to participate. In total, 78 men answered the questionnaire, which is 46% of the maximum number possible. Three questionnaires were excluded as one woman was not in fact pregnant and two others chose not to terminate the pregnancy.

Altogether, 27 men chose to participate in the interview study in connection with the abortion, and at 4 months and 12 months post-abortion. Thus, the present study comprises 26 men. Ten of these men had been personally asked about participating in the study as they came with the woman to the hospital. The interviews lasted about 30–40 min and were conducted over the phone by two experienced medical social workers, of whom one is the first author (AK).

The questionnaire study covered questions about life conditions, reasons for abortion, and the decision-making process. In order to get feedback and to validate the questionnaire, all the men who had also consented to participate in the longitudinal interview study were contacted by telephone within a few days for a follow-up interview concerning the questionnaire. Several of the questionnaire items were repeated in order to check understanding and accuracy. It was found that these 26 respondents had reacted positively to the questionnaire, and had not had any problem understanding the questions. Furthermore, this contact showed that the answers given over the telephone and the written answers were in agreement. Apart from validating the questionnaire, a further aim in contacting these men was to establish a personal link prior to the follow-up interviews.
Based on the questionnaire a semi-structured interview was designed, focusing on attitudes, feelings and experiences at 4 and 12 months after the abortion. Apart from questions with given response alternatives there were a number of open-ended questions. The open-ended questions concerned items such as experiences, attitudes and coping behaviour concerning the abortion, and were transcribed during and immediately after each interview. Examples of such overall questions were ‘What is your opinion about your ability to cope with the abortion?’; ‘How do you feel about the abortion today, one year later?’ and ‘What has the abortion meant to you?’. 

Non-responding men
There are no reliable data for the men who did not participate. As the men were unknown to everyone except the pregnant women, the study had to rely exclusively on the assistance of the women seeking abortion, which in turn made it impossible to ask or remind them to complete and send in the questionnaire. This implied that the group of men who eventually participated had first been selected by their partner and then self-selected. Thus, the men participating in the present study are not a representative group. Nevertheless, they do represent a unique group that is of great interest since they have been studied longitudinally on four occasions during a period of 1 year.

RESULTS
Before abortion
Background data
Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the men at the time of the abortion. All men except one had grown up in Sweden. They had a median age of 32 years, with a mean age of 31 years. More than half (15/26) already had children, and eight had been involved in previous abortion/s. All except two had a partner relationship with the pregnant woman, half of these were for more than 3 years, and more than half (15/26) were married/cohabiting. The majority supported the woman’s legal right to decide about abortion (16/26), ten were ‘doubtful’, but none were against. Examples of typical male reasoning concerning a woman’s right to decide included: ‘when all is said and done the woman must have the right to decide . . .’; ‘. . . the decision ought to be made by the woman and the man together, but it is her body . . .’; or ‘. . . in a relationship the woman is given the possibility to decide whether she wants to have children . . . it is not right . . . but on the other hand it would be horrible if a woman was forced to give birth . . .’. Those who expressed doubt wanted mainly to stress that it was important to also involve the man in the decision making process.

Regarding contraception, most men reported that the couple had not used any contraceptive method at the time of conception (16/26), or that they did not know if any contraceptives had been used (2/26). Of these 16, 10 men clearly stated that they ‘took a chance’ and/or ‘allowed sexual feelings to take over’.

The decision making process and feelings in the face of abortion
In the questionnaire study before the abortion, the majority of the men (16/26) clearly stated that they wanted the woman to have an abortion. However, two of these had a partner who wanted to continue the pregnancy. On the other hand, two men in opposition to their partners wanted the women to continue the pregnancy to full-term. The rest had not taken any standpoint at the time of the study (8/26), and seven of these stated that they supported the woman whatever decision she made. However, most of them (5/8) gave reasons for the abortion and thus motives were given by 21 men in total. The primary motive for being in favor of an abortion had to do with family planning (12/21); either the men already had all the children they wanted (or had no time for an extra child) or thought it was not the right time for becoming a parent. Other primary motives were, for example, age (too young or too old), lack of stable partner/relationship, and socio-economic reasons. In total, more than a third of the men (9/26) declared that their own interest had been most important in the decision making. However, nine men indicated that the interest of the woman, and six that the interest of the unborn child, was the most important factor (two did not answer the question).

The men were asked to choose from a list of words, which expressed their feelings towards the expected abortion. Eight men chose only positively charged words such as responsibility, relief, release, respect and self-
respect. Four chose only painfully charged words such as anxiety, grief, guilt, emptiness, doubt, powerlessness, injustice, exclusion, shame and impatience. However, more than half (14/26) experienced a mix of both positive and painful feelings in facing abortion. These data have been divided into subgroups and no differences in feelings regarding the expected abortion were found between men with or without children or between men with or without previous experiences of abortion. Furthermore, no correlations were found with age, civil status, duration and quality of the relationships.

Four months post-abortion

A relief

Almost all of the men (24/26) declared at the follow-up 4 months post-abortion that they were ‘satisfied’ with the decision to have the abortion and regarded it as the ‘best’ and/or ‘right’ decision. The majority (17/26) also expressed feelings of relief and/or release. However, one man was not happy with the decision and another expressed doubt. Most men (21/26) considered their ability to cope with the abortion as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, and four as ‘rather good’. One man described his coping as ‘poor’ and reported ‘some’ mental disturbance related to the abortion. However, the most typical statements were ‘. . . the abortion is behind us . . . ’ and ‘. . . once the step was taken it was history . . . ’. Furthermore, many mentioned that they had ‘. . . talked about it a lot during the decision making process . . . ’ and several stressed the complexity of the decision to have an abortion ‘. . . an enormously complex and difficult decision to make even when one knows what the decision will be . . . ’. It was found that none of the men had lacked support post-abortion, and 10 (10/26) added that they had not needed any support. All except one had been able to talk totally openly (18/26), or rather openly (5/26) about the abortion with their current partner. Two men stated that they had not had any need to talk about the abortion.

A responsible act

The vast majority (21/26) 4 months later regarded the abortion as a way of acting responsibly. They thought that the abortion was the best solution for all involved with regard both to the needs of the couple, the existing children and the unborn child. A typical standpoint was ‘. . . have taken responsibility for existing children, and for this child, which was not wanted, and for ourselves, for our whole life situation with work and spare time . . . afraid it would have been too much . . . ’. Some men also pointed out that they had assumed responsibility, as before the abortion they had declared that they would support the woman whatever decision she made. From another perspective, 12 men reported that they had feelings of guilt connected with the abortion, mainly because they had been irresponsible with regard to using contraceptives, and had contributed to putting the partner in an awkward situation.

Powerlessness and feelings of loss

Six men expressed feelings of powerlessness in relation to the decision making process. Powerlessness was either related to the feeling of having had no choice (as abortion was regarded as the only solution) or to the subordinated position of the man in relation to a pregnant woman. One man said ‘cannot

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the men at the time of the abortion (n = 26)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>(n = 26)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil status</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single with partner</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single without partner</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration of partner relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 6 months</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥ 6 months to &lt; 3 years</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 3 years</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No partner relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional status</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployed/other</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
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<td>Completed university studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed senior high school</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed elementary school</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income too low</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income only just meet needs</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income meets most needs with care</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opinion about partner relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rather satisfied</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not satisfied</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No partner relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
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do anything ... the woman had made her decision even before she told me about the pregnancy ...’. Another man described his situation as ‘... I would have liked to have the child ... you cannot work through the powerlessness, you just have to realise that you do not have the power ... I was sad at the beginning ... I have gone through a crisis before and I even managed this one well ... learnt to accept the powerlessness ... though I can still feel sadness’. Two men who had wanted to have a child had held back their feelings before the abortion, as they did not want to influence the woman to make a decision against her will. One of them said ‘I still think of the baby every day ...’, at the same time he stressed that it was unrealistic to have more children in their relationship because of their advancing age. Among those who related feelings of grief and/or emptiness in connection with the abortion (9/26), three described that they had gone through a mourning-process. One of them had consulted a professional counsellor.

The 10 men who accompanied their women to the hospital before the abortion were asked about their experiences regarding the attitudes and reception they encountered at the department. Seven mentioned shortcomings in general and six of them referred to the effect of being a man in this context. One said ‘... got the idea that I should not accompany her to the doctor ... it is wrong that only the woman is a patient’ and another said ‘... there were no positive attitudes towards men, I got the feeling that I should not be there ... I would never go back there again ...’.

One-year post-abortion

No regret in spite of contradictory feelings

At the 1-year follow-up, none regretted that they had been in favor of the abortion, which also included the two men whose partners would actually have liked to complete the pregnancy. Furthermore, those who had wanted the woman to continue the pregnancy to term were reconciled to the abortion decision. None reported any mental disturbances related to the abortion. On the other hand, all of the men were of the opinion that the decision to have an abortion was the best and/or the right decision. This did not exclude many of them also characterizing the decision to have abortion as ‘sad’. In answer to the question as to whether they ever thought about the abortion, half the men (13/26) answered ‘never’ or ‘almost never’, 12 answered ‘once or more a month’ and one ‘once or more a week’.

At both the 4 and 12 month follow-up the men were asked to choose from a list of words that expressed their feelings in relation to the abortion. Figure 1 shows that the number of men who chose only positively charged words (relief, release, responsibility, maturity) had increased by the time of the 1-year follow-up, compared with the 4-month follow-up (14/26 and 8/26 respectively). At the same time, there was a reduction in the number who chose only painful words such as guilt, grief, powerlessness, shame, emptiness, regret, exclusion, anger (1/26 and 2/26 respectively) or both positive and painful words (11/26 and 16/26 respectively). At the follow-ups, maturity, responsibility, relief and release were the most frequently chosen positive words. Guilt, grief and powerlessness...
ness were the most frequently chosen painful words. At 1-year post-abortion it was also found that most men (21/26) had no ethical doubts related to the abortion. However, one man who had also been involved in a previous abortion declared that ‘... abortion is not an option for me anymore ...’, and another man expressed contradictory feelings ‘... I still think that it is right to have an abortion though I also think there is something sick about the fact that every fourth pregnancy is terminated ...’. When the men were asked about their attitude to a new pregnancy in their current situation 1-year post-abortion, seven (7/26) said they would be in favor of an abortion, nine said they would have liked to complete the pregnancy, while the rest (9/26) did not know what their attitude would be.

Partner relationship and sexuality
At 1-year follow-up, all except five men (21/26) still had a partner relationship with the previously pregnant woman. One man’s partner had even got pregnant again and given birth. Most men were ‘very satisfied’ (14/21) or ‘rather satisfied’ (7/21) with their partner relationship. More than half (13/21) declared that the abortion had influenced the relationship in a positive way, since it had become deeper because of it. The rest stated that the abortion had not had any influence on their partner relationship. When the men were asked to value their sexual life, most were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ (18/26), three were ‘rather satisfied’ and four were ‘dissatisfied’. (One man did not have any sexual relationship at the time of the interview). In the whole group of men, a majority (19/26) reported that the abortion had not had any influence at all on their sexual life. However, three described a negative influence, one a positive influence and three did not know whether or not the abortion had had any influence.

Contraception
Regarding contraception 1-year post-abortion, the vast majority (21/26) reported that they ‘never’ had sexual intercourse without using some method of contraception. Ten men reported that their partner either took hormonal contraceptives or had an IUD, while the rest mainly used condoms (13/26), relied on safe periods (2/26), coitus interruptus (2/26) and/or a pessary (1/26). Thus, the number of men reporting no use of contraceptive methods had decreased to five compared with the time of conception before abortion when 16 men reported no use at all of contraception. Nine men clearly stressed that one consequence of the abortion was that they had become more careful about contraceptive use. Some ‘would never be careless’, one declared that ‘... I have had sex with many women post-abortion and now I always ask them if they have contraceptives ...’. One man, who had already become the father of a newborn child at the follow-up (the pregnancy was unplanned), considered sterilization. Another stated that his partner was going to be sterilized. Seventeen men declared that they never relied on methods such as safe periods and coitus interruptus. However, nine men still ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘always’ relied on these unsafe methods, and five of them, now and then, had sexual intercourse without using any contraceptives whatsoever despite having no desire to procreate.

Mental growth
In an open-ended question the men were asked about the positive and negative experiences of the abortion process. The majority (16/26) reported only positive experiences and most of them described feelings of maturity, deeper self-knowledge and strengthened self-esteem. They pointed out that their opinions were more open and they had gained new insights and become more reflective and/or responsible. Some described that they felt more humility and that they valued life more as a consequence of the abortion, and a few stated that they had become more conscious of their reproductive ability. One said ‘... now I know I can make a woman pregnant ...’, another said ‘... in a way it is nice to know that one can beget children, which one cannot take for granted ...’. Four men reported a mix of both positive and negative experiences, while the rest (6/26) characterized their experiences as either positive or negative.

DISCUSSION
Studies investigating men involved in legal abortion are rare, and we have not found any longitudinal study of men’s long-term reactions. This is probably connected with the fact that men are not the patients in an abortion situation. As the identity of the
The processes connected with pregnancy and abortion highlight differences between women and men which arise from the biological reality in which women carry and give birth to children, a context in which she has the primary position while the man has an ancillary position. Furthermore, most women in Western countries have the formal right to decide whether or not a pregnancy should be terminated. Thus, men have no legal rights in this aspect. However, they may influence the women in many other ways. In agreement with some previous studies the present study shows that men want to participate in the decision making process\(^5,13,14\). The woman’s unrestricted right to decide might indicate a possible gender conflict over the subject of abortion. A US national survey showed, for example, that 61% of adolescent males thought it would be unacceptable for a woman to have an abortion if her partner objected\(^15\).

In the present study, almost all the men declared that they were in favor of a woman’s right to decide about abortion. Many stressed that they subordinated themselves to the decision of the woman and many considered the interest of the woman as paramount. In addition, only a few men expressed powerlessness that was related to their subordinated position in relation to the decision making. This probably reflects that men largely agree with or influence their partner in her decision, which is in line with the well known findings that one of the most frequently stated reasons for terminating a pregnancy among women is related to the partner\(^16–20\). Furthermore, studies in women have shown that the decision-making process greatly influences the post-abortion reactions, and that relief is the most dominant feeling after abortion\(^9,10,21\).

According to the present study, these findings are also valid for men. Moreover, most of the men in our study found support in their partner relationships that were mainly stable and long lasting. Though, this does not imply that there is no need to give support to men involved in abortion. In order to gain a deeper knowledge of the decision making process, future studies ought to include both sex differences and gender aspects. It is worth noting in this context that more than half the men who accompanied their woman to the hospital (6/10) did not feel that the staff had a welcoming attitude. Certainly, this is a challenge for clinicians to deal with and ought to be investigated further.

Emotional reactions post-abortion

Almost all the men describe themselves as satisfied with the decision to have an abortion at both follow-ups. They regarded it as a responsible act for all concerned. Simultaneously, many expressed contradictory feelings in relation to the abortion both before, and 4 months and 1 year after. However, this did not imply that the men regretted their standpoint. Abortion as a solution to unwanted fatherhood was frequently experienced as a relief and/or release. Simultaneously, abortion could also be experienced as a sad, ethically problematic and painful act. In spite of these contradictory feelings, all the men except one described their ability to cope post-abortion as essentially good. Overall, the abortion process was mainly described in a positive way; they referred to its engendering maturity, a deeper self-knowledge and strengthened self-esteem. These results are strikingly in accordance with studies on reactions in women post-abortion\(^9,10\).

Contraceptive use 1-year post-abortion

The present study shows that the majority of the men used some contraceptive methods (including safe periods and coitus interruptus) at 1-year post-abortion. In total, the number of men who had sex without using any contraception whatsoever 1-year post-abortion had decreased compared to the number at the time of conception. However, more than a third still relied on safe periods...
and coitus interruptus. Five of these even took chances by having sex without any contraception or wish to procreate. Thus, experiencing an abortion does not always imply that reproductive risk-taking will come to an end, which is also in agreement with studies on women. About 40% of the legal abortions in Sweden are performed on women who have had a previous abortion. Furthermore, among all Swedish men (between 25–65 years of age), every fifth man reported that they had been involved in a pregnancy that was terminated with an abortion at least twice. The number is probably higher as all men do not know about all pregnancies. Thus, the effort to prevent abortion has another target group; that is not only men involved in abortion, but also men involved in repeat abortion. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that healthcare providers reach out to and influence both women and men.

The latest Swedish national survey showed that reproductive risk-taking without any wish to procreate is a common phenomenon among both women and men in general. However, contraception and abortion are usually only seen to be related to women and as being the woman’s responsibility. For example, the discourse of sexual politics in Sweden from 1970 indicated clearly that contraception was the responsibility of the women, and that contraceptive methods such as the pill and the intrauterine device were to be preferred to the condom. In a previous abortion study we also found that both women and men reported that women more often took responsibility for contraceptive use than did their partners. Furthermore, the study showed that men to a greater extent than women preferred coitus-independent methods (OC and IUD), while women, to a greater extent (than men), preferred coitus-dependent methods, such as condoms. Thus, the complexities of the reproductive context are huge. In addition to the potential conflict of interest between males and females about abortion decisions, choice of contraceptive method seems to reflect a divergence between the sexes. This has not been sufficiently highlighted in either research or clinical practice. Consequently, there is a need for further studies and, as mentioned above, it is fundamental that a gender perspective is incorporated into reproductive health research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The authors would like to thank social worker Katarina Bergström for professional assistance in conducting the study. The project was supported by the Swedish Council for Social Research, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health and the Umeå Medical District, County of Västerbotten.

REFERENCES
Current knowledge on this subject

- Men want to be involved in the decision-making process
- Men have a great influence over the decision their partners
- Men experience both positive and painful feelings in the face of abortion

What this study adds

- All men supported the woman’s legal right to decide about abortion
- Most men experienced abortion as a relief and a form of taking responsibility
- Most men had only positive experiences after the abortion, such as a feeling of maturity
- One-year post-abortion, one-third consistently did not use a reliable contraceptive method