

HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE EUROPEAN ABORTION DEBATE

INSPIRING A NUANCED DEBATE WITH
HUMAN DIGNITY AS COMMON GROUND

Jan Schippers MSc
Jacoline Waaijenberg BA



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Inspiring a nuanced debate with human dignity as common ground

Jan Schippers MSc, Jacoline Waaijberg BA

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Sallux is the political foundation for the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM). Sallux means "Salt and Light" and we want to spark a salted debate where needed and shed light on the issues we face. We present solutions by organising events and distributing relevant publications and will not stay on the safe side of the status quo.

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Foreword

Abortion is a particularly emotional topic. This is understandable because it deals with people in a difficult position. The first is the woman who is unintentionally pregnant and suddenly must make a difficult choice, a choice that will determine the course of her life. This becomes more difficult when she must make the decision alone. And when she is under pressure from many sides, the choice becomes even harder. As far as we can determine, every politician would want to see a woman in this situation supported and relieved of this burden.

What many women in this predicament feel, but unfortunately is not brought up in public debates, is that, in addition to her life, another human being will suffer the consequences of her choice, if she chooses an abortion. This not only complicates her decision, but it also complicates the debate. In particular, we see a contradiction between the two debate positions, one which focuses on the life of the woman, and the other, which focuses on the early life of the (unborn) baby. Is it possible to build a bridge between these two positions? This is the question addressed in this publication.

We begin by analysing three debates in the European Parliament to get a better picture of the current state of the abortion debate. Clarifying the current state of the debate is necessary before an alternative framework can be presented. We then discuss this alternative framework in detail. In this publication, we put forth a proposal to initiate a different debate based on human dignity.

Unfortunately, the European Parliament debates about abortion are stifled at the moment. Truly meaningful and respectful debates about medical ethics are rare. This division between the sides appears to impede a serious and open European debate. According to the authors of this publication, medical ethical issues require deep reflection and contemplation. Because of their sensitive nature, these issues urgently need to be discussed in a manner that respects the dignity of the human person, with an open ear to the arguments of others.

This publication can be used by policy makers and others. Primarily, it is essential to engage in the concept of human dignity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the debate. Next to this, the publication can also serve as a valuable resource for reflection on the current pro-life arguments. Furthermore, through the statistical, analytical and philosophical representations of the diverse positions within the debate, it is possible to employ this publication as a tool for formulating positions that challenge existing perspectives.

This study is a joint endeavour of the Guido de Brès-Foundation, the research institute of the Dutch political party SGP (Political Reformed Party) and Sallux, the political foundation of the European Christian party ECPM (European Christian Political Movement). Both ECPM and SGP, as political organisations, share the opinion that legislation on abortion is primarily a competence of the national member states. Debates on abortion are a current reality that our politicians can hardly ignore, and the debate in the European Parliament reflects the wider European debate on abortion. Therefore, this brochure is also intended to be blueprint that inspires a wider European conversation on this issue.

A respectful conversation is only possible, we argue, if the conversation is centred around the theme of human dignity. In this way a nuanced dialogue that touches the hearts and minds of the participants can become an European reality.

Last but not least, the authors would like to express their sincere thanks to Heather Zeiger, to whom it is due that this text is presented to you in fluent English.

Rotterdam/Amersfoort, 2024,
Jan Schippers MSc
Jacoline Waaijbergen BA



Starting points

The debate on abortion in the European Parliament (EP) is a recurring one. It is also an entrenched and emotionally intense ideological debate. It is hardly a surprise, then, that the metaphor of a battle is often used. It is a fight, and it is about winning or losing. Parliamentarians intensely believe that the progress of our society or the humanity of our European community is at stake: “We can go backward or forward.”

To give a fair picture of the debate, it is important to mention nuanced voices are also represented among those parliamentarians who take into account human dignity as well as autonomy. Next to them, are there also parliamentarians present with a pro-choice view on abortion legislation, however who are also strong supporters of sexual education in the context of an emotionally safe relationship. In both cases, it is possible to see starting points for serious conversations.

The aim of this publication is to provide tools for a more nuanced conversation and a more respectful debate. This is particularly necessary because the polarisation in the current debate is not in any way constructive. Therefore, it is important to analyse the debates in the European Parliament, and from there, take a different path in a more constructive direction.



Research Methodology

Qualitative framework

The second part of this publication draws on the qualitative analysis of the following three EP debates:

- o The EP debate about the report of the rapporteur Pedrag Fred Matić in June 2021.¹
- o The topical EP debate following French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal to include the right to abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in January 2022.²
- o The current affairs debate following the US Supreme Court's decision to abolish the (federal) right to abortion in the United States in July 2022.^{3 4}

In the qualitative part, the authors will give a brief description of the different and most striking arguments put forward by the different positions. An analysis of the abortion debates in the EP shows that roughly four positions can be distinguished. For the sake of completeness, it is important to note that there is some overlap between these positions. It is important to mention that these diverse positions are invented by the authors of this publication and consequently have a degree of subjectivity.

The first position the authors distinguished are those who take a pro-life position. The second position are those MEPs who focus mainly on women's autonomy, the so-called pro-choice position. The third position has shown to be an intermediate position that respects both autonomy and human dignity. The fourth position takes an institutional approach to the issue and focuses on competences and legislative frameworks. In this research an overview will be given of the different positions and their most frequently cited themes and standpoints.

Quantitative framework

This qualitative classification was subsequently used by the researchers as a starting point for a quantitative study. The quantitative study was set up according to the following method; the authors transferred each debate to a spreadsheet. Each individually written or verbal contribution made by a MEP to one of the three debates was included in this sheet. The sub table for each contribution includes information about the MEPs themselves, the issues covered by the contribution, and striking or apparently absent elements (or themes) in their contribution.

On this basis, all contributions were assigned to a specific position by the authors. In some cases, it was possible for the contribution to be classified in more than one position. In each case, the authors used the information in the spreadsheet to decide which position the contribution could best be identified.

The pro-life contributions and the pro-choice contributions from each of the three debates were separately examined. Different arguments were marked by the authors with different colors. The number of times that the same argument re-appeared in contributions was counted. Any argument that recurred in the same contribution was counted as one occurrence. The results are reported in the graphs Frequency of different pro-life arguments and Frequency of different pro-choice arguments. Each debate also has its own statistical representation in the following chapter.

The institutional and intermediate positions were not examined by means of this method. It is the opinion of the authors that the content of the institutional contributions is less relevant when it is about the main topic of this publication, human dignity. It would have been interesting to analyze the intermediate position because of its unique content. However, there were very few contributions from this position, which made data analysis problematic.



Quantitative analysis

Analysis of EP debate on Matić report (June 2021)

Results of vote for motion for a resolution (as a whole)

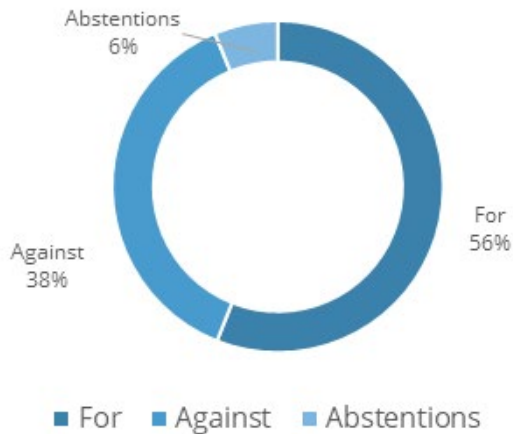
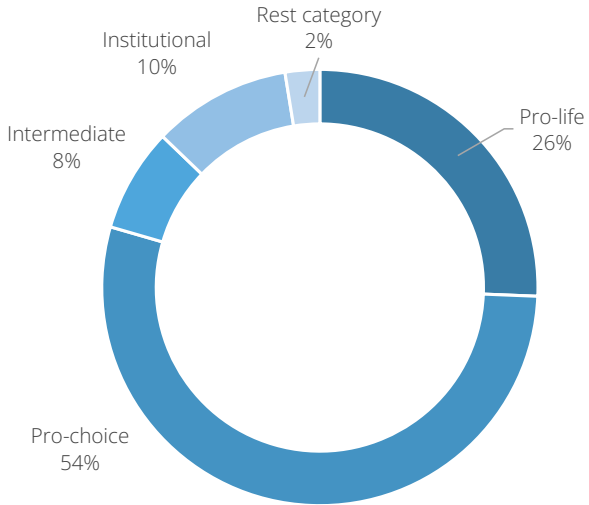


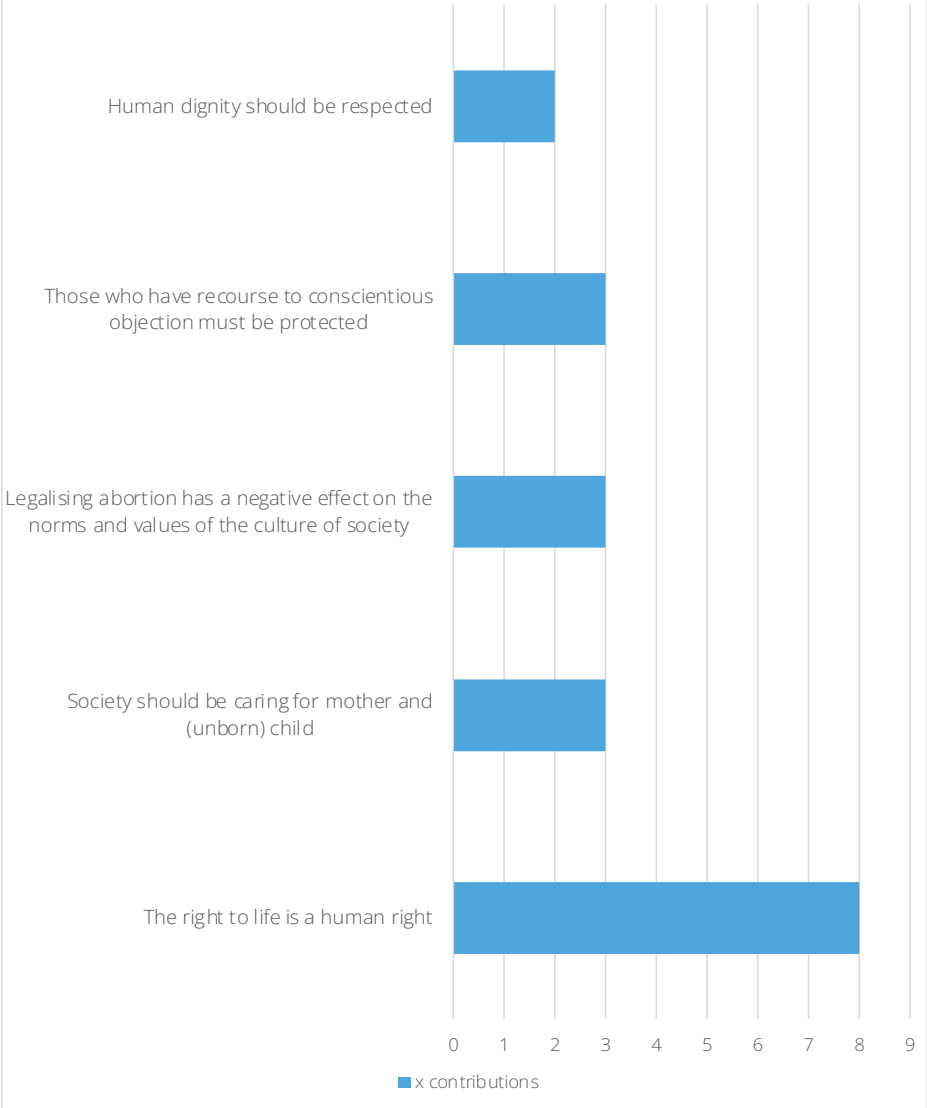
Fig. 1 Results of vote for motion for a resolution (as a whole)⁵
Final vote 23-06-2021

Description	Results	Voting system
Motion for a resolution	Adopted	Roll-call vote
For	Against	Abstentions
378 (56%)	255 (38%)	42 (6%)

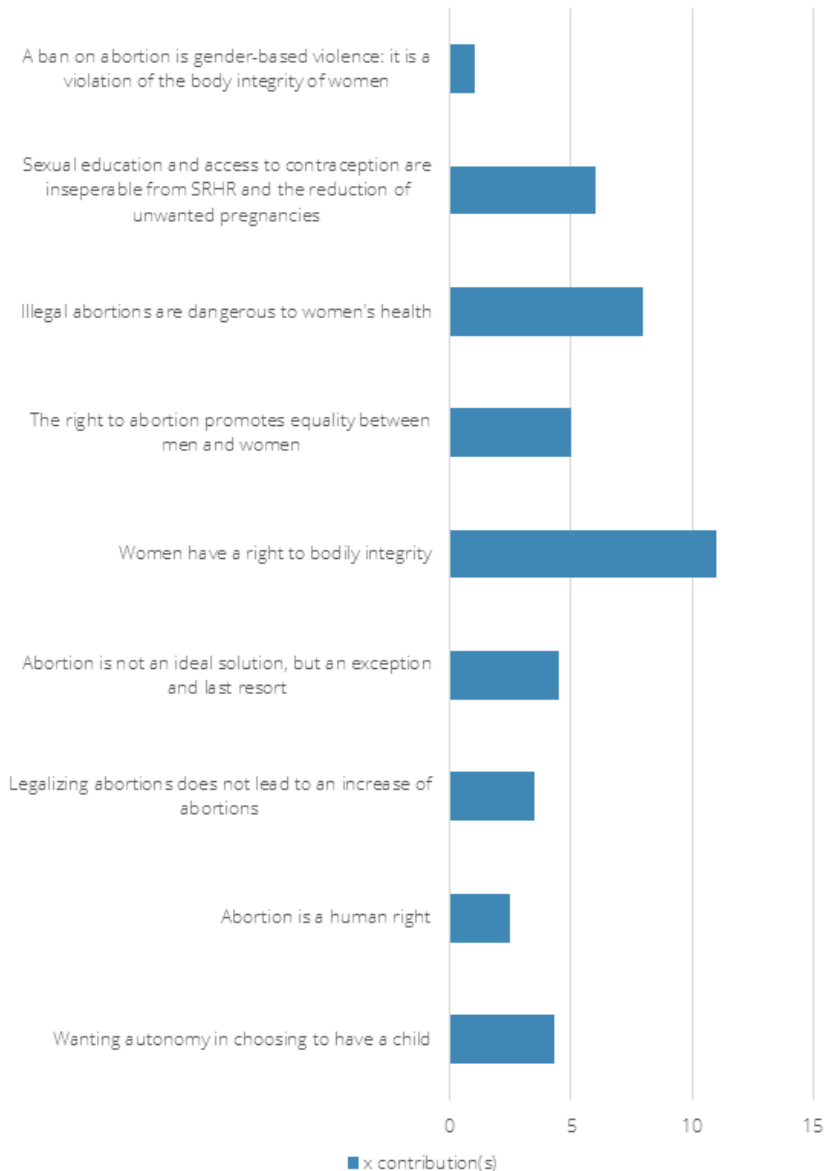
Frequency of contributions by the four positions by percent (EP debate June 2021)

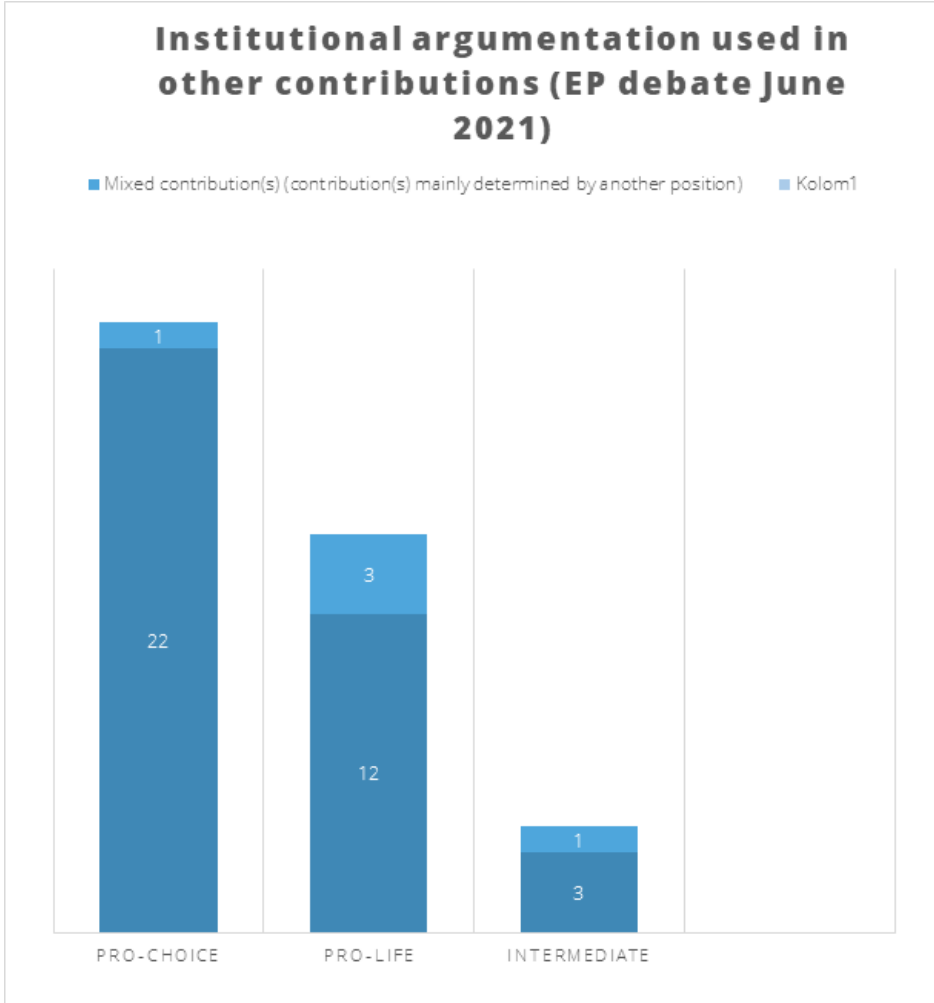


Frequency of various pro-life arguments (EP debate June 2021)



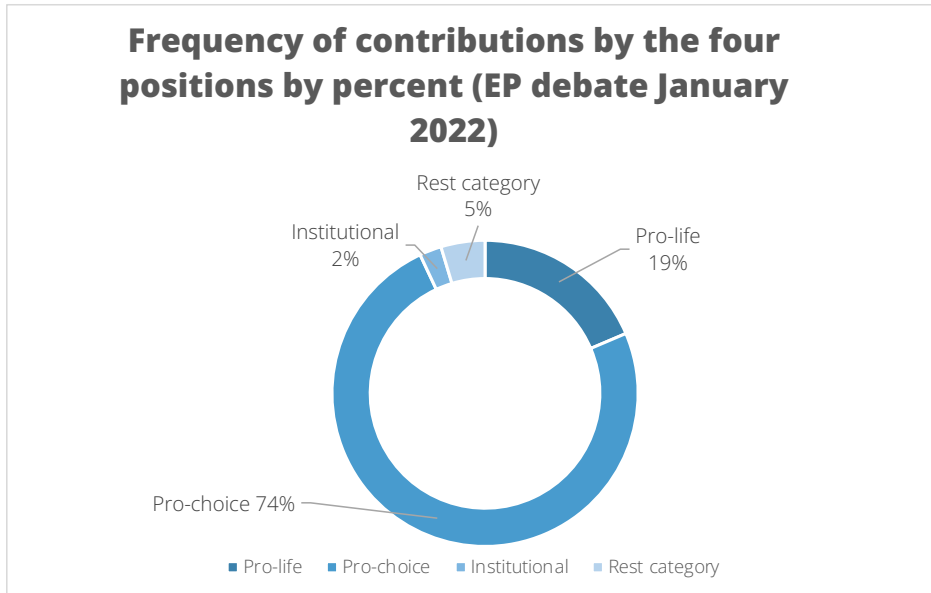
Frequency of various pro-choice arguments (EP debate June 2021)





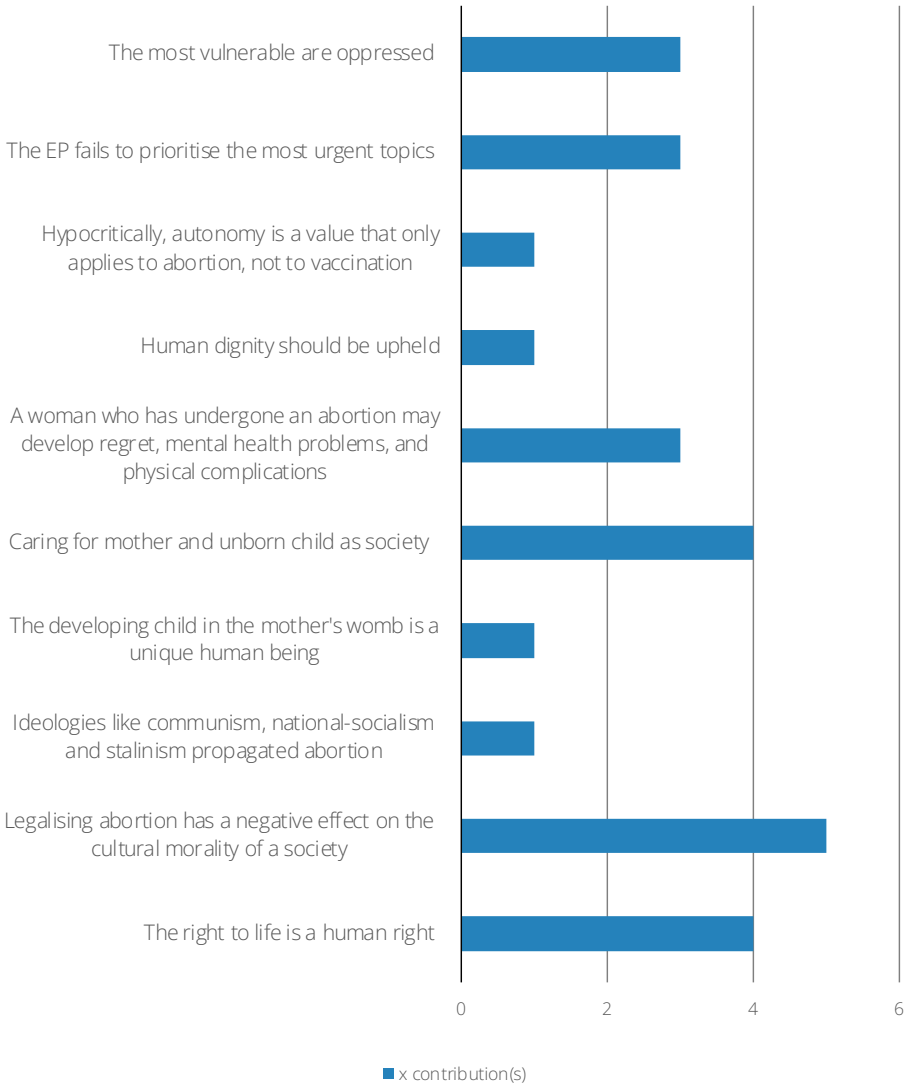
N.B. Whereas in the chart on page 13, we separated the four different positions, in this chart, we have chosen to drop the purely institutional contribution (Lexmann). We show how often mixed contribution(s) (i.e., contribution(s) who shared institutional position characteristics with the institutional position) were included in the other positions because they were mainly determined by another position. The chart shows how often institutional argumentation was used by the pro-choice position, the pro-life position and the intermediate position.

Analysis of EP topical debate about SRHR in the European Union (January 2022)

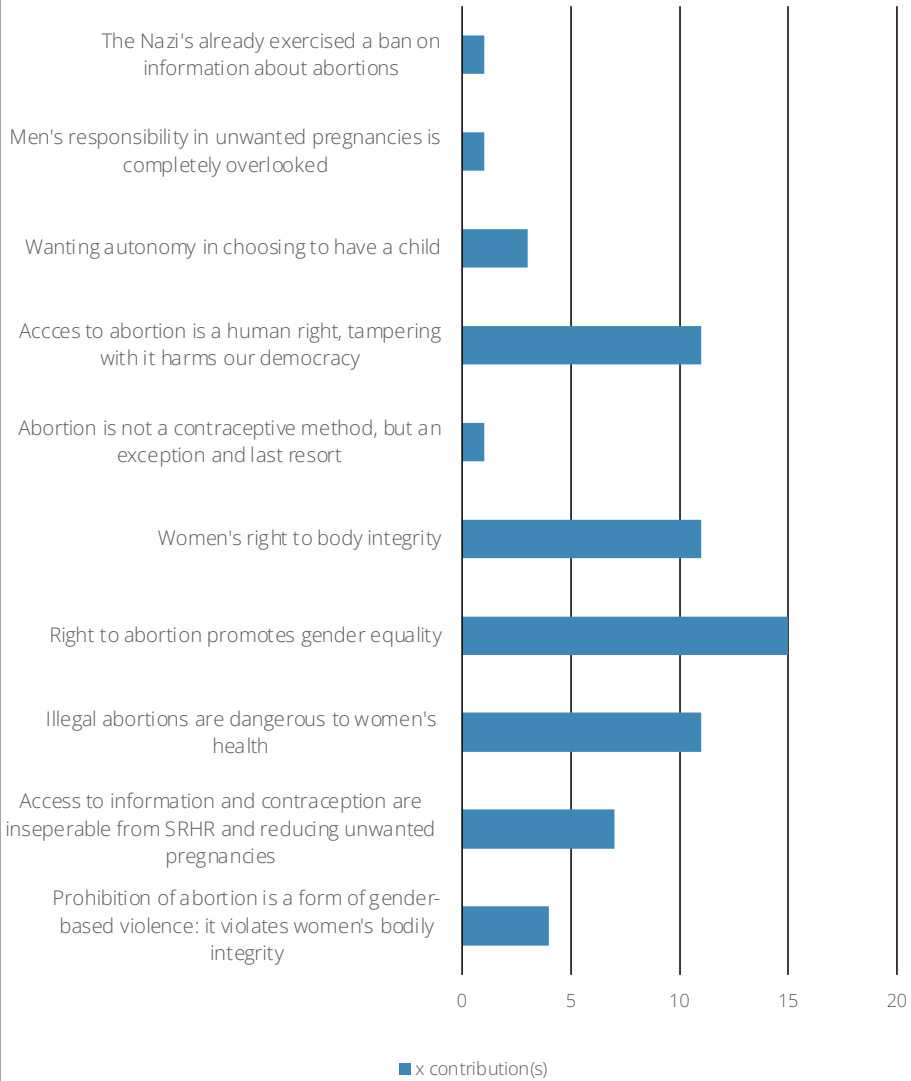


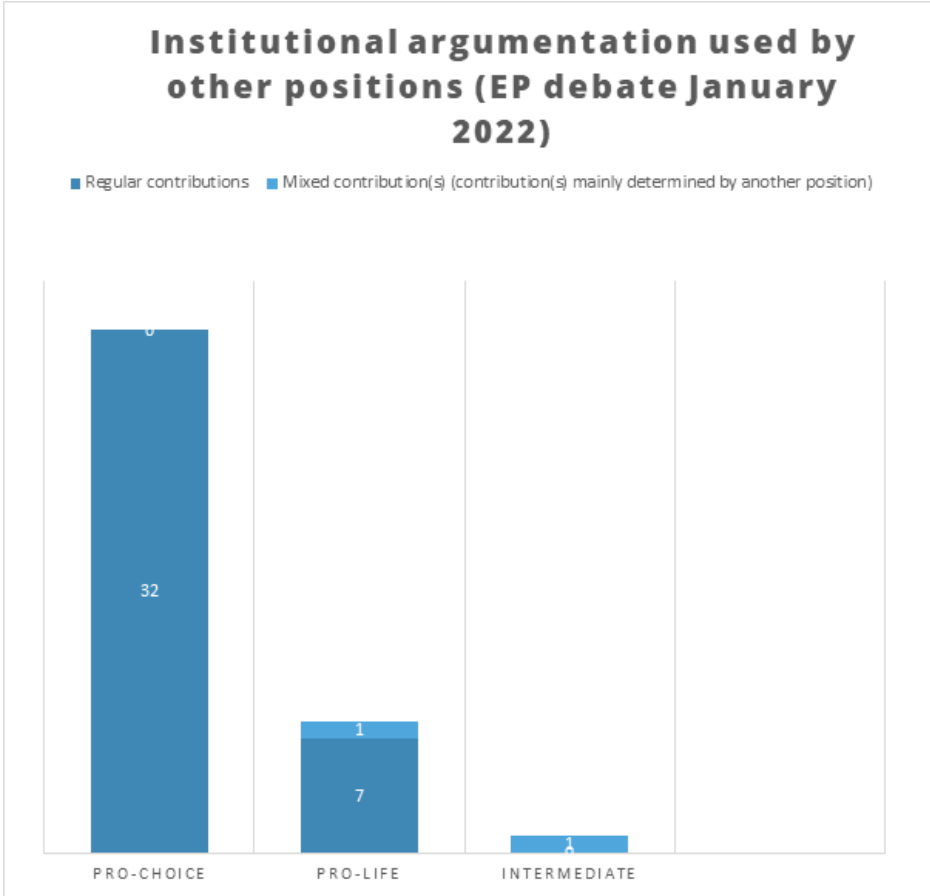
N.B. In total 43 MEPs contributed to the January 2022 debate. We have identified zero contributions from the intermediate position. In this chart we excluded the contributions of the European Commission vice president, Vera Jourová, and the contribution of Clément Beaune, the Council President.⁶

Frequency of various pro-life arguments (EP debate January 2022)



Frequency of various pro-choice arguments (EP debate January 2022)

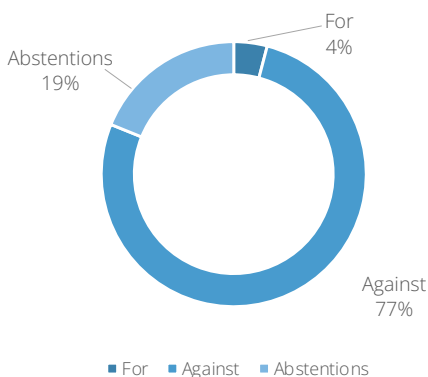




N.B. In total 43 MEPs contributed to the January 2022 debate. We have identified zero contributions from the intermediate position. In this chart we excluded the contributions of the European Commission vice president, Vera Jourová, and the contribution of Clément Beaune, the Council President.⁶ N.B. Whereas in the chart on page 17, we separated the four different positions, in this chart, we have chosen to drop the purely institutional contribution (Rookmaker). We show how often mixed contribution(s) (contribution(s) who shared institutional position characteristics with the institutional position) were included in the other positions because they were mainly determined by another position. So, the chart shows how often institutional argumentation was used by the pro-choice position, the pro-life position and the intermediate position.

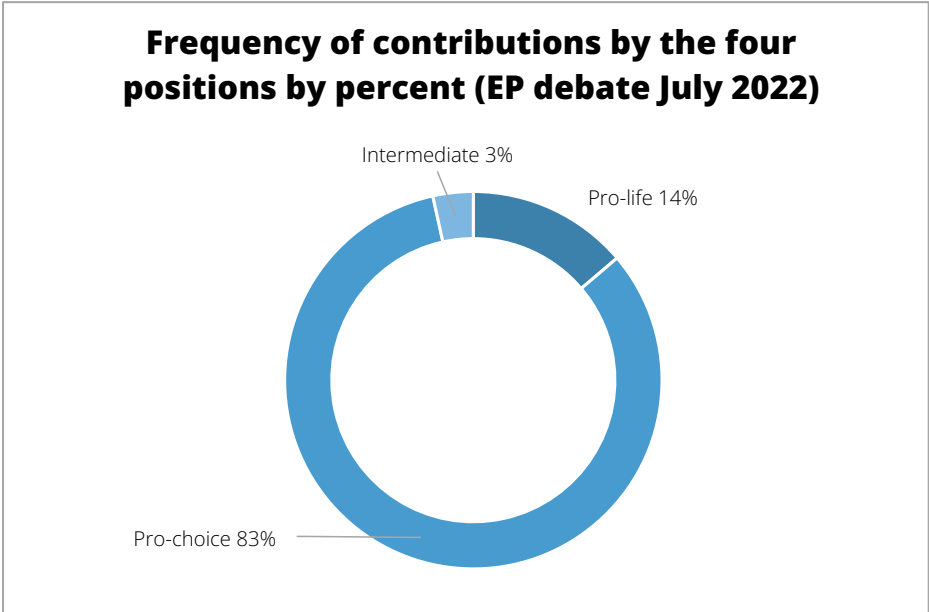
Analysis of EP topical debate about SRHR in the European Union (January 2022)

Results of vote for motion for a resolution (as a whole)



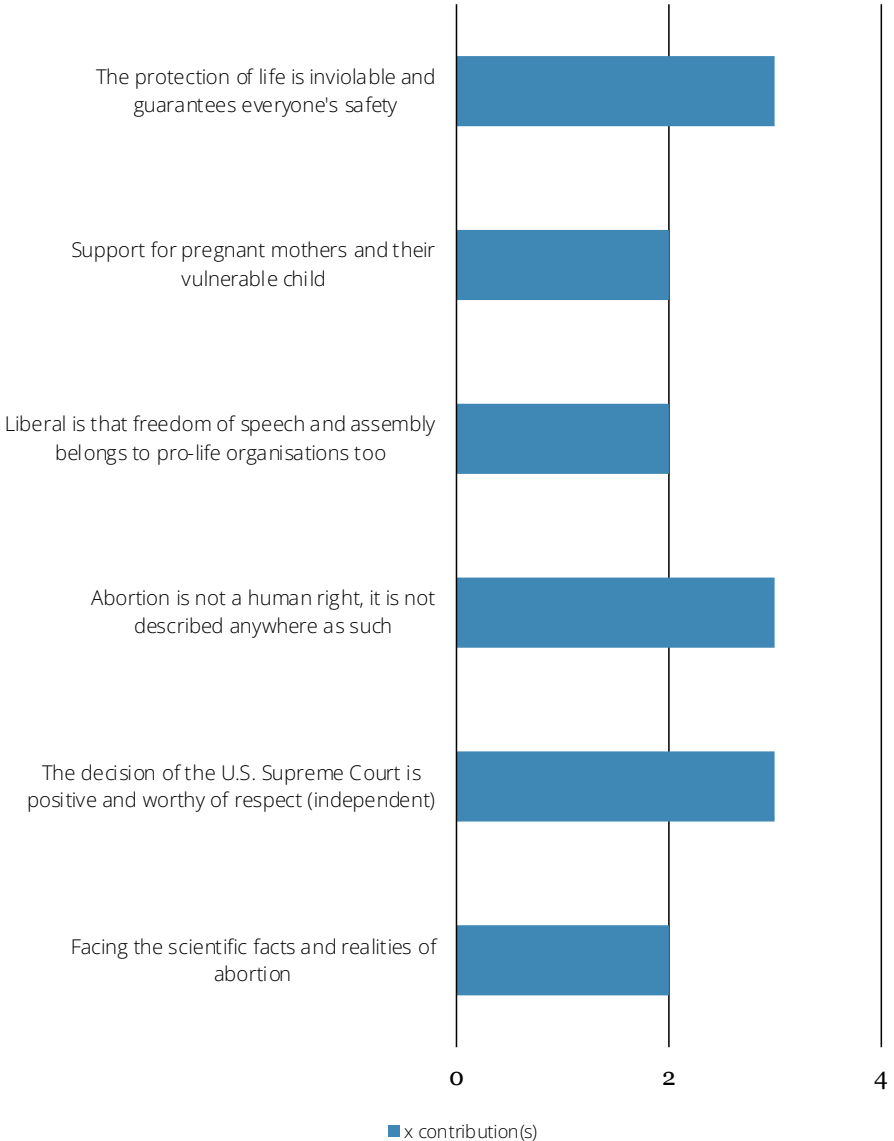
Voting results for motion for a resolution (as a whole)⁷ Final vote 04-07-2022

Description	Results	Voting system
Motion for a resolution ⁸	Adopted	Roll-call vote
For	Against	Abstentions
324 (63%)	155 (30%)	38 (7%)

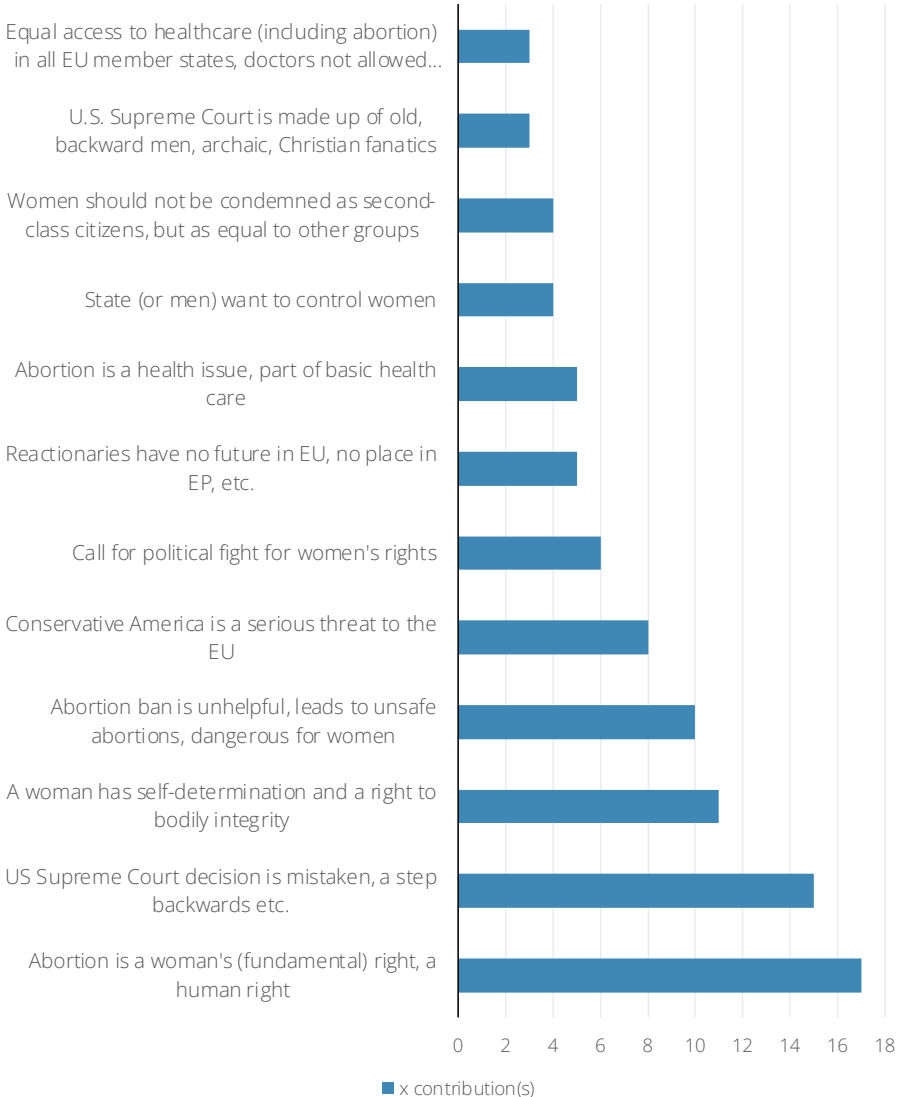


N.B. 29 MEPs contributed to the July 2022 debate.

Frequency of various pro-life arguments (EP debate July 2022)

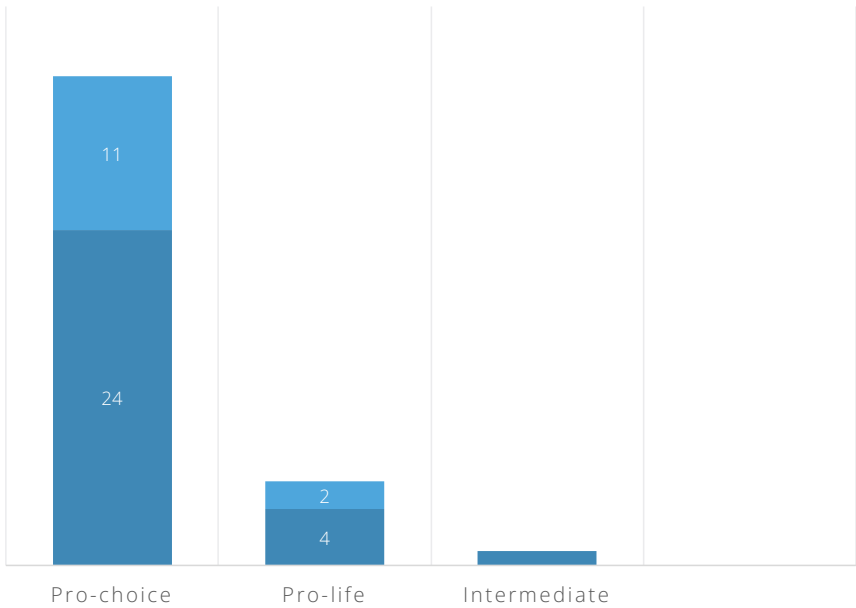


Frequency of various pro-choice arguments (EP debate July 2022)



Institutional argumentation used by other positions (EP debate July 2022)

■ Mixed contributions (contributions mainly determined by another position) ■ Regular contributions



N.B. In the debate, we have examined zero purely institutional contributions. Because many of the pro-choice contributions argued for abortion to be included in the EU Fundamental Rights charter, there is a larger number of mixed contributions in the pro-choice position than in the pro-life and intermediate positions.





Qualitative analysis

In this second qualitative chapter, we have compiled a list of the most frequently used themes and subsequent arguments from the pro-choice, intermediate, pro-life and institutional positions.

Pro-choice

We begin with an analysis of the most frequently employed arguments from the pro-choice position. We have positioned the arguments presented around four sections: women's rights, education, health and individual freedom. The concluding section deals with extreme arguments. Surveying the whole of arguments, one could almost conclude that pro-choice means pro-abortion.

Women's rights are human rights

Women are at the heart of the argument for free choice on legal abortion. According to the pro-choice narrative, a woman is a vulnerable human being. Her rights have not always been respected throughout time and history. Fortunately, some progress has been made when it comes to women's rights. The purpose of the pro-choice position is to ensure women and men have equal rights. This is why the progressive idea of the integrity of the female body is, for its proponents, synonymous with the fight against gender violence. From this perspective, there is no difference between physical violence against women and the restriction of women's rights. The pro-choice position on legalised abortion includes not only education, but also access to contraception, infertility treatment and abortion. An umbrella term for this pro-choice philosophy is "sexual and reproductive health and rights" (SRHR).

Education

Education has always been the main emphasis of this position. This is because the pro-choice movement has insisted since abortion was first legalised that it was never intended to be utilised as a form of contraception. Therefore, educating young people about safe sexual intercourse is extremely relevant. Autonomy, dignity and safety are key words in educating young people about sexuality. Gender stereotypes, violence and sexual abuse can also be combated with good education.

Health implications

From the pro-choice position we see the following arguments about health implications; illegal abortion can be life-threatening. Not every woman can freely and voluntarily decide to have sexual intercourse. In cases of rape, traumatic experiences or danger to the woman's health, the woman should be able to choose to terminate the pregnancy. Additionally, in the case of foetal abnormalities that may lead to the foetus being non-viable, this option should also be available. The pro-choice movement often cites examples of particularly tragic, not to say extreme situations.⁹ For young girls, under 16 years of age, it can be dangerous to carry a pregnancy to term and give birth. In the United States, a 10-year-old child was denied an abortion after being raped because of the pro-life changes in jurisdiction. This last example was cited by pro-choice MEPs in the analysed debates. It is, they say, a real disgrace to Western civilisation.

Rights, freedom and democracy

According to the pro-choice position, access to legal and safe abortion care is closely tied to the broader concept of general rights and freedoms in society. Those who are against legalisation of abortion are sometimes labelled as extremists, fundamentalists or extreme conservatives. Some pro-choice MEPs believe opinions that tend towards extremism will threaten the rights and freedoms of everyone in society. In the end, it is likely that all members of society will be affected by the gradual erosion of civil liberties, according to the pro-choice narrative.

Extreme arguments

Pro-choice MEPs use negative framing to characterize the pro-life parliamentarians, organisations and movements. Pro-life MEPs are accused of having a lack of empathy. Pro-choice MEPs state that the pro-life position forces women to have unwanted children, but do not offer any care with anything else, e.g., child care.

Several pro-choice MEPs have taken the extreme position that those who disagree with them do not have the right to be part of democratic representation and debate. This is extreme, because it means that many Europeans would be excluded from the right to vote and the right to be elected. This opinion represents a denial of equal human rights of all citizens. Also, there was a pro-choice MEP, who compared the pro-life MEPs narrative with Nazi legislation.

Intermediate

Analysis of the three debate positions makes clear there are some parliamentarians' arguments that can be distinguished as a position between the pro-choice and the pro-life position. Both humanism and the tone of the debate appear to be key issues for this group.

Humanism

In the European abortion debate, a middle group can be distinguished when it comes to style and substance in the abortion debate. For example, these parliamentarians simultaneously support the rights of women and LGBTI-people, but also emphasise the rights of the child. Humanism is the core ideology from which they draw their arguments. In every situation and for every person present in the situation. "A child is everything," it is said by these parliamentarians: "A child is not a commodity." A philosophical and real conflict between women's rights to SRHR and, on the other hand, the status of the unborn life is not mentioned in their contributions to the debate. According to this position, taking an extreme position obscures a human view and should be avoided.

A sensitive issue

This centrist MEPs also call for softening the tone of the debate because that's what this subject calls for. They argue that a sharp tone is out of place here and should be avoided at all costs. Sometimes the moderate tone comes from the feeling of not being able to talk about such sensitive issues because you are of the opposite sex. A parliamentarian claimed to be unable to understand a woman who terminates a pregnancy, yet simultaneously asserted that he is not in a position to pass judgement on the matter. According to this parliamentarian, even if you cannot understand it with your heart and mind, a woman's right to make decisions about her own body still stands.

Pro-life

The pro-life contributions in the European Parliament use a diverse set of arguments. Those that hold to a pro-life view discuss the worldview of the pro-choice majority, and they include, for example, the significance of new life for a larger intergenerational group of people. It is clear that the pro-life argumentation is original and has a lot of variety in response to the pro-choice argumentation.

Wider cultural influence

Pro-life contributions emphasize that legislation on abortion has a wider cultural impact. Abortion legislation is never an issue in and of itself but reflects the values and norms of the culture from which the legislation arises. Here, the culture from which abortion legislation emerges can be considered a “culture of death”, according to these MEPs. They say that legal permission for abortion has a chilling effect on the hearts of individuals and society because it impacts how society views the value of life.

SRHR ideology

Some pro-life parliamentarians call the pro-choice ideas in their entirety an ideology. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is described by them as an all-in ideology. They describe this ideology as a new vision of humankind, in which the individual loses its unique dignity. People are only seen as products, which can be reproduced. The uniqueness of a new-born life is lost, they point out, when we focus our attention primarily on those who wish to procreate.

Practical implications

Apart from theory, the practical implications surrounding abortion are mentioned by pro-life MEPs. Regret after an abortion is mentioned. One pro-life parliamentarian asked: “Do we want a society without people with the Down syndrome?” He sees the situation in Denmark as dehumanizing. In Denmark almost all unborn babies with Down syndrome are aborted, which the pro-life perspective considers an eugenic practice. In addition, pro-life parliamentarians use the argument of helping the mother and child to redirect the thoughts of those who see some pregnancies as insurmountable for both mother and child.

Reality speaks?!

Of course, the value of the unborn life, is seen by pro-life parliamentarians as a valid argument in the European abortion debate. At this point, the pro-life argumentation can unfold in two different ways. First, it is possible to reason in an emotional manner about the vulnerable unborn foetus and/or unborn life. Pro-life MEPs argue that when the unborn cannot raise their voice, others will have to make their voices heard. Secondly, some present a more scientific view. In such a contribution, the pro-life side emphasises that the genetics of the soon-to-be-born human being are different from the genetics of the pregnant woman. No new or extra arguments are added to these pro-life contributions, for example, about the potential, autonomy or dignity of this new human being. Parliamentarians assume that other parliamentarians understand their position when they just explain reality.

Intergenerational context

Everyone in European Parliament who focuses on the pro-life position emphasizes the intergenerational context of life. Also, they emphasise over and over the relevance of the extended family. Society should not allow families to find themselves in circumstances in which an abortion seems inevitable for them. Pro-life MEPs emphasise in many arguments that new life has an impact on the broader family circle.

Extreme arguments

Unfortunately, a few of the pro-life parliamentarians are convinced the debate benefits from references to the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. They remind us that it was in these states that abortion, or eugenic abortion, was legally permitted for the first time in Western history.

Institutional

The institutional approach, also called the legal approach, brings into focus competencies, legislation and charters when it comes to the topic of abortion.

Subsidiarity

An example of this approach is the assertion that the European Parliament undermines the competences of individual member states, if MEPs in the European Parliament say that abortion should be legalised throughout all member states of the European Union. For instance, a parliamentarian can ask the question: "In some democracies in Europe, for instance, Malta, abortion is illegal. If the EP declares something different, are the democratic rights of the citizens of Malta still respected at the same time?" Also, some arguments refer to the fact that the legalisation of abortion is still not mentioned in the different EU charters, which means it is not an EU competency.

Representation

Occasionally, representation is referenced as a potential legal problem. Large money flows to certain progressive or conservative groups could undermine democratic representation. By using money as a tool, the legal position argues, foreign powers could enhance their influence on the European Union.

The framework of competences of EU institutions

Both proponents and opponents of abortion admit the European Parliament currently has no authority to make something juridical obligatory in regard to abortion. Proponents express this truth by saying they are not able to control the legislation of member states. Opponents of abortion often ask why abortion is so often the subject of debate in the European Parliament when it should not be. Supporters of legalising abortion see abortion rights as human rights, which is why they see it as a logical step to include the legalisation of abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. There are also voices, albeit ideologically coloured, who believe that Member States do not offer safe and legal solutions when it comes to abortion, so an European solution is in order.

Institutional implications

Institutional implications can be an argument in itself for this group of MEPs. For instance, it is repeatedly argued that violating the principle of subsidiarity sets a dangerous precedent for violations in other areas. They also refer to practical problems in implementing the legalisation of abortion. As the current situation is different in different member states, there will be practical problems if the EU wants to centralise abortion legislation across the European Union, according to these MEPs.





Recapitulation

Summary

In this chapter, we evaluated the various positions on abortion in the European Parliament. When we examine the arguments of the pro-choice position, we see this narrative repeatedly states men and women are equal and should be treated as such.

On the one hand, pro-choice arguments state that the importance of bodily integrity is an argument in itself. However, this position also emphasises that abortions are almost always complicated situations; it is repeatedly mentioned that women in economically vulnerable situations are more affected by a ban on abortion. The intermediate position is, in their own words, based on humanism. Parliamentarians try to justify both the worthiness of life and the autonomy of women. The pro-life argument has several key themes: the wider cultural influence of the legalisation of abortion, the intergenerational context and the reality of the unborn life. Regret after an abortion and fewer people with disabilities in society is also mentioned as negative consequences to legalising abortion. Also, less visibility of disabled people in society is recalled as a negative consequence. The institutional position takes a very different approach, focused on the institutional context of the debate and not on the content of the issues of the debate.

Reflection

This research aims to analyse the existing situation. We do not claim to be objective while presenting a view of the current situation. But we do make an effort to reflect the state of affairs in a fair way by asking what is striking about the existing arguments of the various positions?

Pro-choice

The pro-choice position strongly supports an unfettered choice on whether or not to have an abortion. The basic idea behind this is the freedom for women to make their own choices about their own lives. Every human being, including women, are pictured as autonomous individuals, or, at least, that every individual should have autonomy in their choices. Abortion is considered an essential part of the hard-won rights for women. At the same time, there seems to be a tension with other arguments that are mentioned by the same MEPs: pro-choice MEPs acknowledge that pregnant women can be vulnerable or in a precarious situation. The argument that criminalising abortion could lead to greater inequality in society also highlights the underlying tension in terms of inner logic. The vulnerable and precarious position of women apparently serves to underpin her right to autonomy, which creates an impression of inconsistency at a basic level. Is the recognition of this vulnerability consistent with the idea of the autonomous individual?

Intermediate

The middle position is definitely not clear about their inspirational sources in their arguments. However, the argumentation that they use implies certain values and ideas. Proponents of the intermediate position value tolerance above determining who is right or wrong in the abortion debate. For that reason, they are against polarisation on this topic. Their call for a nuanced debate is commendable, and this position has the potential to connect other sides. The challenge, however, is that they do not resolve the fundamental questions that arise in this debate. In several arguments we see that these tensions are mentioned, but not bridged. They mention the contradictions and tensions, however without building a common ground that would help to bridge these differences. The main problem seems to be that the differing viewpoints imply contradictory value systems and ideologies in their contributions.

Pro-life

In their contributions the main point of departure for pro-life MEPs is the right to life of the unborn foetus. In many instances this is not made explicit. Although the argumentation does centre around this unspoken idea, the audience is not always informed of it. Sometimes pro-life parliamentarians use extreme arguments, and therefore argue in a manner that contradicts human dignity. In general, pro-life MEPs are creative and elaborate in their arguments. However, their underlying motives behind these various arguments could be more clearly stated. Moreover, reasoning from the right to life creates an one-sided approach, that fails to find common ground with a broader audience.

Institutional

The institutional position is focused on implementation and subsidiarity. There is no immediate discernible ideological position in this approach. However, the application of the institutional position in various arguments makes it clear that the institutional position is sometimes used to further an ideological goal, which can be a pro-life, a pro-choice or an intermediate position.

Brokenness of the world

It is clear from all four positions that the brokenness of the world is often overlooked. Reality is too multifaceted to employ an one-size-fits-all approach. The reality is that in the debates in the European parliament there is little space to consider the broader consequences and our common reality. The question is whether there is an impetus among the parliamentarians to find an approach that bridges the different positions on abortion.





Human dignity as a means of fostering understanding and bridging divides

The debates on abortion in the European Parliament, analysed above, are not isolated debates. They fit within a broader context. For instance, one's worldview, including one's anthropology, play a fundamental role in framing the discussion on abortion, even if worldview is not explicitly mentioned. In this chapter, we first discuss the 'how' and 'what' of this ideological and entrenched debate and why it is desirable to build a bridge between the opposite positions. Next, we provide suggestions to reframe the debate. We do this by addressing the nature of humanity itself. The philosophical perspective of the human being plays a major role in what position one takes. We then bring up the distinct views on the status of the human embryo. Subsequently, we explore the concept of human dignity as defined in various international human rights documents. Finally, we provide some conclusions and questions for reflection.

Trench warfare

Because many speakers take part in the debate with unspoken presuppositions, often showing great enthusiasm for their perspective combined with prejudices about their opponents, the discussion soon degenerates into people talking past each other. One can hear a cacophony of arguments, but very often people do not listen to each other. Rather, they hurl accusations back-and-forth from their own trench. This applies not only to spokespeople from the pro-choice side, but also the pro-life side of the debate.

The following examples from the EP-debate on June 23, 2021 provide a telling illustration of this:

"... the enemies of sexual and reproductive rights are not pro-life. They are merely part of a movement that seeks to curtail our freedom of choice, that seeks to control our bodies, that seeks to return women and sexual minorities to the grip of authoritarian fundamentalists. We will not let that happen." – Terry Reintke, Verts/ALE-Group

"This report explicitly demands that one of the much-vaunted European values in the future is that the EU guarantees the killing of a human being as an inalienable human right, thereby establishing an enforceable right to kill a human being. Any member of parliament agreeing to this report should be clear: their approval amounts to a crime against humanity."

– Christine Anderson, ID-group

Benefits of a bridging approach

All participants are free to continue this 'debate' in this way. However, it seems to us that there cannot be a reasonable discussion. The question is how to turn this stalled situation in the abortion debate for the better. In our view, it would be better to move away from intense polarisation and strive towards better listening, i.e., a real dialogue. And of course, this without compromising the possibility of having a clear stance on the issue. Why is this necessary? Because in a substantively argued dialogue - it forms part of the basis of every democracy - the input from the pro-life side can, in our opinion, be more just and be more effective. Such an improvement cannot be achieved overnight: this is a long-term issue. It requires great stamina. Also, because in our society deeper thinking and broader reflection are not really encouraged.

But there is more. There are quite a few flaws in the arguments. This is another reason why the principles of the protection of life, on the one hand, and that of women's self-determination, on the other, clash head-on. Is there a way to transcend this contradiction? To put it another way: does this apparent opposition indicate the real conflict? Or does it merely mask a deeper problem - fear for losing something valued as very important - that (partly) causes people in our culture to be so intensely divided on this issue. Another factor is that different starting points, differing views on humanity and the world make it difficult to understand each other's perspective.

The organizations that jointly publish this report can be deemed 'pro-life'. Precisely for that reason we ask: "What is life?" What is it exactly what 'pro-life' stands for? "The right to life" is not in-and-of-itself an explanation of what 'life' is. By asking this question it is possible to find both a more solid ground for a culture that values life as well as common ground in the debate.

Given the political background of our organisations and the constituencies we represent it is relevant to ask our own constituencies the following critical questions regarding their conduct in this debate: "Who is convinced by a defensive narrative?" Does the defensive and/or confrontative approach indeed led to a culture that embraces life? Has it done so in the last decade or so? In general, we can conclude that a polarised debate has failed to deal with the underlying questions of autonomy and human dignity and, therefore, has moved to favouring the notion of autonomy without much reflection.

Moreover, we believe that it is crucial to find common ground and diminish polarisation in the debate as this will contribute to mutual understanding. Therefore, it is important to understand both sides of the debate in more detail and analyse the dynamics of the debate.

What thoughts are behind the words? Into which 'frame' are pro-life MEPs pushed and into which narrative do they want to try to bring others along? What prejudices are expressed about pro-choice MEPs? Do these contribute to a fruitful dialogue or not? When we reflect on these types of questions, it might well lead us to proceed in a different way and with a different attitude.

We are aware that due to the cultural pressure from mainstream media against the pro-life position there is a general defensive attitude among those who adhere to a pro-life position. This cultural pressure is very unhelpful and increases polarisation. We understand that due to this dynamic some who are seeing themselves as pro-life may see a risk in departing from a mere defensive position. We want to emphasize that finding a way to a more fruitful and less polarised debate does not mean that those who adhere to a pro-life position abandon their core beliefs. To the contrary, by providing a path to a less polarised debate, it will be possible for more people to consider the pro-life position on its own merits.

Basic argumentation of main opponents

As described earlier, we will here provide a more in-depth analysis of the dynamics of the debate beyond a mere description of the various positions and see what the philosophical anchors of the different positions are. We also explore what the weaknesses are in the arguments and (most importantly) what is missing in the debate.

First, we briefly outline the principles and basic arguments of both opposing ‘camps’.

Pro-choice

- Individual autonomy of women;
- Freedom of choice for women;
- Respect for women’s bodily integrity;
- Safe and legal abortion belongs to basic medical care, is a solution for women who are unintentionally pregnant, and should therefore be accessible to all;
- Equal treatment of women vis-à-vis other positions (i.e., no control of women by the state and/or by men);
- Abortion or contraception offers women more freedom, and for that reason it is seen as progress for society.

Pro-life

- Right-to-life offers a guarantee of everyone’s safety;
- The unborn child is a full human being (not an object or part of the mother’s body);
- Offers help to both mother and child (in the case of an unintended pregnancy);
- Abortion can have negative consequences for the physical and psychological health of women;
- International treaties recognise the right to life, not the right to abortion;
- Guard freedom of conscience for doctors who cannot cooperate with performing abortion without compromising their beliefs.

One-sidedness, inconsistencies and ‘blind spots’

Even if the preceding overview is brief and incomplete, it exposes a fundamental aspect of the issue at stake. Indeed, what is remarkable is that the most basic principle underlying the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) of the United Nations, as well as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (EU-CFR), is hardly thematised at all: human dignity.

In the three EP-debates studied, this fundamental concept is mentioned only a few times. Implicitly, it is more widely present, but mostly in an one-sided way. For instance, the pro-choice position seems to identify human dignity with autonomy and freedom of choice, while pro-life MEP's do not name human dignity, but focus on the right to life and the protection of every human life.

The arguments both sides use, increase the differences between them. This in turn makes it difficult to see how and where there could be any common ground for a serious dialogue - an adversarial debate - between pro-life MEPs and pro-choice MEPs.

To understand how human dignity is the blind spot on both sides of the debate it is necessary to deal with the question of life itself and how we see the human being.

What is man?

Answering the question "what is man?" would require an exhaustive study. In what follows, we can only indicate a few basic ideas. In doing so, we distinguish three approaches:

- Man as an individual being;
- Man as a communal being;
- Man as a relational being.

The following briefly explains these three approaches.

The first approach is dominant in Western society and politics. For their vision of man and society, liberal parties start from the individual. They stand up for the rights, freedoms, and autonomy of individuals in society. However, one person's freedom should not go so far as to harm other individuals. This is the well-known liberal do-no-harm principle. Radical liberals place the interests of the individual so far above the interests of a community that it compromises the shape and common experience of a shared (religious) identity and communal life.

The second approach is characteristic of traditional societies, where people live in the context of a tribe or clan. The ideologies of communism and national socialism are also based on a collectivist view of man. In this, the individual is subordinate to the community. In radical collectivist variants, the value of a person is measured by his usefulness to the collective.

The third approach stems from Judeo-Christian thinking. Man is not seen as a solitary, autonomous individual, but as a relational being with a personal responsibility. Every person is placed within four connections or relationships, namely between God and man, between man and fellow man(s), between man and creation (environment), and between man and himself.

These relationships appeal to each person's personal responsibility towards others around him to care for those in need. By virtue of reciprocity, a person who is, or becomes, dependent upon others may also count on their care and protection.

For a meaningful, dignified existence, it is important to keep these four relationships in balance and not ignore any of them. When one of those relationships is denied, a person becomes unbalanced resulting in all of the relationships becoming distorted. This leads to negative consequences for the well-being of the person concerned, the stability and development of society and the condition of the natural environment.

In what way do differing visions of the human being affect the debate on abortion? To answer this, we first bring into focus the positions on the moral status of the human embryo.

On the status of an unborn human being

For the sake of brevity, the following three positions can be distinguished from each other in the abortion debate:

- The human embryo is not worthy of protection (until birth)

According to this position, the human embryo is just a "clump of cells"; it is seen as biological or human tissue that has no special status that merits protection.

- The human embryo is worthy of protection from conception onwards

According to this view, the human embryo has intrinsic value, it has all the potential to develop into a fully formed human being, and therefore from the very beginning it is entitled to the same protection as a newborn baby or adult person. It is arbitrary to assign the same protections to one human embryo and not to another.

- The human embryo is increasingly (from a certain stage in pregnancy) worthy of protection

According to this view, the human embryo has intrinsic value. The further the embryo develops into a human being, the greater it merits protection. The point of full protection is placed at various points in biological development, for example at implantation in the womb, at the first heart beats, at the experience of pain, at the viability threshold or at birth.¹⁰

Legislation around induced abortion is mostly based on the latter position, with the time limit for a legal abortion ranging from the twelfth week of gestation (most European countries) to the 24th week of gestation (Netherlands and United Kingdom). Countries like Malta base their policy on the second position and have restrictive abortion policies for that reason.

The first position is held by Canada and Israel. In these countries, abortion upon request is legalised until the end of pregnancy.

The view that protection of the human embryo is linked to its characteristics and attributes has striking similarities with the widely shared view of humanity among politicians, journalists and scientists in Europe. The question, however, is whether this view is consistent with the concept of human dignity that is inherent in nature according to the international declarations on human rights. This question is addressed in the following sections.

Human dignity: a core value

In international documents such as the UDHR, the ECHR and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, human dignity functions as an anchoring or grounding principle. This dignity is considered inherent. It belongs to every human being regardless of gender, social status, skin colour, sexual orientation, intellectual ability or any other characteristics. Therefore, this dignity is inseparable from and found in the humanity of every human being.

Does it make sense to connect humanity and dignity? Because, unfortunately, people are also capable of inhumane behaviour. And not every human being behaves in a way that is in accord with their inherent dignity. In this respect, what applies to individuals also applies to peoples and states. That's the unruly reality. From this we can conclude that the aforementioned international documents are therefore not a self-evident observation, but an appeal. The international declarations call on all states, organisations and people - including every politician and lobbyist - to show a right attitude towards fellow human beings, to show respect for the dignity of all (fellow) human beings. Otherwise, an appeal to human dignity becomes a platitude when it is only used to assert one's position as the 'right' one.

Article 1 of the UDHR summarises this as follows: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Here, the connection between dignity, freedom and equality immediately springs to mind. That this does not mean absolute freedom or equality is obvious. After all, absolute freedom would lead to chaos, injustice and arbitrariness on the one hand, while absolute equality would deprive human beings of freedom and does not leave room for a personal identity. The Declaration of Human Rights, drafted shortly after World War II, as well as the ECHR aims to prevent the pursuit of such absurd utopias.

This leads to the observation that the values of freedom and equality both need correction and colouring by two other fundamental values, namely justice and solidarity (see Figure 1 on page 41).

By supplementing freedom and equality with the value of justice, states or governing bodies cannot arbitrarily exercise their authority. States or governing bodies also have a duty to protect their citizens from arbitrary interference of (among other things) their right to life. For this reason, inviolability of the person is also named as a human right and slavery is rejected.

More can be said about this vision of freedom. Namely, it is freedom that allows the person and the community to flourish and promotes their well-being. The state therefore must give every citizen freedom to flourish, including the possibility that citizens may aspire to a completely different political system or to achieve changes in legislation or in the organisation of society through political opposition.

Importantly, freedom of conscience, thought and religion, as well as freedom of association and assembly and that of expression are basic rights that guarantee a "state-free space" for citizens. Based on the equal rights and dignity of all people, these and other fundamental rights should apply everyone equally.

About equality, it is worth noting that it is not aimed at denying, let alone eliminating, the many differences between people. It is precisely because of the differences in gifts and abilities that people rely on each other to assist others (and especially the vulnerable among them) and thus together help build a society and promote its stability. The value of solidarity emphasises the recognition of the differences between people on the one hand and that of their equal dignity on the other. The value of solidarity also emphasises that space for freedom goes hand in hand with the degree of responsibility for looking after fellow human beings and contributing to the common good.

In short, the values of justice, freedom, equality and solidarity, in their interrelatedness, constitute a guiding expression of the core value of human dignity.¹¹ For the sake of flourishing and peace in society, one of these values should not be absolutized, although situations or circumstances are conceivable in which one value needs (temporarily) more emphasis than the others.



Figure 1 - Human dignity: a core value amidst four other values

A multi-dimensional dignity

"Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected."

This can be read in Article 1 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This sentence is a widely shared premise and is therefore quite useful as a starting point for an alternative approach to the abortion issue, both for politicians on the pro-life side and those on the pro-choice side in the debate.

Of crucial importance here is how human dignity is understood and how it is used in the debate. If the concept only serves as a conversation stopper to silence anyone with a different point of view, how seriously do we take all those solemn international declarations and treaties? If all of us in Europe believe that human dignity is inherent, then using human dignity instrumentally is incompatible with the concept.

The inherent nature of human dignity then means that it does not stand or fall based on certain characteristics or attributes of a human being. Nor can this dignity diminish based on a reduced presence or even an absence of certain of certain human abilities. Since the inherent nature of human dignity is unconscious or casual in debates and discussions, it requires explanation.

If human dignity is inherent, in what way are pro-choice positions compatible with it, since they strongly emphasise autonomy, freedom of choice and self-reliance? Is a human embryo that lacks these characteristics and cannot live independently outside the mother's body regarded as 'merely' a clump of cells or 'biological tissue' and therefore not entitled to protection?

The assumed autonomy, freedom of choice and self-reliance of human beings are counterbalanced by the inherent dependence and vulnerability of human beings. Here, too, we see one-sidedness in the arguments put forward from both sides.

We see therefore an unbalanced approach by both pro-life as pro-choice. On the pro-life side of the debate it is as if there is only the reality of vulnerable human being that needs to be protected by the state. On the pro-choice side of the debate it is as if there is only the reality of autonomy of the woman that needs freedom from intervention by the state and/or society.

It's even more complex if we include the many remarks from the pro-choice MEPs that emphasize the vulnerability of the woman and place that above the vulnerability of the unborn child in order to secure the autonomy of the woman. Anyone who intervenes or advocates on behalf of the unborn child is then deemed an oppressing force.

Contributions to European Parliament debates also show that spokespeople in the pro-choice camp therefore tend to make human autonomy and freedom of choice (quite) absolute. The corollary of this, however, is that we then end up in a situation where the law of the jungle applies, where the will of the strongest prevails and justice is hard to find. From this, the most vulnerable people, especially women and children, become the first victims. It is a curious inconsistency that some feminists, perhaps unintentionally, are pushing for such a situation.

Those who deny the fundamental vulnerability of human beings and thereby fail to recognise the need for the protection of vulnerable life pull the matter out of kilter. But if we were to turn things around, it also backfires. For those who deprive human beings of their freedom and space for autonomy end up with the coercive state, or worse, the totalitarian state. With some sense of understatement, we can conclude that this is not

the ideal perspective envisaged by most pro-life MEPs.

Being human is ultimately a matter of “to be or not to be”: human life is there and when it is there, it is due dignity which, after all, should be accorded to every human being. Human dignity exists as soon as there is life.

We can conclude that it is important to clarify what constitutes human dignity. In doing so, it is a matter of reasonableness and realism not to confine this dignity to one dimension of human existence, but to start from a perspective that acknowledges human dignity is multi-dimensional. For the sake of starting the conversation on this, six dimensions of human dignity are named, each in two more or less contrasting pairs of concepts (see also Figure 2 on page 44):

- Responsibility and receptivity;
- Freedom of choice and vulnerability;
- Autonomy and dependence.

These three pairs of concepts demonstrate the paradoxical nature of being human. In our European culture and society, for example, human autonomy is highly valued. However, a person is dependent on others for its realisation. Furthermore, a person’s autonomy or self-reliance may vary throughout life, according to the extent of a person’s knowledge, abilities and health, as well as according to the situation in which a person finds himself. A person’s autonomy or dependence may vary according to time and occasion, but it does not mean a person has more or less dignity. This also applies to the other pairs of dimensions.

Opposite to freedom of choice is the vulnerability of every human being, which sometimes leaves little choice but to do the right thing, which is caring for the vulnerable. The opposite of responsibility is receptivity. Receptivity means being open to appeals from others, in order to fulfil this responsibility as a (fellow) human being in such a way that promotes human flourishing.



Figure 2 - Three pairs of dimensions of human dignity: autonomy v. dependence, freedom of choice v. vulnerability, responsibility v. receptivity.





Conclusion

Human dignity ultimately describes the intrinsic value of every human being. Without the acceptance of the foundational reality of human dignity, we cannot have a functioning democracy that respects the rule of law. Without the notion of human dignity, we cannot have a liveable society. That is why human dignity is fundamental for a constructive and respectful debate on this difficult topic.

It appears that none of the position within the abortion debate fully acknowledges the fundamental premise that human dignity represents a core value shared by all of us. These two principles, the right to life and autonomy,¹² are both derived from this fundamental value. If the different aspects of human dignity that have been mentioned and of which there are even more to be distinguished, are not seen from this balanced perspective but separate from human dignity, it is easy to lapse into extremes. One dimension is then elevated above another dimension which creates consequences that are contrary to respect for human dignity.

The pro-life position, through its emphasis on the right-to-life, and therefore 'justice,' 'equality' and 'solidarity' (Figure 1 on page 45) and 'dependence,' 'receptivity' and 'vulnerability' (Figure 2 on page 48) falls into the trap of becoming extreme in their policy options if other dimensions become secondary or are even pushed aside. For example, when 'pro-life' leads to policy proposals in which women should be monitored by the state if they are pregnant or not, then that would be an infringement of fundamental rights. When 'pro-life' proposals lead to authoritarian forms of state intervention, human dignity is violated.

On the pro-choice side an excessive focus on 'freedom' and 'autonomy' (Figure 1 and 2) also leads to extreme positions. Where the phrase "my body, my choice" leads to a situation in which the child becomes a commodity (as is the case in commercial surrogacy), the fundamental right to life and the human dignity of the child have been erased. When the systematic abortion of children with down syndrome or gender-based abortions are deemed acceptable, the risk of the acceptance of eugenics is evident. Both are also contrary to equal human dignity.

Those who are very fervent in their positions (either pro-life or pro-choice) may state that the position of the other is, by definition, extreme. They will state that either abortions or any attempt to reduce the demand for abortion treatments or the number of abortions is contrary to human dignity. However, in both cases, this denies that human dignity is a common ground in which the preferred values by either side are ultimately anchored in. An one-sided approach produces consequences that are contrary to human dignity.

For human dignity to be respected, all dimensions, whether autonomy and right to life, whether freedom, equality, solidarity and justice, whether freedom of choice, responsibility, autonomy, dependence, receptivity and vulnerability should be equally weighed in policy options and policy visions.

It appears that no position within the debate fully acknowledges the fundamental premise that human dignity represents a core value shared by all of us. These two fundamentally non-contradictory principles, the right to life and autonomy, are both derived from human dignity. That is why human dignity is the common ground between pro-life and pro-choice. If both sides base their approach and style on human dignity, it will be possible to have a more meaningful and less polarized debate.

Summary



1. The inherent nature of human dignity, as enshrined in the widely recognised UDHR and other basic international documents, is not compatible with an attribution of that dignity on the basis of a person's characteristics, capacities or abilities.
2. It is contrary to the inherent nature of human dignity to vary the attribution of protectiveness to a human being according to the degree of a person's capacity for self-reliance, autonomy, freedom of choice, consciousness or other characteristics or capacities.
3. In the abortion debate, care must be taken to ensure that human dignity is not granted only to the woman, who is unintentionally pregnant (pro-choice position), or only to the unborn child (pro-life position). Both positions exhibit one-sidedness and are contrary to the inherent nature of human dignity.
4. Opposition to oppression and demand for the state to protect the vulnerable are wired into the moral compass of Western civilisation. It corresponds to a deep-rooted sense of justice. The curious thing, however, is that a deep divide emerges between those who wish vulnerable, voiceless unborn babies to be protected by the state versus those who want vulnerable, pregnant women to be protected from the state (or others) controlling their bodies.
5. The paradox of the posited "right to abortion" is that it minimises men's (i.e., expectant fathers) sense of responsibility and allows for the possibility of gendercide.
6. The paradox of a one-sided approach to the right to life is that it can lead to a level of control by the state that is contrary to human dignity and the core value of human freedom.

7. Given the promotion of the alleged right to abortion, adequate sex education for both boys and girls is desperately needed. Preventing the demand for abortion takes precedence over banning it.

8. Human dignity is the core value from which four other basic values derive: justice, freedom, equality and solidarity. They are all interrelated and therefore we should not isolate them from each other, as if in any given situation only freedom and/or equality matter. Justice and solidarity should also be given equal weight with the two other values, to give full weight to human responsibility. Both autonomy and the right to life are unthinkable without their common foundation in human dignity.

9. The abortion debate in Europe will be less polarised and more meaningful if both pro-life and pro-choice positions explicitly take human dignity as their point of departure. There will still be major differences between them but both sides will understand that they also have a common ground. Without that sense of shared human dignity, we cannot sustain democracy in Europe.



Appendix - Suggestions for dialogue

1. The international human rights declarations and treaties call on all states, organisations and people to demonstrate a right attitude towards fellow human beings, including respect for each human being.

a. What does this call mean for the way you treat people who do not share your position on abortion?

b. What would this call mean for the treatment of a woman who is unintentionally pregnant and who has been abandoned by the child's father?

2. An essential feature of the rule of law is that governments must protect their citizens (or people in general) from arbitrary interference with their lives and bodily integrity.

a. If you hold the view that abortion (for reasons other than medical) amounts to arbitrary killing of innocent life, how would you respond to above mentioned statement (based on the concept of human dignity as explained in this publication)?

b. What arguments do you make against advocating legal and safe abortion on the grounds of protecting the physical integrity of the woman who is unintentionally pregnant?

3. A person's autonomy and dependence may vary according to time and occasion.

Why should anyone consider that these differences affect a person's dignity?

Can you explain why this should not be the case?

4. Sex education for girls is not complete if it is limited to knowledge about the 'technical' aspects. It's important for girls to gain self-respect for their own bodies and not to throw away the pearl of their intimacy by having sex outside of a close, lasting relationship (i.e., a marriage). One reason for good sex education for boys is to teach respect for the dignity of girls and women.

Do you agree with this, and can you give other reasons for this?

5. Men cannot become pregnant; they don't bear children and shouldn't, therefore, have any say about women in the abortion debate.

What do you think of this argument (from pro-choice side), and how do you respond to it?

6. Important principles such as freedom of choice and self-determination or protecting bodily integrity are sometimes applied selectively in the political debate. In one situation (i.e., abortion) they are upheld, in another (i.e., vaccination) they are not. Or vice versa.

What do you think of such handling of principles? In what ways could these principles be applied in a consistent manner across multiple social issues?

7. Based on this study, three elements stand out for common ground between proponents and opponents of legalised abortion on demand: human dignity, protection of the vulnerable, and prevention or reduction of unwanted pregnancies.

Do you see more elements that could help bridge the gap between pro-life MEPs and pro-choice MEPs? Which element do you think is most useful and why? And which element is, in your opinion, not useful at all? What approach did you miss in this study?

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Footnotes

1. European Parliament, "Verbatim report of proceedings, Wednesday, 23 June 2021 – Brussels, Sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health (debate)," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-06-23-ITM-023_EN.html (accessed 3 May 2024).
2. European Parliament, "Verbatim report of proceedings, Thursday, 20 January 2022 – Strasbourg, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the European Union (topical debate)," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-01-20-ITM-004_EN.html (accessed 3 May 2024); European Parliament, "Verbatim report of proceedings, Thursday, 20 January 2022 – Strasbourg, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the European Union (continuation of debate)," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-01-20-ITM-006_EN.html (accessed 3 May 2024).
3. European Parliament, "Verbatim report of proceedings, Monday, 4 July 2022, US Supreme Court decision to overturn abortion rights in the United States and the need to safeguard abortion rights and Women's health in the EU (debate)," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-07-04-ITM-012_EN.html (accessed 3 May 2024).
4. It is important to note that a topical or current affairs debate is often held at short notice, which means that there was less time for parliamentarians and staff to prepare their contribution to the debate. Therefore, the debate on the Fred Matić report can be given more weight in comparison to the other debates.
5. European Parliament Legislative Observatory, "Results of vote in parliament. Statistics – 2020/2215(INI) | A9-0169/2021," <https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/sda.do?id=56607&l=en> (accessed 18 October 2024).
6. On the 20th of January there was held only a topical debate between the contributing MEPs, no voting session was included.
7. European Parliament, "Minutes – Results of votes, Thursday, 7 July 2022, Strasbourg," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PV-9-2022-07-07-VOT_EN.html (accessed 18 October 2024).
8. This vote concerns the resolution B9-0365/2022 which was proposed by S&D, Renew, Verts/ALE, The Left and independent members. The resolution B9-0366/2022 which was proposed by ID and the resolution B9-0367/2022 proposed by ECR, were not put to vote.
9. Those situations are often used in the debate as a leverage to justify all abortions.
10. Retrieved from: Arthur Alderliesten, *Recht op leven. Aanzet voor een bio-ethiek van het levensbegin* [Right to life. Impetus for a bioethics of the beginning of life, publication in Dutch] (Kampen 2023), p. 30-32.
11. This conclusion has much overlap with the thoughts of Radu Motoca. He identifies five fundamental implications of human dignity, namely: 1) respect for and protection of life; 2) attention to and care for the issue of human freedom; 3) respect for

justice; 4) the close link between dignity and solidarity; and 5) raising the awareness of everyone's responsibility. See: Radu Motoca, *Human Dignity*, (Sallux 2023), p. 84-87.

12. Autonomy is here understood as space for or freedom to decide, not as a moral or philosophical principle (contrary to the principle of heteronomy).

The debate on abortion in Europe is emotional and exciting. It is also radicalising. In 2022, French President Macron floated the idea of making abortion a fundamental right. Meanwhile, the French parliament has overwhelmingly accepted this proposal. However, such a licence to kill innocent life arbitrarily, clashes with the right to life as enshrined in the current human rights catalogues. That a legislator does not care about this collision shows how polarised the debate on abortion is.

In this publication three European Parliament debates are analysed in order to get a clear picture of the current situation. This clarification is followed by an exploration of the concept of 'human dignity', which the authors believe can play a central role for a more substantive debate on abortion.

Sallux believes that legislation on abortion is primarily a competence of national member states. At the same time, debates on abortion are a reality that our politicians can hardly ignore. The debate on abortion in the European Parliament is a reflection of the broader European debate on abortion. That is why this brochure is also meant to be an inspiring trigger for the broader European conversation on this issue.

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