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Secret strategies: Women and abortion in Yoruba society, Nigeria

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Induced abortion is a controversial topic. It has stirred heated moral and ethical debates, but the health problems related to it have long been ignored. Gradually, policy makers and health professionals have acknowledged abortion in developing countries as a problem worthy of urgent attention. However, empirical, community-based research necessary for the formulation of interventions is limited, partly because the sensitive nature of the topic makes it difficult to study.

This book is the result of Winny Koster's three-year applied anthropological study in Yoruba society, Nigeria, which exposes the magnitude and the nature of the problems related to abortion. About 700 women recount their motivations, doubts and practices in the different phases of their personal experiences, from deciding to abort to coping with complications. In addition to situating abortion in its societal context, this study considers abortion in relation to other fertility regulation practices, including contraception and infertility treatment.

Throughout the book, the societal rules, and those related to sexuality and reproduction in particular, are juxtaposed with the reality of women's experiences. The author describes women's decisions and actions in terms of 'agency' and 'coping'. She theorises whether or not abortion can be considered as a female strategy and/or resistance against certain dominant rules of patrilineal Yoruba society.

Finally interventions are suggested to reduce the morbidity and mortality caused by unsafe abortion.

Winny Koster is a medical anthropologist who has worked for 14 years in health-related development programmes, mainly in African countries. Presently she is teaching at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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