Poverty and abortion
Lisa Beech

Last year I encountered a young woman’s abortion story. She described sobbing as she saw the results of her pregnancy test. Her husband heard her, came into the bathroom and hugged her and cried. She said to me they didn’t need to talk about it, they both knew they couldn’t afford another child.

Although they had both been working, they couldn’t pay their bills on one income; she had just finished maternity leave after the birth of a previous child and needed to go back to work. She said in another world she would have liked to have another child, but she couldn’t see how it could be possible.

Her feelings after the abortion were primarily of relief, that they would manage to cope financially. The rent would be paid; power wouldn’t be disconnected; there would be food in the cupboard. However, what I heard above all was a sense of pride that - despite their feelings and wishes - they had managed to do what they thought was the responsible thing to do; they would not have a child that they could not afford.

It’s rare for people to talk me about their abortion – the cross around my neck usually precludes this. But the subject of our conversation hadn’t been the ins and outs of pro-choice and pro-life positions, or the dignity of human life, or the point when human life begins.

The conversation was about poverty. And these two lovely young people, tertiary educated, were in low-paying jobs with little long-term security, without any hope or possibility of home ownership, frightened of being evicted from a cold rental home which they couldn’t afford to heat in winter; trying to keep an old car on the road in order to go to work in service jobs which started and finished at hours when no public transport was available.

What saddened me was that they thought abortion was a satisfactory outcome, even though they would have welcomed another child. What alarmed me was that they had absorbed and internalised messages that they alone had the responsibility for keeping their family out of poverty. What outraged me was that because of their own experience, they agreed with politicians who argued that beneficiaries who had additional children should be penalised.

Forty percent of children in New Zealand living in poverty are in homes where at least one parent is in employment. There are numerous reports about what poverty in New Zealand means in practice: the child poverty monitor of the Office of the Commissioner for Children (www.childpoverty.co.nz) is one source of information. Families living in poverty are usually experiencing deprivation in multiple areas – for example, living without warm clothing, adequate food, a bed for each person and participation in the community. It looks different in different settings.

Statistics tell us some of the picture; what I hear and meet are stressed and worried parents who cannot see any way out of poverty, whether on benefits or in paid work. While this is a societal responsibility, the outcome of deliberate public policy decisions over the past 30 years, the message society sends to parents in these circumstances is one of judgement, condemnation, guilt and shame.
Consequently, too many people living in poverty have absorbed the political rhetoric of individual responsibility, and now see hardship primarily as an individual matter about which they alone have made their own choices. It is especially heartbreaking and unjust that some parents regard abortion as an answer to poverty; as a solution to their problem of high rents, low wages and unaffordable childcare.

A consistent ethic of life affirms that we care about life from conception to natural death; however, that isn’t what comes across to people in mainstream rhetoric about abortion. What many people perceive is that anti-abortion/pro-life organisations and voices are only concerned about life before birth, and are content to leave a child to live in poverty after they are born.

Welfare policy continues to be a strongly debated topic, and not every pregnancy that is ended is because of financial hardship. However, it is an area where we can find common ground with people of different perspectives. At a Welfare Working Group forum in 2010 I unexpectedly found support from a representative of a family planning group when I stood to oppose proposals that would have penalised women who had additional children while receiving a benefit. We had different philosophies and different approaches to issues of welfare and sexuality. But we were able to stand together and publicly agree that poverty is the worst possible reason to have an abortion.

Rather than just focusing narrowly on the debate about the legal availability for abortion, we need to be visible participants in working on issues around low incomes, housing affordability and job security. So our society becomes one where a working family does not just sob in the bathroom at the news of an unexpected pregnancy, but where parents know that they can afford to welcome another life into their home and that they will be supported and cherished by the wider community.

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