Recently, an advertorial in a major English-language newspaper for a show called ‘Zindagi Ke Crossroads’, on a leading TV channel, led with the bold red headline: “Mother asked to kill her own child.” This might work as an attention-grabber, but for anyone concerned about reproductive rights — and that should be all of us — it is potentially traumatic. For any woman who has undergone an abortion, this amounts to public mockery of a difficult decision.

Even allowing for the fact that viewership for prime-time reality shows in India is extremely competitive, and that provocative advertising and content are par for the course, the strident quality of this advertisement, which filled a quarter of the front page of the newspaper, amounted to cocking a snook at women’s reproductive rights. While the advertisement went on to accuse women who choose an abortion of trying to play god, and virtually denied women choice in this matter, I would like to reflect upon how, in such cases, language and imagery can impact perception.

Unplanned pregnancy is a huge and common problem. When abortion services are provided by qualified personnel in appropriate settings it is one of the safest medical procedures known. Yet, in India many women die every day and hundreds undergo life-threatening complications trying to seek abortions simply because of the lack of access at the last mile. This scarcity stems in part from a combination of resource and infrastructure shortages, but it is also built around the cultural stigmatisation of abortion. Advertising agencies and news channels can either mitigate or exacerbate these stigmas depending on the words and images they use.

In this case, the advertising preview appeared to juxta- pose two options facing the mother in question: give birth to a child with special needs or stop the breathing of the child in the womb. How is this framing of the issue fair to any of the parties involved? Is it not reducing the much-debated and complex issue of choice versus right to life to a tawdry sound bite for the sake of TRP ratings?

Even more alarming was the fact that viewers were asked to vote on this issue through an opinion poll. Ultimately, and to echo the statement by the Supreme Court in the right to privacy judgment last year, the decision to continue or end a pregnancy is a woman’s to make, and lies firmly within her right to privacy. Even if the show had fictional characters, the very notion of an opinion poll suggests that public opinion ought to influence a woman’s reproductive choices.

Debate around a globally contentious issue such as abortion is certainly to be encouraged at a community level. However no democratic, progressive nation ought to foster the notion that ultimately a woman’s reproductive rights are anything but unequivocally her own.

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