

25th Anniversary of Roe v. Wade

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January 22, 1998 marks the 25th anniversary of legal abortion in the US. A quarter century after women won this basic right on paper, the ability to control our reproductive lives is not a reality for most women. Cutbacks on welfare, lack of child care, dead-end jobs, lack of healthy birth control alternatives, men that won't use condoms, lack of health insurance, lack of access health services including abortion and prenatal care, harassment and violence at our clinics, in our homes and in the streets are just a few of the obstacles to this critical aspect of women's freedom. In anticipation of January's anniversary I look forward to an ongoing dialogue about how to take back this battle, reframe it in terms of women's lives and health—and win.

The media will certainly play this silver anniversary as a significant one. The fact that the majority of folks in the US still support legal abortion has been eclipsed in part by the much publicized conversion of Norma McCorvey. (Jane Roe, of Roe v. Wade, became a born again Christian and Operation Rescue member last year and recanted her pro-choice views as well as her lesbianism.) We can expect two things from the mainstream media on the anniversary of Roe. First, they will most likely take their cue from Operation Rescue and Christian Coalition press releases and use McCorvey's "switch" as an invitation to question the morality of abortion. And they will legitimize the voices of anti-abortion leadership who have spearheaded violence, harassment and assault of women and doctors around the country as respectable, family-oriented, 'non-violent' fetus lovers.

The tepid "pro-choice" response, which the mainstream feminist leadership will broadcast at press conferences, will most likely focus on the need for more laws on the single issue of abortion. Will they defend abortion as an inalienable right for women and proclaim that women should be able to have an abortion without apology or hassle? Probably not. Mainstream pro-choice voices can sound foggily "anti-abortion" as they talk about abortion as the lesser of two evils—"a sad necessity." Abortion can be emotionally hard for some women who are already mothers or who want to be. Having an abortion can also be an incredible relief and an exercise of personal power over one's life and one's future. Long-time clinic workers have told me that they have observed a significant shift in women's reactions to abortion over the past 25 years a shift they believe was induced by anti-abortion harassment and the mass cultural backlash on women's rights. These reactions have moved from profound expressions of relief at receiving good health care—instead of a potentially deadly illegal abortion—to varying levels of guilt and anxiety.

Beyond Choice

This notable anniversary is ripe to re-ignite a movement for women's freedom. Many activists I know on the abortion rights and other fronts have resigned themselves to the paltry and apathetic response to their organizing efforts. While we can not simply conjure the spirit of mass resistance, we can start dialogues, create propaganda and actions that better involve communities and speak to peoples' experiences.

As a movement that has successfully mobilized against anti-abortion assaults at our clinics, I think we are fairly good at articulating what we are fighting against. Motivating people to stay mobilized and engaged for the long haul involves much more. We must include a clear vision of what we are fighting for. We are fighting for women's freedom. "Choice" just doesn't cut it.

Roe was never enough. Roe v. Wade itself was a compromise, an effort to co-opt the powerful women's movement that was demanding an end to all laws that regulate abortion. Roe made

abortion a matter of privacy rather than an essential human right. It also left the decision not entirely up to a woman, but as a matter decided “between a woman and her doctor.” So much for “a woman’s choice.”

A movement hinging on the single issue of abortion and the notion of “choice” does not speak to the reality of most women’s lives. While abortion is one of many significant issues women deal with, it is lack of access to all health services. Racism, inability to control fertility, a discriminatory, dead-end labor market and poverty are some of the real issues restricting women’s free exercise of choice in their lives—not simply the legal status of abortion. “Choice” is a middle-class construct that presumes women have the economic ability to “choose.”

On the question of abortion alone, the women’s movement failed to maintain access to the vital service for all women. In 1977, a few years after abortion was legalized, Congress passed the Hyde Amendment, which took “choice” away from women who couldn’t afford clinical abortion by cutting federal money for Medicaid abortions and allowing states to do the same. Did the women’s movement organize en masse to oppose this assault on women’s right to “choose”; did millions of women take to the street, recognizing that an assault on the ability of poor women to get abortions was an assault on the rights of all? Nope. Today only eight states cover Medicaid abortion services. Most states have parental consent laws on their books and other restrictive measures which disproportionately impact the ability of young and poor women to access abortion services.

It has been said, but is certainly worth repeating, that the anti-abortion forces give more rights to fetuses than they do to children. When we actually take a look at the family-related policy supported by the “pro-family” herd, we get a pretty clear picture of whose families they “value.” While middle-class women with substance-abuse issues go to the exclusive Betty Ford clinic, poor pregnant women are being thrown in jail on substance-abuse charges and their newborns taken away. One in four women entering prison is pregnant or has recently given birth, while 80% of women inside are mothers. Are the “pro-family” forces working to create drug treatment programs for poor women, or working to stem the rising tide of homelessness amongst women and children?

The US ranks second to South Africa in infant mortality rates in a survey of 21 industrialized countries. This is in part due to the fact that only one in five pregnant women in the US receives pre-natal care. Current welfare “reform” has nothing to do with helping families—it forces women to work without providing benefits or childcare for measly checks at sub-market wages. Examples of “pro-family” and “pro-child” hypocrisy abound. While proclaiming that “the womb is the most dangerous place for a child,” the forces led by Operation Rescue that attempted to shut down the Delta Women’s Clinic in Baton Rouge in 1992 at the same time aggressively opposed a Louisiana state law that would have made corporal punishment illegal in all schools (including private religious schools). The antis argued, blind to the irony, that such a law interfered with the separation of church and state.

While I’m not proposing that we claim the ‘pro-family’ title as our own, I think we should expose the hypocrisy of those who claim to champion family values as they make it increasingly difficult for families to survive. We need to refuse the notion that the nuclear patriarchal family is the universal norm. It means mobilizing, as reproductive rights activists, against the assaults on welfare, supporting single motherhood, and launching opposition to the broad range of anti-queer attacks that deny basic civil rights and recognition to queers and queer families.

It is hardly just the Christian Right that we need to target for denying reproductive freedom. The US state has controlled women's reproductive lives through policies of sterilization abuse and population control, within and across US borders. In government policies institutionalized racism and sexism are most apparent. The feds will not pay for Medicaid abortions, but they will pay for sterilization. Poor women, especially women of color, are blamed for poverty in the US. Similarly global economic and environmental crises are blamed on overpopulation "created" by third world women. Often, international aid organizations make food and economic aid contingent on women's sterilization or their use of dangerous birth control methods.

Congress has recently passed a bill forbidding international family planning organizations from offering abortion services. This harkens us back to the days of Reaganism, when International Planned Parenthood et al. were refused family planning money unless they cut the abortion rap.

Action Ideas

- We need to keep our focus on women's lives and health and avoid the pitfall of focusing all our effort on the shitty nasty things the anti's do. While it is important to document and expose their actions and hypocrisy, let's not be constrained by this.
- A tip to East Coast activists: Representative Smith of New Jersey sponsored a bill to deny funds to international family planning organizations. The Population Council (the agent of population control in the US) is located in New York City. Taking on policy makers responsible for restricting the reproductive rights of women world wide would be an excellent commemorative activity!
- Demonstrate in support of women's clinics that keep the focus on women's lives and women's health. Create harassment-free zones and celebrate women's lives at the places we get our health care. Bring folks back to the clinics that are being harassed as a reminder that their escorting efforts are needed. It's pretty outrageous that it takes people getting shot and killed at clinics to pull out a mass pro-choice demonstration these days.
- Let young women lead in shutting down fake clinics. The religious right is on a roll to take back what gains women have made towards sexual freedom. Sexual autonomy and reproductive autonomy are inherently linked. It's hard to have great heterosexual sex if you are worried about bleeding to death from a back alley abortion.

Operation Rescue began a national campaign this year to target high school girls with gory fetus photos, abstinence programs and calls to renew virginity (whatever that means). Since the mid-80s federal funds only go to school based sex ed. programs that teach abstinence.

There are four fake clinics to every one real women's health care clinic. Fake clinics, run by anti-abortionists, pose as real clinics to lure young pregnant women and scare them into carrying their pregnancies to term. They advertise as Crisis Pregnancy Centers, and fail to mention their anti-abortion politics in their ads. They often set up shop near high schools or real clinics, lie about fetal development, and make empty promises of "help." Many of these anti-abortion centers are linked to profit-making adoption agencies and have an economic interest (as well as a patriarchal one) in coercing women to bear unwanted children.

- You can shut down your local “crisis pregnancy center” through consistent exposure, demonstrations and direct action. Make it costly for them to put out their lies. Steer women to real clinics where they can get full information about abortion, birth control and health care.

These are just a few ideas. In the Bay Area members of BACORR, Refuse & Resist and others involved in social-justice struggles have been meeting to plan a week of action around the anniversary. We are proposing a conference that will bring together groups and individuals who are working on the range of issues that impact our lives; from those working on the front lines against welfare cuts and other forms of economic assault on poor women, against domestic violence, against racism, to those working on women’s health (from abortion clinic defense, to self-help health care and battling breast cancer and HIV, to getting prenatal care). We plan to culminate the organizing skills and network building conference by taking the streets to demonstrate for women’s freedom on the anniversary of Roe.

The struggle for reproductive rights has been on the defensive since 1977. Now is as good a time as any to turn the fucking tables. What will you launch in your area?

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