Foster, Diana Greene. The Turnaway Study: Ten Years,a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion. [*Gravidez indesejada: The Turnaway Study*. Translated by Mariana Mesquita and Ana Carolina Mesquita]. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante; 2024. 336 p. ISBN 978-65-5564-803-4.

Conducting rigorous empirical studies on abortion has become particularly relevant in contemporary times, not only due to the politically polarized nature of the topic, but above all because of the need to understand, through evidence, the concrete impacts of restrictive or enabling policies on women's lives. The international literature has consistently demonstrated that restrictive legal contexts are associated with poorer health outcomes, delayed access to care, an increase in unsafe abortions, and disproportionate social and economic costs for vulnerable women, in addition to systemic effects on healthcare services and human rights.[1]

In the Brazilian context, the recent debate surrounding proposals to expand the criminalization of abortion has raised concerns about its potential effects on women's health, racial and socioeconomic inequalities, and reproductive autonomy, reinforcing the importance of evidence-based analyses based to inform public debate and policy-making.[2]

In this scenario, studies that measure actual consequences, rather than merely normative assumptions or ideological arguments, are essential to inform public debate and guide evidence-based policies, particularly in contexts marked by intense moral, legal, and political disputes concerning women's reproductive autonomy.

It is precisely to this demand for evidence that Diana Greene Foster's book The Turnaway Study responds, occupying today a unique place in contemporary scientific literature on abortion.[3] It provides a rigorous and accessible synthesis of one of the most robust empirical studies ever conducted to answer, based on systematic evidence, a question frequently permeated by ideological disputes: what are the effects on the lives of women who manage to terminate an unwanted pregnancy compared to those who are denied it?

The so-called Turnaway Study is a longitudinal, multicenter, prospective study that followed nearly a thousand women over five years across different parts of the United States. The methodological originality of its design is as significant as its findings. Grounded in an impact evaluation logic, the study enabled the estimation—with a high degree of methodological rigor—of consistent associations regarding the causal effects of having access, or being denied access, to abortion.

Rather than comparing women who had abortions with women who never became pregnant or who wanted to carry a pregnancy to term (comparisons inherently biased from the start), Foster and her team contrasted similar groups: women who sought abortion services at specialized clinics and, being just under the gestational age limit, were able to obtain the procedure, and women who, having exceeded that limit by a few days or weeks, were denied the abortion. This quasi-experimental strategy, which is rare in this field of research, substantially reduced selection biases and allowed for closer approximations to more solid causal inferences, as detailed in the methodological and analytical articles derived from the study.[1,4-6]

The book organizes, in clear and carefully grounded language, the findings of more than fifty scientific articles published from the Turnaway Study.[3] Diana Foster guides the reader through core themes: mental health, physical health, socioeconomic conditions, family relations, violence, subsequent motherhood, and well-being over time. In each of them, the author presents a real-life story and dismantles, point by point, narratives widely disseminated in public debate—often repeated as self-evident truths yet sustained by fragile or nonexistent evidence.

One of the most persistent, and politically instrumentalized, myths about abortion is that women who terminate a pregnancy inevitably experience deep regret and lasting psychological distress. By offering longitudinal, comparative, and evidence-based data, the Turnaway Study does not support the hypothesis of an average increase in lasting psychological distress frequently associated with abortion. In the study, the majority of women who successfully obtained an abortion reported throughout the follow-up that the decision was the right one for their lives at that moment, and any negative emotions tended to decrease over time, with no evidence of increased depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, or suicidal ideation compared to women who were denied an abortion.[4,5]

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In contrast, women who were denied an abortion denials had significantly more adverse consequences, including a higher probability of remaining in abusive relationships, worsened economic conditions, increased food insecurity, greater dependence on fragile support networks, and negative impacts on physical health, with more complications associated with pregnancy and delivery.[3,6] These findings provide evidence that does not support the hypothesis that the forced continuation of a pregnancy produces better results for women, demonstrating that denying access to abortion may be associated with less favorable social and health outcomes across several dimensions.

Another merit of the book is shifting the focus of the debate from an abstract and moralizing plane to the tangible consequences of abortion access on women's lives. Foster shows that reproductive decisions do not occur in a vacuum; they are socially conditioned and embedded in contexts of poverty, structural racism, gender inequality, limited access to healthcare, and fragile support networks. In this sense, the findings of the Turnaway Study suggest that being denied an abortion does not eliminate preexisting vulnerabilities and may be associated with their persistence or exacerbation in certain contexts.[3,6] This point is particularly relevant to realities such as Brazil's, where unsafe abortion remains a significant cause of morbidity and mortality, and where legal restrictions disproportionately affect poor, Black, and young women.

From a methodological standpoint, the book constitutes an exemplary demonstration of scientific rigor. Foster transparently discusses limitations such as loss to follow-up, potential residual biases, and the ethical and logistical challenges of conducting a longitudinal study over a decade on a sensitive topic. This transparency strengthens the credibility of the findings and helps explain their broad influence on technical reports, judicial decisions, and public health guidelines.[3] Although the Turnaway Study is recognized as one of the most robust investigations on the topic, its results must be interpreted in light of certain limitations. Methodological points under discussion include the potential impacts of loss to follow-up over time, issues related to sample representativeness, and limits to the generalizability of the results to other national contexts. Foster addresses some of these issues throughout the book and argues that they do not substantially alter the study's main findings. Furthermore, the data were produced within the institutional, legal, and social context of the United States, which calls for caution regarding the direct extrapolation of the results to other countries. Still, the longitudinal and comparative design of the study offers important evidence for understanding the consequences associated with accessing or being denied an abortion. Some more recent criticisms of the study have also been the subject of methodological controversies, including the retraction of an article that questioned the study due to problems identified in the editorial process and the empirical consistency of its conclusions.[7]

The Turnaway Study demonstrates how socially controversial issues can—and should—be investigated with methodological rigor, without resorting to rhetoric or reductionist analyses of complex scientific issues. The derived articles consistently show that it is possible to produce scientific and social impact based on robust evidence, without exaggeration or alarmist language, dismantling politically convenient narratives that lack empirical backing.[4-6]

As a review, this text does not replace reading the book, but seeks to place it in its proper perspective: a work that transcends the debate on abortion and inscribes itself in the history of public health, health impact evaluation, social epidemiology, and rights-based research.[3] By questioning the widely disseminated hypothesis that regret is a predominant consequence among women who undergo an abortion, and by documenting consistent associations between being denied an abortion and less favorable outcomes observed during the follow-up of women, Diana Foster combines the production of robust scientific evidence with a call for intellectual honesty in interpreting and using data in sensitive public debates.

In times of active disinformation, when false arguments circulate rapidly with the appearance of truth, The Turnaway Study serves an essential function by reaffirming that public policies should be informed by the best available evidence, particularly on issues marked by intense social, moral, and political controversy. For researchers, health professionals, and policymakers, it is highly relevant reading. For the public debate, it represents an important milestone in the production of knowledge on abortion.[1-6]

Authors' contribution

Fernandez M: conceptualization, writing – original draft, and writing – review and editing. Amorim MMR: conceptualization and writing – original draft. All authors approved the final version of the article and declare no conflicts of interest.

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