



# Social work and Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy: A Systematic Literature Review

**Nazareth Gallego-Morón**Área de Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales. Departamento de Derecho del Trabajo y Trabajo Social.  
Universidad de Salamanca **Francisco Manuel Carballo Rodríguez**Área de Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales. Departamento de Derecho del Trabajo y Trabajo Social.  
Universidad de Salamanca <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cuts.99667>

**ENG Abstract:** This paper provides a systematic review of the scientific literature from the last decade (2014–2024) on the relationship between social work and the voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP). Following the PRISMA methodology, 27 studies are identified and analysed. It is observed that research output from social work in this field remains scarce, particularly in European contexts, despite the clear social and professional relevance of the topic. Most of the work is concentrated in the United States and adopts qualitative designs, focusing on professional practices, training shortcomings, and the ethical dilemmas faced by those who support women through abortion processes. This review also highlights the tension between a medicalised view of abortion—which tends to interpret it as a traumatic experience—and the critical perspectives of social work, which promote interventions based on human rights, feminism, and reproductive justice. Furthermore, notable deficiencies are evident in the training of social work students, which limits their ability to intervene with competence and ethical sensitivity in this field. The article underscores the fundamental role of social work in the interdisciplinary approach to reproductive health and raises the need to strengthen its presence in professional teams, develop specific ethical frameworks, and incorporate reproductive rights into academic curricula. Ultimately, this review contributes to positioning abortion as a legitimate area of intervention and knowledge production within the discipline.

**Keywords:** human rights; reproductive justice; professional ethics; voluntary termination of pregnancy; social work.

## **ES Trabajo social e Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo: una revisión sistemática de la literatura**

**Resumen:** El presente trabajo ofrece una revisión sistemática de la literatura de la última década (2014–2024) sobre la relación entre el trabajo social y la interrupción voluntaria del embarazo (IVE). Siguiendo la metodología PRISMA, se identificaron y analizaron 27 estudios. Se observa que la producción investigadora desde el trabajo social en este ámbito sigue siendo escasa, especialmente en contextos europeos, a pesar de la evidente relevancia social y profesional que reviste la temática. La mayor parte de los trabajos se concentran en Estados Unidos y adoptan diseños cualitativos, centrándose en las prácticas profesionales, las carencias formativas y los dilemas éticos que enfrentan quienes acompañan a mujeres en procesos de aborto. Esta revisión también pone de manifiesto la tensión entre una mirada medicalizada del aborto—que tiende a interpretarlo como una experiencia traumática— y las perspectivas críticas del trabajo social, que promueven intervenciones basadas en los derechos humanos, el feminismo y la justicia reproductiva. Asimismo, se evidencian notables deficiencias en la formación del alumnado de Trabajo Social, lo cual limita su capacidad para intervenir con competencia y sensibilidad ética en este campo. El artículo subraya el papel fundamental del trabajo social en el abordaje interdisciplinar de la salud reproductiva y plantea la necesidad de reforzar su presencia en los equipos profesionales, desarrollar marcos éticos específicos e incorporar contenidos sobre derechos reproductivos en los planes de estudio. En definitiva, esta revisión contribuye a posicionar el aborto como un ámbito legítimo de intervención y producción de conocimiento dentro de la disciplina.

**Palabras clave:** derechos humanos; justicia reproductiva; ética profesional; interrupción voluntaria del embarazo; trabajo social.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 2.1. Identification. 2.2. Screening. 2.3. Eligibility and inclusion. 2.4. Data analysis. 3. Results. 3.1. General characteristics of the included studies. 3.2. State of the art. 3.3. Professional

practices. 3.4. Epistemological issues. 3.5. Training and education. 3.6. Ethical implications. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusions. References.

**How to cite:** Gallego-Morón, N. & Carballo Rodríguez, F. M. (2026). Social work and Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy: A Systematic Literature Review. *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social* 39(1), 91-101. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cuts.99667>

## 1. Introduction

In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, marked a significant milestone in advocating for sexual and reproductive rights. Although considerable progress has been made in the last three decades, it is currently estimated that 44% of women worldwide (aged 15 to 49) are unable to make informed decisions about sexual relations, contraceptive use, and reproductive healthcare (United Nations Population Fund, 2023, p. 158).

Each year, there are approximately 73 million induced abortions, 43% of which take place under unsafe circumstances (World Health Organization, 2023). According to Eurostat (2024), in 2022 Spain had the fourth-highest abortion rate in the European Union (8.4 per 1,000 women of reproductive age). In recent years, the debate on this issue has gained prominence in cultural and political circles. Advocacy for principles such as social justice and self-determination has led more than 60 countries to liberalise access to voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP). However, in some contexts, significant setbacks are occurring. Examples include countries such as Poland, the United States, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, where the legal framework on abortion has been restricted. As a result, 40% of women of reproductive age still live in one of 112 countries with restrictive regulations, with abortion being completely prohibited under any circumstances in 21 of them (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2023).

Scientific literature has highlighted the existence of inequalities in access to abortion. Educational, economic, institutional, and sociocultural factors directly influence women's ability to make decisions about unwanted pregnancies (Ferrer & Solsona, 2018). In addition, subpopulations, such as undocumented immigrant women, continue to face difficulties in accessing safe abortion services (Pérez-Urdiales, 2021). In this context, the professional support and intervention of social workers in healthcare services are essential before, during, and after the termination of pregnancy (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2022), encompassing functions of care, prevention and promotion, education, research, coordination, and training (Junta de Extremadura, 2007, pp. 53-56).

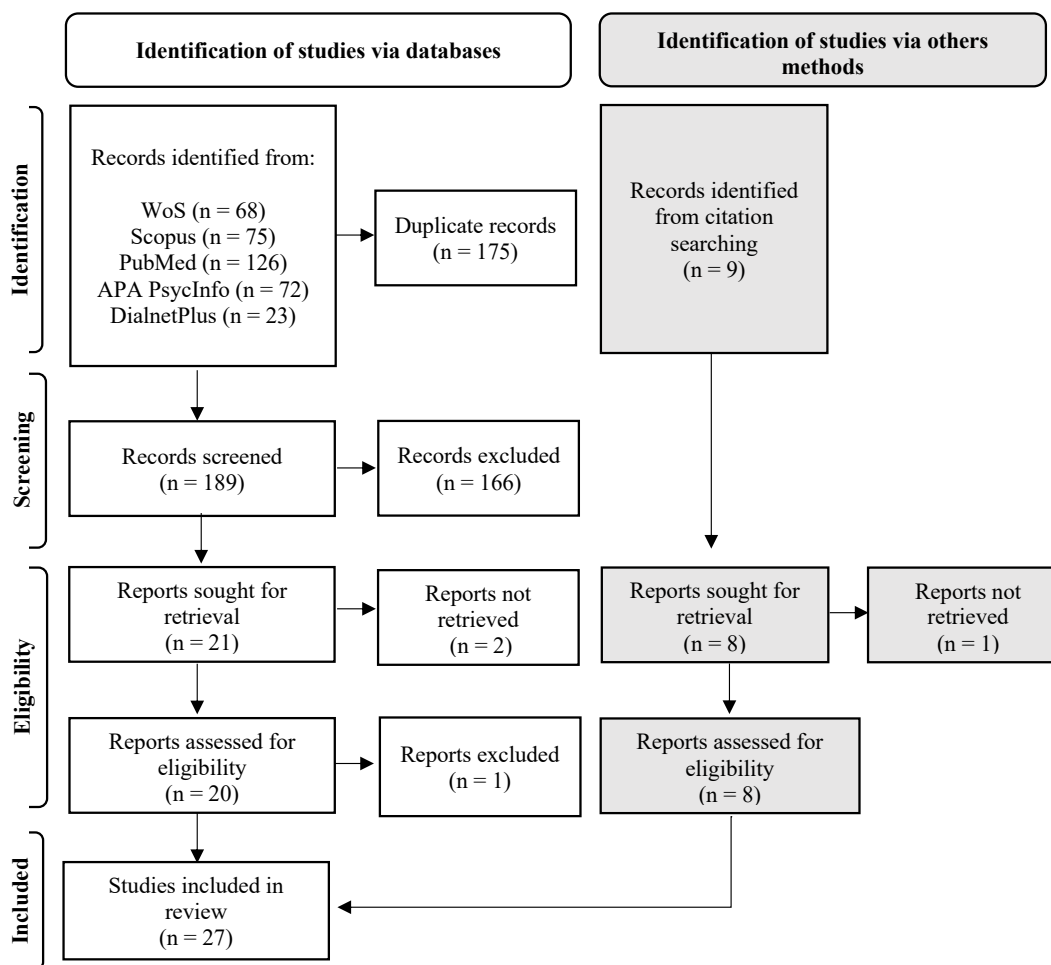
There is extensive research on the phenomenon of VTP. However, sexual and reproductive health –including abortion and the multiple factors related to it– is a marginal topic in the scientific discipline of social work (Begun et al., 2016; 2017; Hyatt et al., 2022; Jayasundara, 2011; Sperlich et al., 2020). Thus, it was considered pertinent to review the existing international and national scientific literature that, from a social work perspective (as a profession and scientific discipline), has analysed the phenomenon of abortion or VTP over the last decade.

## 2. Methodology

This paper presents a systematic literature review concerning the relationship between VTP and social work, with the aim of analysing the characteristics of research that has addressed this phenomenon and presenting the current state of the art. The research question posed was: how has the scientific community addressed the relationship between the phenomenon of VTP and social work as a scientific discipline and/or profession over the last decade? In addition, three specific objectives were defined: 1) to identify the countries that have analysed the issue; 2) to ascertain the methodologies used in the different studies; and 3) to analyse the main topics addressed and findings obtained.

To this end, a systematic literature review was carried out. The application of this method allows for a comprehensive, explicit, and reproducible review, ensuring transparency and scientific rigour (Codina, 2015). The methodological framework of reference was the PRISMA statement. Figure 1 shows the four established phases (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1. Flow diagram PRISMA.



Source: Own elaboration, based on Page et al. (2021).

## 2.1. Identification

The search was conducted in five databases –Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, DialnetPlus, APA PsycInfo, and PubMed– between 8-10 November 2024. The search was filtered to include scientific publications from the last decade (2014-2024). Keywords in both English and Spanish related to the subject of study and the discipline of social work were used (Table 1).

The search equations and Boolean operators were adapted to the characteristics of each database. The search in WoS was carried out in 'subject' (TS=), the search in Scopus was performed in 'title-abstract-keywords' (TITLE-ABS-KEY), and in Dialnet Plus a more limited search equation was used given the search engine's word limit (('voluntary abortion' OR 'voluntary termination of pregnancy') AND ('social work' OR "social worker" OR "social service" OR "family planning")). In APA PsycInfo and PubMed, only results with English terms were obtained. In addition, in the latter, the "human species" filter was applied. The searches yielded a total of 364 records.

Duplicates (n = 175) were removed manually and by using the PICO Portal web-based systematic review management tool. Furthermore, a review of the bibliographic references in the studies selected during the eligibility phase was conducted, which identified an additional 9 records.

Table 1. Keyword selection.

	Subject of study	Discipline
Spanish	Aborto voluntario Aborto electivo Interrupción voluntaria del embarazo Aborto inducido Aborto artificial Aborto provocado	Trabajo social Trabajador social sanitario Planificación familiar Intervención social Servicio público Departamento de trabajo social Estado de bienestar Asistente social Servicio público

	Subject of study	Discipline
<b>English</b>	Voluntary abortion Abortion volunteer Elective abortion Voluntary termination of pregnancy Voluntary pregnancy termination Voluntary termination of pregnancy Elective termination of pregnancy Abortion induced Induced abortion Artificial abortion Provoked abortion	Social Work Social worker Family Counselling Service Social intervention Social services Social work department Social welfare Social assistant Public service

## 2.2. Screening

Once duplicates had been eliminated, the titles and abstracts of 189 records were screened. This was carried out by two researchers, considering the established selection criteria: 1) documents in Spanish, English, or French; 2) studies addressing the phenomenon of VTP in relation to Social Work; 3) any type of document and methodological design was included. The exclusion criteria were: 1) documents in a language other than Spanish, English, or French; 2) studies whose object of study was VTP but which did not provide an analysis from a Social Work perspective or present results relevant to the scientific discipline and/or profession; and 3) publications from the field of social work that did not focus on VTP.

## 2.3. Eligibility and inclusion

After screening the studies according to the inclusion criteria, 29 articles were accepted for inclusion in the review (21 publications obtained from the databases consulted and 8 from the bibliographic references of those publications). The full texts of these were downloaded and exported to the Mendeley bibliographic manager. The full text of three of the articles could not be accessed, and one of them was excluded because it did not address the subject of study in relation to social work. Therefore, the literature review ultimately included a total of 27 documents.

## 2.4. Data analysis

A Google spreadsheet was used to analyse the documents. First, the authorship, publication date, country, objective, methodological design, sample, and main findings of all the documents reviewed were recorded. Subsequently, to answer the research question, an inductive approach was used to create 5 mutually exclusive categories that grouped the issues addressed in the publications: state of the art; professional practices; epistemological issues; training and education; and ethical implications. The information was extracted independently by two researchers, with any discrepancies resolved by comparison.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. General characteristics of the included studies

As shown in Table 2, the documents are contextualised in 12 different countries. More than half (55.6%) were conducted in the United States, followed by China with two studies (7.4%). One study was conducted in each of the remaining countries (Argentina, Australia, Chile, Spain, India, Italy, Mexico, and South Africa). Two of the studies included multiple contexts (Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Libya, and Uganda), as they considered case studies from different nations.

Furthermore, 22 of the documents were original works, with a predominantly qualitative methodological design (59.3%), compared to quantitative (22.2%), while 5 of them (18.5%) consisted of theoretical works (3 literature reviews and 2 policy reviews). 8 of the studies used interviews as a research technique, 6 used surveys, and 2 used discourse analysis of stories published on a website. With regard to the method used, 4 case studies and 2 autobiographical works were found.

In terms of samples, 5 of the studies used a sample composed of university students (4 of them from social work); another 5 used women (adults or minors) who had experienced an unwanted pregnancy and/or an abortion (legal or illegal, voluntary or involuntary); and 4 used social workers. 8 of the documents presented mixed samples. 4 of these were composed of health sector professionals, as well as activists and academics from the field of social work, and another 4 were composed of professionals and women (or their relatives) who had undergone a VTP.

Table 2. General characteristics of the studies.

Reference	Country	Objective	Design	Participants	Category
Beddoe et al. (2020)	AU / NZ / IE	To present experiences that illustrate advocacy and the promotion of the right to abortion from a social work perspective.	QL Case study	Social work activists, professionals, and academics (n = 4)	EPIS
Begun et al. (2017)	US	To describe the relationship between sexual attitudes and attitudes towards abortion among social work students.	QN Survey	Social work students (n = 504)	TRAIN
Begun et al. (2016)	US	To explore the relationship between knowledge of and attitudes towards abortion among social work students.	QN Survey	Social work students (n = 504)	TRAIN
Begun y Walls (2015)	US	To compare the extent to which hostile and benevolent sexism predict attitudes opposing the right to abortion.	QN Survey	University students (n = 627)	PROF
Crosetto et al. (2021)	AR	To analyse access to sexual and (non-)reproductive rights during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic from a feminist and human rights perspective.	QL Interview	Primary Healthcare agents	PROF
Dalwai y Soans (2018)	IN	To examine a judicial decision denying abortion to a pregnant minor who is a victim of sexual assault.	QL Case study	Pregnant minor who is a victim of sexual assault (n = 1)	PROF
Eggers (2016)	CL	To analyse how Chilean women experience the criminalisation of abortion within a context of social inequality.	QL Interview	Women who experienced illegal abortions (n = 11) and institutional representatives (n = 25)	ETHIC
Ely et al. (2018)	US	To investigate the experience of seeking an abortion in relation to stress, trauma, and care from a trauma-informed social work perspective.	TW	Literature review	EPIS
Gilbert y Sewpaul (2015)	ZA	To understand the experiences of women who have accessed VTP, contrasting the arguments of liberal feminist theories with those of radical feminism.	QL Interview	Women who have undergone a VTP (n = 15)	EPIS
Goldblatt (2021)	US	To develop a practice model for healthcare social workers to provide therapeutic intervention to women who have terminated a pregnancy due to a foetal anomaly.	QL Case study	Women attending professional therapy with healthcare social workers after a VTP (n = 4)	EPIS
Gómez (2023)	ES	To describe the roles, responsibilities, challenges, and gaps characterising healthcare social workers' practice in relation to VTPs and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies.	QL Autobiographical work	Healthcare social worker (n = 1)	PROF
Grether et al. (2015)	MX	To explore the opinions of healthcare teams regarding decision-making in the management of pregnancies involving severely ill fetuses or neonates.	QN Survey	Social workers (n = 22), perinatal nurses (n = 29), and physicians (n = 84)	PROF

Reference	Country	Objective	Design	Participants	Category
Huang y Ngai (2022)	CN	To examine the factors influencing abortion decision-making among single migrant women from a critical social work perspective.	QL Interview	Women who have undergone a VTP (n = 33)	EPIS
Hyatt et al. (2022)	US	To analyse the role of social workers in response to emerging legal and cultural restrictions on abortion in the United States.	TW	Literature review	EPIS
Loke y Lam (2014)	CN	To investigate the factors influencing decision-making among single adolescents facing an unwanted pregnancy.	QL Interview	Pregnant adolescents (n = 9)	PROF
Malek et al. (2024)	AU	To examine the perceptions and experiences of professionals involved in providing VTP services after 20 weeks of gestation.	QL Interview	Gynaecologists/obstetricians (n = 5), midwives/nurses (n = 7), social workers (n = 2), and other professionals (n = 3)	PROF
Odo et al. (2022)	LB / UG	To analyse two cases presenting ethical challenges faced by social workers when making decisions with service users in vulnerable situations.	QL Case study	Social workers (n = 2)	ETHIC
Perry et al. (2015)	US	To explore the experiences of women terminating a pregnancy following sexual assault, as well as the perspectives of professionals involved in their care.	QL Interview	Women who have accessed a VTP (n = 9) and professionals (n = 12)	PROF
Sperlich et al. (2020)	US	To analyse narratives concerning experiences of VTP from a trauma-informed social work perspective, identifying factors contributing to stress.	QL Discourse analysis	Women who have undergone a VTP (n = 37), relatives/acquaintances (n = 4), and healthcare professionals (n = 2)	EPIS
Suslovic (2018)	US	To examine two professional contexts (institutional and non-institutional) within the healthcare sector.	QL Autobiographical work	Social worker (n = 1)	ETHIC
Swan et al. (2021)	US	To investigate how women process the experience of VTP and situate it within the broader context of their lives, employing a trauma-informed and feminist social work approach.	QL Discourse analysis	Women who have undergone a VTP (n = 37), partners (n = 2), child (n = 1), friends of women who have undergone a VTP (n = 1), and healthcare professionals (n = 2)	EPIS
Taylor (2014)	US	To provide an overview of historical debates surrounding reproductive health policy and its impact on women with limited economic resources.	TW	Policy review	ETHIC
Testoni et al. (2023)	IT	To explore the experiences and perspectives of social workers supporting women who have accessed VTP.	QL Interview	Social workers from family guidance services (n = 10)	PROF



Reference	Country	Objective	Design	Participants	Category
Winter et al. (2015)	US	To examine the relationship between knowledge and attitudes towards abortion and perceptions of ethical decision-making in reproductive health among social work students.	QN Survey	Social work students (n = 443)	TRAIN
Witt et al. (2022)	US	To explore social work students' attitudes and knowledge regarding abortion, and the influence of exposure to abortion-related content during training on their support for abortion access.	QN Survey	Social work students (n = 626)	TRAIN
Wright et al. (2015)	US	To conduct a systematic review of literature published in social work journals on reproductive health in the United States.	TW	Literature review (2010-2014)	SA
Younes et al. (2021)	US	To analyse the socio-political context surrounding reproductive rights in the United States and the ambivalence of social work education in integrating reproductive justice into curricula.	TW	Policy review	TRAIN

*Note:* Country: AR (Argentina); AU (Australia); CL (Chile); CN (China); ES (Spain); IE (Ireland); IN (India); IT (Italy); LB (Lebanon); MX (Mexico); NZ (New Zealand); UG (Uganda); US (United States); ZA (South Africa) / Design: QL (Qualitative); QN (Quantitative); TW (Theoretical Work) / Category: EPIS (epistemological issues); ETHIC (ethical implications); PROF (professional practices), SA (state of the art); TRAIN (training and education).

### 3.2. State of the art

The study by Wright et al. (2015) provides a systematic review of the literature published in scientific social work journals on reproductive health in the United States between 2010 and 2014. It finds that abortion occupies a very marginal place in research. Thus, most of the articles published focused on pregnancy and childbirth, and only 4 of the 31 studies analysed addressed the issue of abortion. Two of them described the impact of abortion policies on women, another highlighted the need for support and counselling, and the fourth analysed the views of social work students on the subject.

### 3.3. Professional practices

The role, functions, and professional experiences of social workers in the context of reproductive health, specifically in relation to abortion and unwanted pregnancies, are addressed in 9 of the 27 studies reviewed. Loke and Lam (2014) point out that social work professionals play a fundamental role in providing guidance and support, while avoiding influencing women's decisions. Malek et al. (2024), for their part, highlight that social workers show a strong commitment to comprehensive intervention, addressing women's psychosocial needs. However, their practice is not without difficulties, both emotional and systemic. To address the latter, they point to the importance of strengthening support policies and access to services.

The presence of social workers in multidisciplinary teams providing reproductive health services, including abortion, is relatively consistent across all geographical contexts. In addition, there are differences in how each professional assesses the various options available. In this regard, it should be noted that social workers incorporate information about the socio-familial context and the possible effects of each option offered to women into the decision-making process, even showing themselves to be more favourable to abortion for strictly medical reasons than health professionals in certain circumstances (Grether et al., 2015). The participation of social work professionals in these teams is considered essential for proposing and evaluating, together with women and their families (in the case of minors), alternatives to abortion, such as adoption (Dalwai & Soans, 2018). Moreover, the importance of these multidisciplinary teams in providing safe spaces where women can receive emotional support is highlighted (Perry et al., 2015). However, research by Testoni et al. (2023) indicates that the role of social workers in these teams has weakened in Italy, while the work of Crosetto et al. (2021) shows that, in Argentina, social workers are not present in all primary healthcare services. In the Spanish context, Gómez (2023) points to the need for interdisciplinary care within the healthcare context, combining healthcare knowledge and training with social care, focused mainly on healthy family planning behaviours.

One issue that recurs in the literature on VTP is that of individual attitudes. On this point, Begun and Walls (2015) have shown that the presence of ambivalent sexism clearly translates into anti-abortion attitudes and emphasise the need for social workers to incorporate this knowledge into their professional practice.

### 3.4. Epistemological issues

Of the 27 papers reviewed, 8 present research results that integrate theoretical and methodological approaches or reflections on intervention models, incorporating a clear normative dimension, whether ethical or political. In our reading, therefore, these dimensions appear within a space of reasoning that we consider specific to social work and, consequently, we recognise its capacity to produce knowledge specific to the discipline.

The available evidence on the experiences of women who have undergone abortion agrees that it is a process in which multiple stressors converge (Swan et al., 2021). The potential sources of stress associated with the abortion process range from legal and institutional constraints inherent in health systems to the social stigma associated with the procedure, including personal material difficulties (economic, work-related) and possible negative interactions with anti-abortion groups (Sperlich et al., 2020). Understood as a stressful and potentially traumatic experience, the proposed interventions aim to minimise such effects by applying principles of trauma-informed social work, whose fundamental component consists of considering the empowerment of women and the defence of their capacity to decide autonomously as priority objectives (Ely et al., 2018; Goldblatt, 2021; Sperlich et al., 2020). In this same vein, critical social work approaches are considered the most appropriate for combating the social stigmas associated with abortion (Huang & Ngai, 2022).

Women's decisions regarding motherhood are often treated from an exclusively reproductive health perspective, even in Social Work. However, currents within the discipline inspired by radical feminism propose an analytical framework that incorporates structural factors, including economic, cultural, and religious ones. From this perspective, it is argued that all these factors condition women's reproductive decisions (Gilbert & Sewpaul, 2015). These arguments coincide with the diagnosis made in other studies, such as the work of Beddoe et al. (2020), which highlights that the introduction of neoliberal management methods in institutions has shifted social work towards clinical practices, thereby abandoning its role as an agent of social change and promoter of rights. Taking on board this diagnosis, the study by Hyatt et al. (2022) calls on social workers to promote a reproductive justice movement in a cultural and legal context that restricts the right to abortion. This approach to reproductive justice, guided by feminist theory, embraces the values and objectives of social work and the defence of the principle of social justice. To respond to this challenge, Goldblatt (2021) advocates for a normative dimension of health social work aimed at advancing human rights. To this end, she proposes tools that can be applied during abortion procedures to manage situations of grief and complex decision-making.

### 3.5. Training and education

Issues related to the training and education of future social work professionals in relation to VTP are addressed in five of the studies analysed. These studies concur in highlighting that a majority of university students in the United States (four studies in social work), at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, report having received no or very little training on abortion during their academic studies: 85.3% (Begun et al., 2017) and 97.3% (Witt et al., 2022).

The results also show that the attitudes of social work students towards abortion are related to their ideology, beliefs, and individual sexual attitudes, as well as to their development during their training, in the course of which they may acquire some knowledge about reproductive health. Thus, those who express greater sexual permissiveness are less opposed to abortion, while those with more conservative ideologies and stronger religious beliefs are more opposed to it (Begun et al., 2016; 2017). In terms of attitudes based on knowledge, those in the early years of their studies show greater rejection of abortion compared to those in their final years or pursuing postgraduate studies; as they acquire more knowledge about abortion, their attitude becomes more positive (Witt et al., 2022). Furthermore, social work students with anti-abortion attitudes acknowledge that, in their future careers, they do not imagine being able to help women make decisions about their reproductive health if those women consider options with which they personally disagree (Winter et al., 2015).

All this evidence highlights the training gaps of social workers in sexual and reproductive health issues and the inability of training programmes to incorporate reflection on cultural differences and the diversity of beliefs and attitudes of future professionals, based on an approach focused on respect for and the promotion of human rights (Begun et al., 2017). Paradoxically, despite the limited attention given to reproductive justice and abortion in social work curricula, the vast majority of students are in favour of defending the principles of self-determination, autonomy, and justice promoted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States in its Code of Ethics (Witt et al., 2022). In response to this situation, Younes et al. (2021) advocate in their study for the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in the United States to mandate the incorporation of content related to reproductive rights into curricula, thus ensuring the training of competent professionals prepared to promote the values of social work and human rights.

### 3.6. Ethical implications

Of the 27 documents identified and analysed, only four address the importance for social work of critically considering the place of morality in the field of reproductive health. Reproductive health policies, argues Taylor (2014), have historically been framed in terms of health, but always accompanied by a strong moral dimension. The result is punitive policies that reproduce forms of discrimination that disproportionately impact women's reproductive health, especially those belonging to marginalised groups. Thus, barriers to access to sexual and reproductive health information and services constitute a specific form of institutional violence against women who wish to terminate their pregnancies (Eggers, 2016).



In such contexts, where laws, policies, and beliefs come into conflict with women's needs and desires, social workers face multiple ethical dilemmas. Faced with these dilemmas, professionals must choose between respecting the rules, in certain extremely demanding contexts, and fulfilling the moral obligations of the professional body to which they belong (Odo et al., 2022). Social workers have a responsibility and obligation to incorporate gender and human rights perspectives into their professional practice, as well as to challenge policies and practices that perpetuate inequalities, with a view to achieving social justice and respecting women's moral right to autonomy in interventions related to their reproductive health (Eggers, 2016). Some models of care, based on a feminist ethics of care, offer an alternative to traditional health models that are considered overly focused on diagnosis and treatment from a health perspective. These models, which promote mutual support and women's empowerment, recognise that social workers play a key role in promoting social justice to ensure that all people have access to quality sexual and reproductive health services (Suslovic, 2018).

#### 4. Discussion

The results obtained from this systematic review show that social work research on abortion is limited, with a greater proliferation of studies in the American context compared to a scarcity in European countries, including Spain, where only one study was found. Furthermore, the study of the phenomenon is biased towards health-centred perspectives, which reflects the marginalisation of this issue within the discipline, despite its social relevance. This assessment of the existing literature could be interpreted as the result of an increasing medicalisation of social problems and different forms of distress; for this reason, perhaps, the studies reviewed reflect a tension between different approaches to professional practice in relation to VTP. On the one hand, some of the available research characterises abortion as a stressful and traumatic experience that requires trauma-based interventions (Ely et al., 2018; Huang & Ngai, 2022; Sperlich et al., 2020). On the other hand, research inspired by critical, feminist, and reproductive justice approaches argues that interventions should be based on a structural perspective that considers economic, cultural, ethical, and political factors (Beddoe et al., 2020; Eggers, 2016; Gilbert & Sewpaul, 2015; Suslovic, 2018). This epistemological debate illustrates the capacity of social work to produce knowledge that transcends the limits of health—understood in exclusively medical terms—and promotes transformative social change.

Despite these differences, the research analysed as a whole highlights that social workers play a crucial role in reproductive health interventions, including abortion, by offering information, guidance, and emotional support. However, professionals face systemic and emotional challenges that hinder their work, especially in restrictive legal and cultural contexts (Malek et al., 2024). In light of this, it is clear that multidisciplinary teams offer spaces of support for women, although their effectiveness depends on the adequate integration of social work professionals (Crosetto et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2023).

This tension between different approaches in professional practice is underpinned by a concern that lies at the very heart of the discipline: its ethical component. Social work faces significant ethical dilemmas in the area of abortion, where professionals must balance restrictive legal norms and fundamental ethical principles. Punitive reproductive health policies perpetuate inequalities and institutional violence, disproportionately affecting women in vulnerable situations (Eggers, 2016) and those who are direct victims of extreme forms of violence (Odo et al., 2022). On this issue, the literature reviewed emphasises the need to develop a comprehensive approach to social work on reproductive health based on respect for and the expansion of human rights. To this end, it calls for social workers to participate actively in advocating for public policies that promote reproductive health, gender equality, and social justice (Eggers, 2016). Furthermore, there is a need for more research on women's experiences of reproductive health, as well as on effective practices by social workers in VTP (Taylor, 2014). It is also necessary to promote collaboration between social workers, health professionals, and other social actors as a fundamental tool for addressing the complex challenges that arise in this area.

Finally, there is a call to strengthen training in ethics, human rights, and reproductive health. To this end, models such as the feminist ethics of care are proposed as an appropriate framework from which to question and transform discriminatory practices, aligning with values of human rights and gender equality (Suslovic, 2018). In addition to these pending tasks for the discipline, there is a need to incorporate content related to reproductive rights into its curricula (Younes et al., 2021). Findings show that most students do not receive specific training on abortion (Begun et al., 2016; 2017), which perpetuates conservative attitudes and limits their ability to intervene ethically in this area (Winter et al., 2015).

#### 5. Conclusions

The literature review undertaken in this article provides results that confirm the validity of some of the challenges currently facing the discipline. In the works analysed, abortion is both a subject of research and a practice that reveals the internal contradictions to which social work is subject, reflected in the tension between the identity of the discipline and professional practice (Salcedo, 2010). The former responds to a set of values and principles that shape professional ethics, while the latter is conditioned by the set of norms—religious, legal, moral, and social—that regulate the life of political communities. Thus, professional practice related to abortion poses varying levels of difficulty depending on the context, especially where access policies are highly restrictive, as is the case in Uganda (Odo et al., 2022), Chile (Eggers, 2016), and India (Dalwai & Soans, 2018). Yet even in these extremely complex contexts, social work asserts its identity in an attempt to improve women's access to basic human rights, such as reproductive healthcare.

This interest in the discipline is reflected in some of the findings of this study, which leads us to consider that social work is making a considerable effort to change our societies' relationship with the practice of abortion. For example, social work approaches based on radical feminism analyse the structural factors that condition reproductive decisions and propose the need to overcome a very limited conception of respect for freedom, highlighting the social conditions that guarantee access to autonomous decisions (Gilbert & Sewpaul, 2015). Furthermore, references to codes of ethics and official texts from professional organisations, which set out the principles that should govern the conduct and aims of the discipline, are a constant feature of the studies reviewed. Although these are not mere declarations of principle or theoretical frameworks presumed to have a greater capacity to bring about changes in the social structure, they should be recognised as useful and necessary tools.

Among our findings, we found information relevant to advancing knowledge and improving practice. Clinical supervision and the presence of social workers in multidisciplinary teams improve these teams' ability to handle ethical dilemmas (Malek et al., 2024). Although social workers find the management of ethical problems difficult, they tend to reason by evaluating intermediate courses of action and incorporate a more global view of the situation (Grether et al., 2015). These skills seem to coexist with anti-abortion attitudes, detected among students and professionals in the discipline (Ely et al., 2018), confirming the need to strengthen training in ethics, gender, and sexual health in social work (Huang & Ngai, 2022).

Finally, it is consistent with the results obtained in our review to consider that social work is determined to reconfigure the 'moral economy' of our societies regarding abortion, from a perspective of expanding women's reproductive rights.

## References

- Beddoe, E., Hayes, T., & Steele, J. (2020). "Social justice for all!" The relative silence of social work in abortion rights advocacy. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 8(1), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986019X15717380615737>
- Begun, S., Bird, M., Ramseyer Winter, V., Massey Combs, K., & McKay, K. (2016). Correlates of social work students' abortion knowledge and attitudes: Implications for education and research. *Social Work in Public Health*, 31(4), 276-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2015.1137510>
- Begun, S., Kattari, S. K., McKay, K., Ramseyer Winter, V., & O'Neill, E. (2016). Exploring U.S. social work students' sexual attitudes and abortion viewpoints. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 54(6), 752-763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1186586>
- Begun, S., & Walls, N. E. (2015). Pedestal or gutter: Exploring ambivalent sexism's relationship with abortion attitudes. *Affilia*, 30(2), 200-215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109914555216>
- Center for Reproductive Rights. (2023). *Abortion rights are advancing across the globe*. [https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CRR\\_WALM\\_SUPPLEMENT\\_new-8-31-23\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CRR_WALM_SUPPLEMENT_new-8-31-23_FINAL.pdf)
- Codina, L. (2015, April 20). *Literature reviews and how to carry them out with guarantees: Systematic reviews and the SALSA framework*. Lluís Codina. <https://www.lluiscodina.com/revision-sistemica-salsa-framework>
- Crosetto, R., Bilavcik, C., & Miana, A. M. (2021, August 19-20). *Primary health care in a pandemic: Sexual and reproductive rights are also a priority*. In Brusasca (Ed.), *First Latin American Congress of Social Work of the UNVM. VII Regional Conference on Social Work "State, citizenship and inequalities. From Argentina to Latin America"* (Conference presentation). Universidad Nacional Villa María, Villa María, Argentina. <https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/exNH/emH>
- Dalwai, S. H., & Soans, S. T. (2018). Defining the best interest of a child: Who comes first—the child or the fetus? *Indian Pediatrics*, 55, 853-855. <https://www.indianpediatrics.net/oct2018/oct-853-855.htm>
- Eggers, M. (2016). *Embodying inequality: The criminalization of women for abortion in Chile* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut]. <https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/dissertations/1059>
- Ely, G. E., Polmanteer, R. S. R., & Kotting, J. (2018). A trauma-informed social work framework for the abortion-seeking experience. *Social Work in Mental Health*, 16(2), 172-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2017.1369485>
- Eurostat. (2024, June 10). *Abortion indicators*. [https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO\\_FABORTIND](https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO_FABORTIND)
- Fassin, D. (2009). Les économies morales revisitées. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 64(6), 1237-1266. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-Annales-2009-6-page-1237?lang=fr>
- Ferrer, L., & Solsona, M. (2018). The place of abortion in the pregnancy decision-making process in young adult women in Catalonia, Spain. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 40(6), 1087-1103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12744>
- Gilbert, I., & Sewpaul, V. (2015). Challenging dominant discourses on abortion from a radical feminist standpoint. *Affilia*, 30(1), 83-95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109914549232>
- Goldblatt, E. D. (2021). Counseling women who have terminated a pregnancy due to fetal anomaly (TOPFA): The ACCEPT model. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 49, 52-63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-019-00732-0>
- Gómez, C. (2023). Family planning from a social perspective. *Transformación: Revista de Trabajo Social de Sevilla*, 7, 25-29. <https://trabajosocialesevilla.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Revista-7-Transformacion-COTS.pdf>

<sup>1</sup> The sociologist and anthropologist Didier Fassin employs the notion of moral economy, which he defines as "the production, distribution, circulation and use of feelings, emotions and values, norms and moral obligations within the social space" (2009, p. 1257), to describe and analyse the evolution of the way in which our societies relate to a given phenomenon.

- Grether, P., Lisker, R., Loria, A., & Álvarez-del-Río, A. (2015). End-of-life decisions in perinatal care: A view from health-care providers in Mexico. *Salud Pública de México*, 57(6), 489-495. <https://doi.org/10.21149/spm.v57i6.7637>
- Huang, D., & Ngai, S. S. (2022). Decision-making, abortion narratives and identity construction towards abortion among rural-urban single migrant women in mainland China: Insights for social work practice and education. *International Social Work*, 65(5), 870-882. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820959375>
- Hyatt, E. G., McCoyd, J. L. M., & Diaz, M. F. (2022). From abortion rights to reproductive justice: A call to action. *Affilia*, 37(2), 194-203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099221077153>
- Jayasundara, D. S. (2011). Applicability of Amartya Sen's human development perspectives to the fields of reproductive health and social work. *International Social Work*, 56(2), 134-147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872811414598>
- Junta de Extremadura. (2007). *Organización y Funcionamiento del Trabajo Social Sanitario en Atención Primaria de Salud*. Servicio Extremeño de Salud. [https://saludextremadura.ses.es/filescms/web/uploaded\\_files/Principal/Recursos%20Sociales/Organizacion%20y%20Funcionamiento%20del%20Trabajo%20Social%20Sanitario%20en%20Atencion%20Primaria%20de%20Salud.pdf](https://saludextremadura.ses.es/filescms/web/uploaded_files/Principal/Recursos%20Sociales/Organizacion%20y%20Funcionamiento%20del%20Trabajo%20Social%20Sanitario%20en%20Atencion%20Primaria%20de%20Salud.pdf)
- Loke, A. Y., & Lam, P. (2014). Pregnancy resolutions among pregnant teens: Termination, parenting or adoption? *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 14(421), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-014-0421-z>
- Malek, M., Homer, C. S., McDonald, C., Hannon, C. M., Moore, P., & Wilson, A. N. (2024). Abortion care at 20 weeks and over in Victoria: A thematic analysis of healthcare providers' experiences. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 24(112), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-024-06299-0>
- Ministerio de Sanidad. (2022). *Guía Común del Sistema Nacional de Salud sobre Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo (IVE). Método Farmacológico*. [https://www.sanidad.gob.es/organizacion/sns/planCalidadSNS/pdf/Guia\\_IVE\\_Farmacologica\\_04-11-2022.pdf](https://www.sanidad.gob.es/organizacion/sns/planCalidadSNS/pdf/Guia_IVE_Farmacologica_04-11-2022.pdf)
- Odo, C. O., Nwatu, U. L., Makkieh, M., Ametepe, P. E. K., & Banks, S. (2022). Law versus morality: Cases and commentaries on ethical issues in social work practice. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 17(1), 83-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2022.2117015>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., ... & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372(71), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Pérez-Urdiales, I. (2021). Undocumented immigrants' and immigrant women's access to healthcare services in the Basque Country (Spain). *Global Health Action*, 14(1), 1896659. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2021.1896659>
- Perry, R., Murphy, M., Haider, S., & Harwood, B. (2015). "One problem became another": Disclosure of rape-related pregnancy in the abortion care setting. *Women's Health Issues*, 25(5), 470-475. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2015.05.004>
- Salcedo, D. (2010). The normative foundations of the professions and the duties of social workers. *Trabajo Social Global-Global Social Work*, 1(1), 10-38. <https://doi.org/10.30827/tsg-gsw.v1i1.901>
- Sperlich, M., Ely, G. E., Rouland, R. S., Walters, C. A., & Carwile, M. (2020). Reflections of stress in U.S. abortion narratives. *Journal of Social Work*, 20(5), 533-556. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017319852602>
- Suslovic, B. (2018). Feminist social work and abortion support work: A young practitioner's reflections. *Affilia*, 33(4), 429-434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918806990>
- Swan, L. E. T., Rouland, R. S., Sperlich, M., Ely, G. E., & Walters, C. (2021). Looking back, looking forward: Examining the processing of abortion experiences using public abortion narratives. *Affilia*, 36(2), 204-219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920944533>
- Taylor, J. A. (2014). Reproductive health policy affecting low-income women: Historical precedents and current need for social work action. *Social Work in Public Health*, 29(2), 132-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2013.775872>
- Testoni, I., Salvalaio, G., Pompele, S., & Zamperini, A. (2023). The management of voluntary abortion in family counselling services: A qualitative study on the role of social workers in Italy. *Alternativas. Cuadernos de Trabajo Social*, 30(1), 130-151. <https://doi.org/10.14198/ALTERN.21262>
- United Nations Population Fund. (2023). *State of World Population 2023 - 8 Billion Lives, Infinite Possibilities*. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/swop23/SWOP2023-ENGLISH-230329-web.pdf>
- Winter, V. R., Kattari, S. K., Begun, S., & McKay, K. (2016). Personal and professional values: Relationships between social workers' reproductive health knowledge, attitudes, and ethical decision-making. *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 13(2), 35-46. <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/94921>
- Witt, H., Younes, M. K., Goldblatt Hyatt, E., & Franklin, C. (2022). Examining social work students' knowledge of and attitudes about abortion and curriculum coverage in social work education. *Affilia*, 37(2), 215-231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099211068241>
- World Health Organization. (2023, May 17). *Abortion*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>
- Wright, R. L., Bird, M., & Frost, C. J. (2015). Reproductive health in the United States: A review of the recent social work literature. *Social Work*, 60(4), 295-304. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv028>
- Younes, M., Goldblatt Hyatt, E., Witt, H., & Franklin, C. (2021). A call to action: Addressing ambivalence and promoting advocacy for reproductive rights in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(4), 625-635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1895930>