1994–1995 U.S. abortion rate was 27 per 1,000 metropolitan women and 14 per 1,000 nonmetropolitan women.14

A U.S. study showed that the abortion rate was lower for Protestants (17 per 1,000) than for Catholics (24 per 1,000) in 1994–1995, although Protestant women made up a larger proportion of those having abortions (37%) than Catholic women (31%).15 Survey data for Uzbekistan, where the majority of the population is Muslim, reveal that while Muslim women obtain the largest proportion of abortions (87%), they have the lowest abortion rate—17 per 1,000, compared with 39 per 1,000 among Christians. A similar pattern is found in Kazakhstan.

In some countries, abortion rates vary substantially by ethnicity. The 1995 U.S. abortion rate was much higher for black women (56 per 1,000) than for white women (17 per 1,000).16 In the Netherlands, native Dutch women obtained 57% of abortions and had an abortion rate of four per 1,000 in 1992; by contrast, Turkish-born women in the Netherlands accounted for only 5% of abortions but had the highest abortion rate—35 per 1,000.17

In Uzbekistan, while native Uzbek women have about three-quarters of abortions, the highest abortion rates are among Russians (43 per 1,000) and Kazakhs (19 per 1,000). The percentage distribution of abortions according to women’s educational attainment is available for a fairly large number of countries. In 15 of 23 countries studied, the majority of abortions are obtained by women who have had at least some secondary education (Table 7). However, the distribution of abortions according to women’s educational attainment probably reflects the distribution of women according to educational attainment in a given country and therefore reveals little about differentials by education.

In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, 80–81% of abortions occur among women with a secondary education, reflecting that 82–89% of women aged 15–49 have this level of schooling in those countries. In Turkey, the proportion of abortions that are obtained by women with a primary education (59%) is exactly the same as the proportion of all women aged 15–49 with primary education. Moreover, in Bangladesh and Nepal, where the majority of women have no schooling, those with no education account for the majority of abortions. A study of women with abortion complications in eight district hospitals in Kenya found that 52% had secondary education or more, 40% had primary education and only 8% had no formal education; by contrast, according to DHS data, among all women aged 15–49, these proportions were 25%, 58% and 18%, respectively.

Abortion rates by education, available for a small number of countries, give a better indication of differences in the incidence of abortion by education and show varied patterns across countries. Rates calculated from sample survey data for three Asian countries indicate that the incidence of abortion is somewhat higher among women with more than a secondary education.* In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, 53–56 abortions occur per 1,000 women with more than a secondary education, compared with 42–49 per 1,000 women with secondary education or less. The difference is much larger in Uzbekistan; the rate for women who have more than a secondary education (32 per 1,000) is twice that of women with a secondary education (16 per 1,000). By contrast, survey data from South Korea show that among married women, those with more than a secondary education have a lower proportion of abortions and lower abortion rates than less educated women.18

Results from a study in Italy suggest that the impact of education on abortion may depend on the age of women. Among 15–19-year-olds, especially those who were married (who are a very small group), the abortion rate was highest for the most educated group. On the other hand, among married women aged 20–39, the rate of abortion declined as the level of education increased. For women aged 40 and older, the abortion rate increased with level of education.19

Discussion

Induced abortion, like unintended pregnancy, occurs in virtually all societies. Whether women terminate unintended pregnancies is likely to be determined by their background characteristics, particularly their age and parity, as well as characteristics that reflect and influence their values, attitudes and motivation to prevent an unintended birth, such as marital status, education, place of residence, religion and ethnicity.

In most countries with available data, abortion is concentrated largely around the middle of the childbearing years. Both the proportion of women who have an abortion and abortion rates show that women in their 20s are usually the most likely to obtain an abortion. This is partly because they are relatively likely to be married, sexually active and fecund, and therefore may have high pregnancy rates.20 Women in their 20s seek abortions both to space births and to stop childbearing.

While the inverted U-shaped relationship between abortion rates and women’s age is apparent in most countries and regions, an important regional difference is found. The proportion of abortions and the abortion rate are lowest among adolescents in many Asian countries, but in all other regions, adolescents generally account for a higher proportion of abortions than women in their 20s. Varying levels of completeness of abortion reporting may explain some of this variation, especially between developed countries (where reporting is mostly complete) and developing countries where reporting is less complete.

*Although these rates are underestimates because of incomplete reporting of abortion, and better educated women may have more complete reporting than less educated women, underreporting is unlikely to cancel or reverse the pattern of the incidence of abortion by education.