

solidarity: a socialist feminist anti-racist organization

FROM ABORTION RIGHTS TO REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

a socialist feminist agenda



In the United States and around the world, abortion is a political battlefield. Women's struggles for reproductive self-determination confront a well-organized conservative movement determined to deny women the means to control our reproductive lives. Why, when millions of women continue to need and have abortions, is the opposition to abortion so deep in the United States? Why are abortion and homosexuality "wedge issues" for building the political right? How can we push back this movement and build our own struggle for reproductive justice?

The Supreme Court's *Roe vs. Wade* decision legalizing abortion was delivered under the pressure of feminist organizing, including speakouts, marches, protests, and picket lines. The ruling represented an enormous victory for the movement, which argued its case through chants and slogans such as "Keep Your Laws Off My Body" "Abortion is a Woman's Choice" "Not the Church, Not the State: Women Shall Decide Our Fate."

Almost before the ink on *Roe v. Wade* was dry, conservatives began a counter-attack. Their first success came quickly—in 1977, the Democrat-controlled Congress passed the Hyde Amendment, banning federal funding for abortion in the Medicaid program which provided health care services for poor families. President Carter refused to veto the amendment and the Supreme Court determined it did not violate the principles of *Roe v. Wade*. By 1979 no federal funds could be used to perform an abortion unless a woman's life was in danger. Low-income women who relied on public health care could not get an abortion as part of their medical benefits.

Thirty years later, the "right to life" movement is the centerpiece of resurgent conservatism, effectively galvanizing the religious right and other abortion opponents. "Pro-choice" organizations are on the defensive as state after state passes laws limiting abortion access— laws that the Supreme Court for the most part upholds. And gradually, state legisla-

tures and Congress have passed legislation that increases and strengthens "fetal rights," Most of these laws and policies target women who are the least politically powerful: teen-age women, low-income women, women giving birth in public hospitals, poor women struggling with addiction, women prisoners, immigrant women, Native-American women, and rural women.

Indian Health Services (IHS) will not provide abortion except when the woman's life is in danger or the pregnancy results from rape or incest. 1.5 million American Indian and Native Alaskan women depend on IHS for their health care. On the other hand, the cost of a sterilization operation is fully covered.

Only 17 states use state funds to provide abortion to low income women who rely on Medicaid for their health care. In all other states, women must pay for their abortion.

28 states require that a woman be given counseling that includes at least one of the following unsubstantiated claims (the purported link between breast cancer and abortion, the ability of a fetus to feel pain, negative long-term mental health consequences for the woman) as well as the availability of services and funding should she decide to carry the pregnancy to term.

24 states require a woman to wait a specified period of time, usually 24 hours, between when she receives counseling and when the procedure is performed. The time involved can be a significant burden for low-income working women and rural women who live far from an abortion provider (87% of US counties have no abortion facilities; some states have only one).

35 states require some kind of parental involvement in a minor's decision to have an abortion. These requirements range from notifying one parent to consent of both parents.

FRAMING THE DEBATE

The right-wing has been able to prevent the most vulnerable women in our country from exercising their right to abortion, but they have been consistently defeated when access to abortion for more

racially and class-privileged women is threatened. If nothing else the mainstream pro-choice organizations have held the line on keeping abortion legal. But the pro-choice forces have lost control of the public conversation on abortion. The anti-abortion movement sets the terms of the discussion - defining fetuses as persons and claiming for themselves the moral high ground as "defenders of life."

Although millions of women have had abortions, abortion has become a "dirty secret," something to be ashamed of. Not murder, exactly, but an ugly necessity. In other cultures, in other times and places, abortion is experienced very differently-it is an extension of contraception, another technique for regulating our fertility, something women "take care of" as part of their responsibilities for their own and others' health. For the feminist activists who fought to make abortion legal, fetuses were not persons, and abortion was, like contraception, the bedrock of women's reproductive self-determination. Without control over our bodies, women could never hope to exercise control over our lives. Feminists argued that abortion is not only about our right to refuse motherhood; it is also an important part of motherhood - "Every child a wanted child" meant that children's lives would be better too.

A REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AGENDA

Socialist-feminists organizing for abortion rights took this idea even further. We argued that individual rights and individual choice are important but they are not enough. Of course, all women need access to safe, legal abortion. But it is a cruel joke played on working-class women, poor women and most women of color to define choice as only about relieving women from forced child-bearing. Real choice means the right to have children, as well as to



not have them. Real control over our reproductive lives requires a full range of reproductive rights. These rights include access to health care for ourselves and our children, sex-positive sex education, freedom from sterilization abuse and other coercive actions by medical and social service providers to limit childbearing by poor women of color. Reproductive rights also include everything women need to raise children in dignity and health: quality affordable child care and well-paid parenting leave, a living wage, neighborhoods free from violence (including state violence) and environmental health hazards, adequate housing, good schools and respect for our motherhood, whether we are raising children as a single mother, as a lesbian mother, or with a male partner.

A socialist-feminist, anti-racist, approach to securing abortion rights calls upon us to build a multi-issue movement for reproductive justice that bridges the divides of race, class, and sexual identities. In contrast, the leading organizations in the pro-choice movement have followed a single-issue strategy. They define reproductive rights narrowly to be about preventing pregnancy and unwanted childbearing. They talk exclusively about individual rights (our right to privacy and "keeping government out of our bedrooms") and rarely talk about social rights (our right to government programs that meet our everyday needs). They never speak about government's obligations to support us as caregivers or the ethical obligations we have as a community to ensure that everyone is cared for. Concerned to build the largest possible electoral



majority for candidates who are “pro-choice”, they have shied away from potentially divisive discussions of social policy and morality and left the field open for the right-wing. While mainstream feminism relies on ideals of individual choice, the conservatives have presented a world-view and ethic that speaks to the dilemmas and concerns confronting people struggling to make ends meet and survive in an increasingly competitive world.

Opposition to abortion and LGBTQ rights is a central focus of resurgent conservatism, part of a broad right-wing movement that responds to the impact of economic restructuring, declining opportunities and increasing economic insecurity. In response to people’s fears for the future, they offer security and order based on intolerance, on the restoration of patriarchal authority and the repression of rebellious and threatening sexualities. In response to the moral emptiness and alienation of late capitalism, they offer an ethical crusade to “save fetuses,” “defend marriage” and “protect life.” These are simplistic and repressive solutions to complex problems, of course. But they are solutions nonetheless.

POPULAR AMBIVALENCE ABOUT ABORTION

The right-wing has benefited from and increased a deep-seated ambivalence about abortion. Most people in the United States support abortion only conditionally—a minority (26-31%) believe that abortion should be legal under any circumstances. Although almost 90% think that rape, incest, physical health and life of the woman are legitimate reasons for abortion, fewer than half agree that abortion should be allowed if “the family cannot afford to have the child” or “the woman feels she can’t care for the child” or “the pregnancy interferes with work or education.”

Conservatives promote the idea that sex for pleasure without procreation is wrong. Their movement exploits and heightens anxieties about women’s sexual independence. These anxieties reflect the reality that still, in spite of important changes in how men relate to parenthood, caring for other people in our society rests on women’s shoulders. Deep down, we count on women to meet everyone’s needs for care. These fears about what women would do if we really could choose whether or not to shoulder the burden (and pleasure) of care are

expressed directly in the national consensus that abortion is okay in cases of rape and incest: if a woman is “forced,” she has a right to abortion. The consensus disappears if she chooses to be heterosexually active-then, she ought to bear the punishment of an unplanned pregnancy and an unwanted birth. Unconsciously tying women’s (hetero)sexual pleasure to coerced childbearing, this narrative reassures us that women will always be available to care.

CHALLENGING THE RIGHT WING WORLD VIEW

Our movement must offer an alternative to this worldview. A woman’s body belongs to herself alone. The slogan “keep your laws off my body” remains fundamental. But we must also argue that society has a collective responsibility to establish the conditions-and the support structures-necessary for each woman to exercise choice. Rather than ignore the reality that people need to live in a caring community, we can argue for social programs that provide alternatives to the unpaid labor women currently perform as wives, mothers and caretakers. We can envision a society where nurturing is valued and shared equally by men and women, where intimacy and security are provided without depending on the oppression of women.

AN ALTERNATIVE MORALITY

We also need to confront the moral and ethical issues that the anti-abortion movement so deftly manipulates to their own advantage. A reproductive justice agenda is “pro-life” in demanding a society where all lives, including women’s lives, are valued and nurtured. We will also insist on a woman’s capacity for making the complex moral and ethical judgments that are involved in the many decisions women make about bearing and raising children. We will argue that these decisions are a woman’s alone not because of an abstract right to privacy but because only she can truly judge the impact of her childbearing on her self, her community, the people she loves, the children she might have, the children she does have, etc. We will also challenge any claims about the universal experience of abortion-terminating a pregnancy has vastly different meanings for different women and for the same woman at different times in her life and under different circumstances. The



goal of a reproductive justice movement is to fundamentally change these circumstances in ways that enhance women's lives and choices, and thereby change the context in which women must decide whether or not to terminate a pregnancy.

WOMEN OF COLOR LEAD THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Today, women of color are taking the lead in the movement for reproductive justice. They have articulated the elements of a broad reproductive justice agenda.

Through grass-roots organizing and national coordination, community-based women of color organizations are putting reproductive justice on the social justice agenda and challenging the mainstream pro-choice movement to change. As Loretta Ross, National Coordinator of the Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, so eloquently states in *Understanding Reproductive Justice* (May 2006):

"Reproductive justice posits that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access"

"Reproductive justice is a base-building analysis that focuses on organizing women, girls, and their communities to challenge structural power inequalities in a comprehensive and transformative process of empowerment."
(www.sistersong.net/publications_and_articles)

WOMEN OF COLOR AND ALLIES ORGANIZING FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Committee on Women, Population and the Environment www.cwpe.org

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence www.incite-national.org

Sister Song: Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective www.sistersong.net

Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice (Southend Press, 2004)

CONCLUSION

In today's political climate, no one group alone—not feminist organizations, civil rights organizations, trade unions, environmental groups—can successfully challenge the powerful forces arrayed against us; the fate of each movement depends on that of the others. We have to organize now in ways that contribute to creating a "rainbow movement" out of the different struggles for social change. We need to counter the conservatives with a worldview that speaks to the real dilemmas and pressing needs facing working-class people and people of color. This is why it is crucial to go beyond the pro-choice agenda to organize a movement for reproductive justice.

Solidarity believes that reproductive justice cannot be won under capitalism, an economic system that relies on exploitation and oppression to maximize profits. Our goal is a truly socialist society in which freely participating individuals share the responsibilities of production and reproduction in egalitarian, worker-controlled, self-managed institutions and neither capitalist owners nor state bureaucrats hold the economic levers of power and domination.

It will take militant mass mobilizations of people fighting the system from below in democratic organizations to achieve this vision. The self-organization of women and their empowerment is essential to creating such organizations.

The struggle to expand community provision of caregiving – child care, eldercare, health care – can build commitments to socialist transformation. Solidarity does not seek a welfare state presided over by credentialed professionals responsible to upper managers in government and corporations. We seek community-controlled services, democratically run by their staff and by those using them. The struggle for these kinds of institutions helps people appreciate socialist possibilities.

Abortion rights cannot be permanently secured without a movement of activists, of informed, thoughtful and involved people. In building movements and working in organizations that encourage democratic participation and decision-making, people develop the skills and aspirations for self-managed societies and fully participatory lives.

We hope you like our approach and want to work with or join Solidarity.
Contact us: www.solidarity-us.org