



Original research article

# Constructing a validated scale to measure community-level abortion stigma in Mexico

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Received 9 March 2015; revised 22 January 2016; accepted 23 January 2016

## Abstract

**Objective:** In Mexico, abortion stigma in the general population is largely unexplored. We developed a scale to measure abortion stigma at the community level, examine its prevalence and explore factors associated with abortion stigma in a nationally representative sample.

**Study design:** Following intensive qualitative work to identify dimensions of the stigma construct, we developed a comprehensive list of statements that were cognitively tested and reduced to 33 to form a scale. We piloted the scale in a nationally and subregionally representative household public opinion survey administered to 5600 Mexican residents.

**Results:** Factor analysis tested the internal consistency and reliability of five previously hypothesized dimensions of abortion stigma: secrecy, religion, autonomy, discrimination and guilt/shame. Under the assumption that these dimensions were independent, confirmatory factor analysis indicated that each of these dimensions functioned as independent subscales. However, to test this assumption, we conducted exploratory factor analysis that revealed a strong codependence between discrimination, guilt/shame and religion statements, resulting in a 23-item four-factor model of abortion stigma and the elimination of the guilt/shame dimension. Both methods revealed a full scale and subscales with Cronbach's alphas between 0.80 and 0.90. Regression analyses suggested that older, less educated individuals living in the north of Mexico report higher levels of stigma, especially related to discrimination and religion.

**Conclusions:** This community-level abortion stigma scale is the first to be developed and tested in Mexico. This tool may be used in Mexico and other similar country settings to document the prevalence of community-level abortion stigma, identify associated factors and test interventions aimed at reducing abortion stigma.

**Implications:** Abortion stigma prevents women from accessing safe abortion services. Measuring community-level abortion stigma is key to documenting its pervasiveness, testing interventions aimed at reducing it and understanding associated factors. This scale may be useful in countries similar to Mexico to support policymakers, practitioners and advocates in upholding women's reproductive rights.

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*Keywords:* Stigma; Secrecy; Discrimination; Guilt; Religion; Autonomy

## 1. Introduction

In Mexico, abortion is restricted in all jurisdictions except for Mexico City, where a legal reform in 2007 decriminalized abortion up to 12 weeks gestation [1–3]. Abortion is nevertheless common throughout the country. According to recent estimates, the annual rate of induced abortion in Mexico is 38 per 1000 women, though the rate varies by region. Juarez and Singh [4] hypothesize that regional variations in the prevalence of induced abortion are related to abortion stigma.

Abortion stigma is often experienced at the level of the community and among social networks [5,6]. Though abortion stigma at the community level is perceived similarly across legal and restrictive settings, it is more evident in restrictive settings [7]. In Mexico, in a backlash to the Mexico City legislation, 17 of 31 Mexican states modified their constitutions to define life as beginning at conception and effectively banned abortion [8]. Concurrently, findings from a study with a nationally representative sample of Mexican Catholics suggested that the majority of respondents (61%) still had stigmatizing attitudes toward abortion despite the belief that abortion should be legal under certain circumstances [9].

Fear of abortion stigma often leads experiences of abortion to be shrouded in secrecy and rarely discussed openly, which can have negative implications for women's

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Table 1  
Descriptive statistics of stigma scale and subscales, unweighted based on CFA, 33 items in total

Statement	Factor loading	Subscale	Eigen value	alpha	N	Mean	SD
–	–	Stigma <sup>a</sup>	–	0.92	4049	2.86	0.73
Women with children who choose to have an abortion do it to give the kids they already have a better life	0.63	Autonomy 4 items	1.90	0.78	5114	3.83	1.03
A woman who has an abortion is doing what is right to not throw her life away	0.80						
Women who have abortions because they feel unprepared to have children are responsible	0.71						
It is ok that a woman has an abortion only because she does not want to have children at that moment	0.60						
Women who have an abortion are irresponsible	0.60	Discrimination 12 items	4.50	0.87	4648	2.55	0.93
Women who have an abortion are stupid	0.69						
Women who have an abortion are easy/will sleep with anyone	0.71						
Women who have an abortion are rejected	0.56						
Men who allow their partners to have an abortion are rejected	0.57						
Women who have an abortion deserve to be rejected	0.67						
Women who have an abortion do not deserve to have a family	0.61						
A man prefers to marry a woman who has never had an abortion	0.61						
A decent woman would never have an abortion	0.62						
An abortion causes a family shame	0.69						
A woman without children is an incomplete woman	0.50						
Women who have an abortion because they do not want children are selfish	0.46						
Women who have an abortion should feel shame	0.77	Guilt/shame 8 items	3.77	0.87	5011	2.90	1.08
Men should feel shame when their partners have abortions	0.76						
Women who have an abortion should feel guilty	0.83						
Men should feel guilty when their partners have abortions	0.76						
Women who have an abortion will forever be marked	0.57						
A woman is always at fault in an unwanted pregnancy	0.43						
Abortion is wrong even if it is legal	0.58						
Women who have an abortion should feel ashamed/disgraced even when the abortion is legal	0.70						
Women who have abortions will be punished by God	0.86	Religion 4 items	2.37	0.88	4971	3.07	1.36
Women who have abortions will receive divine punishment	0.90						
Women who have abortions should go to Church to ask forgiveness for their actions	0.78						
Resorting to more than one abortion is never justifiable <sup>b</sup>	0.44						
If you or your partner had an abortion, you would keep it a secret	0.72	Secrecy 5 items	2.34	0.80	5117	2.75	1.09
Women who have an abortion should not tell anyone	0.80						
Resorting to an abortion should be kept a secret as it is personal	0.77						
Resorting to an abortion should be kept a secret because it's shameful/disgraceful	0.62						
If a woman had an abortion, she should not tell her future partners	0.43						

Source: Authors' calculations. Eigen values are estimated with all relevant items after orthogonal (varimax) rotation using a basic correlation matrix as an input. Alpha score represents the highest alpha score after dropping items with low item-factor correlation. The individual statement dropped from the CFA is "Resorting to more than one abortion is never justifiable" from the religion/morality subscale.

<sup>a</sup> The Stigma scale is defined as the unweighted mean of all the items (32) retained from each of the subscales.

<sup>b</sup> Items marked with an asterisk were excluded from the subscale based on the Cronbach's alpha.

mental and emotional health [10,11]. Research has also linked the fear of abortion stigma to women choosing unsafe abortion services to avoid disclosure and thereby maintain a high level of secrecy [7,12].

Researchers have developed scales to measure different types of abortion stigma occurring in different contexts [13–15], but to our knowledge, no tool exists to measure community-level abortion stigma in Mexico. Given the juxtaposition of abortion liberalization in Mexico City versus the backlash further restricting abortion legislation in the states, we sought to develop a scale to measure abortion stigma at the community level in Mexico, determine the prevalence of stigmatizing attitudes at a national level and identify associated factors.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Formative research to inform the development of the scale

To understand the construct of stigma in the Mexican context, our scale development work began with an in-depth qualitative study in five states and Mexico City. The study's findings suggested that (1) social pressure to have children results in stigma toward those who choose to terminate a pregnancy, (2) women who are known to have had an abortion are severely criticized by people in their communities and, (3) rooted in a pervasive Catholic doctrine, women who have terminated a pregnancy are expected to "pay for the sin" and are described as carrying and an "indelible mark" on their identity [16].

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