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More Than a Choice

WOMEN TALK ABOUT ABORTION

The women who worked on this pamphlet are activists in the women's liberation movement in the Boston area. We have written this pamphlet as part of our efforts to open up discussion of issues central to many of our lives. We encourage your comments and criticisms.

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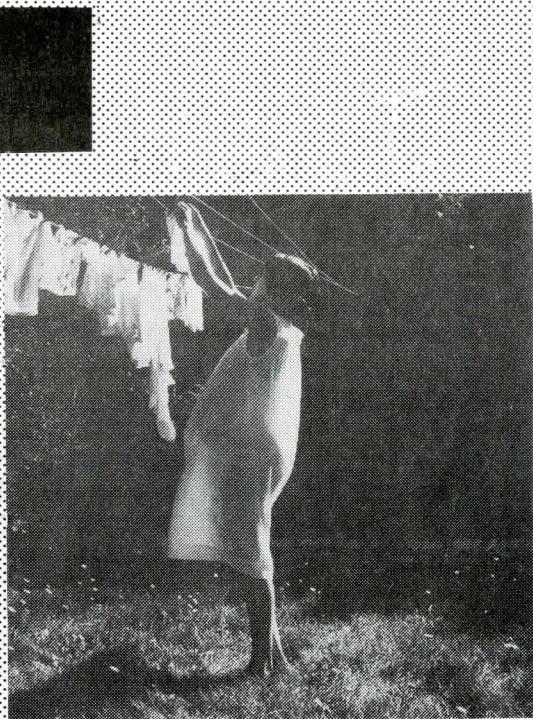


Photo by Joanne Leonard



Photo by Lee Hewitt

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BEGINNINGS

One day a woman discovers she is pregnant. And suddenly she is faced with a host of questions about her life. She needs time to think and people to talk to. Yet, too often in this situation we find ourselves isolated, without supportive community networks — without mothers, sisters, friends to help us make decisions about our lives. We are thrown back on ourselves as we try to figure out what it means to be pregnant at this time in our lives.

We ask ourselves if we have a means of support for our children. If we need to work, we must ask if we have access to childcare centers, or if we have friends or relatives to help. We may think about how the answers to these questions — the availability of work or childcare — are affected by our race or our age. What does it mean to be a teenage mother? Or to become a mother when you are almost middle-aged? We may have a sense of the future; we may have hopes and aspirations for change. But sometimes just getting through the week is as much planning as we can do.

The right to safe and legal abortions is only one of the issues fought for by the women's liberation movement during the past ten years. Concern about who we are and what we can become brought women together to talk about issues which had always been considered too private for open discussion. We began by talking about our relationships with men and with other women, about our sexuality, about being mothers and workers. And as we talked we discovered that many of us shared the same frustrations, the same feeling of not being able to control our lives. We were confronted by a morality that said the woman was to blame if she became pregnant, if she was raped or beaten by a man. And we began to realize that we had accepted hundreds of "shoulds" as if they were natural law.

Our discussions led to articles that challenged these "shoulds." People came together from neighborhoods and schools, from work places and kitchens. We formed organizations to press for wider availability of information about

birth control and women's sexuality, to fight against job discrimination and for more community controlled childcare centers. We began to challenge laws, like those that made abortion illegal, and to press for new laws, against discrimination on the basis of sex, against wife-abuse, for better health care for us all. Our aim was, and still is, to create a social and political environment in which it is possible for women and men to change and grow, to begin to live their dreams.

Today, however, there's a movement organized to repress the public thinking and activity women have generated over the past 10 years. One way to do this is to make issues taboo, to say "abortion is murder." With this proclamation millions of women and thousands of doctors are turned into criminals; the public discussions get cut off and we retreat into our private lives, less able to raise the issues and do the work that would give us more control over our lives.

These attempts to control us are heralded as "pro-life," and as "pro-family." Their language claims to represent the force of humanity, or even the will of God. But the morality asserted is, in fact, a return to keeping woman in her place and a return to the sexual double standard. The logic is if a woman engages in

sexual activity then she must passively accept the consequences — getting pregnant. Men are free to do as they please. If you don't want a baby, don't have sex. Never mind that we engage in sex out of needs for intimacy, love, warmth and pleasure. Sex, they are saying, is for procreation. For women, that is.

Nothing makes this clearer than the resolutions passed by the National Right-to-Life Convention in St. Louis, Missouri this year. The primary strategy of the organization was, of course, to continue the pressure on elected officials which has led to the cut-off of medicaid funding for abortion in many states. But this year, the leadership has also called for campaigns against sex education programs in schools, and against programs which make birth control information and devices accessible to women of all ages and races. Together these three campaigns indicate the organization's concern with repressing sexual expression and depriving women of the right to choose when and if they will bear children.

On the next few pages are the words of four women on welfare whose lives would have been directly affected by federal and state cutoffs of Medicaid payment for abortion. We feel that their response to this attempt to control their lives speaks for many of us.



Women demonstrating before legalization of abortion.

Photo by Michael Hardy

Women's Lives



Eileen

Eileen can remember the night 15 years ago when she told her husband Tom that she was pregnant with their first child. They went out to dinner to celebrate and held hands across the red checked tablecloth in the Italian restaurant drinking wine and toasting a rosy future.

"An abortion was the furthest thing from my mind way back then," the 38-year-old Charlestown woman recalled. "People really didn't even talk about it much. It was unheard of for a Catholic."

Tom, an electrician, has been out of work the past five months. Trying to exist on his weekly unemployment checks has been a challenge to Eileen.

"I finally signed up for food stamps," she said, "but we shop way over in Somerville. I know a lot of people use them in this neighborhood but I don't want any of my family or friends to know."

She doesn't want any of them to know that she signed up for a Medicaid card or for an abortion either. But she knew that that was the choice she was going to make. She figured she had all the family she could handle — after Tommy Jr. came two girls, 13 and 10, and another boy, 7.

"When I found out I was pregnant again we both got so depressed. At first we planned all this way and that way trying to see if we could..... But then one morning I looked at our little one... He's gone through three pair of sneakers since April... I don't know sometimes. It's all so confusing. Who knows when Tom will find work again?"

Eileen and Tom spent several sleepless nights before the abortion three weeks ago.

"It wasn't easy. I was pretty nervous and I

had this image that the clinic would be dark and scary. I kept wondering if I was doing the right thing. But we've decided that it's far worse morally to have a child you don't really want which you can't really take care of.

"I've heard about this new adoption plan. Does anybody in their right mind think I'm going to carry a baby for nine months and then give it away? What are we supposed to tell our kids? That they'll never know their baby sister?"

Lorraine

She went to get her abortion the day after President Carter told a press conference that there are many things in life which aren't fair and that he didn't think the Federal government had an obligation to provide Federal funding for abortions.

Lorraine, a 22-year-old Black woman, an unmarried, unemployed West Virginia native with two children, sat in the living room of the house in Roxbury, where she rents two rooms and explained that unless Medicaid paid \$150 for it, she would have been unable to have a legal abortion.

"There's no way I ever got that kind of money. What does he want folks like me to do? Maybe he'd like to come over here and give me a hand," she said.

"He and them politicians stop the money and poor folks going to go right on. Women do stuff to themselves when they can hemorrhage and bleed to death."

Lorraine's situation looked pretty grim when she found out she was pregnant less than a month ago, a pregnancy which occurred because the doctor at the neighborhood clinic advised her to get off birth control pills for a couple of months. She had just been laid off the factory job which paid \$138 a week gross and with a 10th grade education immediate job prospects looks dim. Her son Ronnie, 18

months younger than her 4-year-old daughter, was running a high fever and required around-the-clock nursing supervision.

She said she'd hoped she'd never have to have an abortion. She'd never considered it with her other two children, who were fathered by two different men. Abortion is something her religious parents would condemn. She hasn't told them or her landlady or her current boyfriend. She's afraid he'd turn out like Ronnie's father, who promised financial help and then split.

"I thought about it and thought about it and knew I'd just make up my own mind. I got my two kids to think about. How I'm going to take care of them?" she asked.

"I want to be independent. I want to have my own place, my own furniture, my own life. I don't want to have to wait on no welfare check or no man. No way I get married till my kids is all grown up."

Sandy

Sandy, 27, lives in Walpole. She also lives in fear. She is constantly afraid that Mike, her estranged husband from whom she's been separated more than a year, will come storming through the front door of the first floor apartment which she shares with their 6-year-old daughter.

"He really works me over," she said, reaching for another cigarette. "Sometimes he's been drinking. Sometimes he starts throwing things. Sometimes he beats on me."

His temper is evident in black and blue marks on her arms and legs, and her broken finger. So far he hasn't touched the little girl but Sandy worries that someday he may reach for her without realizing what he's doing. Mike refuses to believe that he was responsible for her recent pregnancy. He told her he doesn't remember the violent night it happened.

"He goes crazy. He's crazy sometimes," she

explained. "I'm messed up, too, but I'm seeing a counselor. I told him I'd stay by him if he'd see one too. But no. He's all up inside himself... more than anybody. He won't listen or nothing."

Sandy is living on welfare. She hasn't had a job since she worked part time in high school as a checkout girl in a discount department store. After discussing it with her social worker and the counselor, she decided that an abortion was the lesser of two unfortunate alternatives. Medicaid paid for it.

"How could I pay for it? I don't have a dime except what I get from welfare. Sometimes I don't have 25 cents extra for an ice cream. What am I supposed to tell my little girl?"

"I think these senators and judges and lawyers and priests, are a bunch of phonies. If anyone of them needs an abortion, they could afford it. So where do they get off telling me what to do. I need to get straightened out."

Maria

Maria tries to make ends meet with a monthly welfare check of \$290. She spends \$180 of that to rent a rundown five-room apartment in an East Boston housing project. The rest is stretched to cover costs for food stamps, diapers for two toddlers, and utilities. The supplemental clothing allowance disappears very quickly.

"Anything left over? That's a laugh," the 29-year-old said bitterly. "You learn to do a helluva lot with cheap tuna fish and macaroni."

As Maria talked, you could hear the widowed mother in the living room. The older woman, who emigrated from Greece 25 years ago, was cooing to George, 23 months, and John, 11 months, over the sound of morning game shows on television.

"My mother's expression is that welfare doesn't give you enough to die. Just enough to keep you breathing with your nose above

water." The mother also lives in the housing complex and frequently helps with the children.

Maria, who has a year of college and job experience in an insurance company, asked her husband to move out six months ago. She then started to make plans to go back to school to become a nurse. "He couldn't keep a job," she said of her husband. "He was irresponsible about money." But then she discovered that he'd squandered the meager savings account which would have made her schooling possible. She was forced to sign up for Aid to Families with Dependent Children shortly thereafter.

She told the children that their daddy went away in an airplane and whenever one passed overhead they point to the sky and start calling for him. He stops by to see them once in a while and Maria says she thinks she still loves him. But she was frightened to discover she was pregnant by him, three weeks ago.

"I always wanted to have three kids, you know, ever since I was a little girl. But I'm not sure we're ever going back together and how could I have another baby like this?" I'd have to give up on everything, school or a job. We'd be stuck in this dump for good."

Maria had her abortion a week ago Friday.

She feels that any move by the state and Federal governments toward eliminating Medicaid payments for abortion would be devastating to women who share the kind of hand-to-mouth existence she and the children endure.

"It's like they're saying poor people can't make a mistake, that poor women have to keep their legs crossed or something. Medicaid would pay for me to have my tubes tied or for some man to have a vasectomy," she said. "I heard on the radio that somebody — I think it was Carter — said women have abortions for contraception. How the hell would he know, him and his goddamn neutron bomb. Do you know that song, 'I Can See Clearly Now'?" That's how I feel about my abortion. What would he know about that?"



Feiffer



Economics

Lorraine, Maria, Eileen and Sandy speak for millions of women on welfare in the United States. And their stories and struggles speak to millions more who know the truth behind Johnnie Tillmon's claim that "Welfare is like a traffic accident. It can happen to anybody, but especially it happens to women." Formerly a chairwoman of the National Welfare Rights Organization, Johnnie was trying to combat those myths we are taught to believe — the ones that say women are on welfare because they're lazy and irresponsible; they can't hold a job, or a husband. Since these are the same myths people are taught about Black and Third World people, it's not surprising that another myth about welfare is that most women on it are Black or Third World. In fact, both myths are false. The greater percentage of welfare recipients, like the greater percentage of people in this country, are white. And, it's no individual's fault that she's on welfare: in today's economy, some people have to be on welfare. Unemployment, inflation, depression, recession, lay-offs and slowdowns are all daily reminders of our society's failure to place the needs of people before corporate profit. It is this social failure — and not our own — which ends us up on welfare.

"There is one good thing about welfare," Johnnie Tillmon says. "It kills your illusions about yourself and where this society is really at. It's laid out for you straight. You have to learn to fight, to be aggressive, or you just don't make it. If you can survive being on welfare you can survive anything. It gives you a sense of freedom, a sense of your own power and togetherness with other women."

What happens, in circumstances like these, when a woman discovers she is pregnant? Eileen, Lorraine, Maria and Sandy all had children; none had considered abortion before. In fact, each woman makes clear that she would

have liked more children. But each was forced to ask herself, "How can I have another baby like this?"

Even when it seems abortion is the only answer to this question, this decision is not an easy one for many women. We see Eileen and Lorraine trying to make a decision which is in keeping with their religious beliefs, when each knows that for religious or medical reasons reliable contraception was impossible. We see Maria and Sandy, both just out of marriages that were, at best, incompatible, at worst, destructive, weighing abortion against going back to their husbands. Or trying to figure out what it would really mean to raise another child on their own. In making the decision to abort or to carry a pregnancy to term, a woman knows that she must take full responsibility for her decision. She cannot help worrying, like Eileen, whether she is doing the right thing. Because, of course, the fetus is not the enemy these women are fighting: it's poverty, and the lack of control they have over their lives.

For each of these women, deciding to have an abortion was a way to try to change the direction of her life. For Sandy, abortion meant allowing herself the necessary time to "straighten herself out" so she could begin to support and care for herself and her daughter. For Lorraine, as for Maria, abortion meant a chance to get a better education, to train for a job that would enable her to support her kids.

For these four women, and for thousands of other women in this country, Medicaid financed abortion provides that chance to begin to take control of the direction of their lives. That's why, as Lorraine says, "If Carter and them politicians stop the money, poor folks going to go right on. Women do stuff to themselves where they can hemorrhage and bleed to death." Without federal and state support, the majority of women in this country would be unable to afford the surety of a safe, legal abortion. "There's no way I ever got that kind

of money," Lorraine continues. "What does he want folks like me to do?"

"Alternatives to Abortion?"

In fact, President Carter doesn't have any alternatives to abortion for any women — rich or poor. The panel empowered by Secretary of HEW Joseph Califano to find alternatives to abortion, came up with these three: "suicide, motherhood, and some would add, madness." Since few women would willingly choose suicide or madness, these so-called options to legal, safe abortion can lead to the desperate efforts at control Lorraine describes above. Or they can lead to the "option" that the government imposes more and more on poor and Third World women: sterilization. Many women have indeed chosen to undergo sterilization in the last 10 years. Yet sterilization can hardly be considered a choice when women agree to it because there are no reliable, safe methods of birth control, or because sterilization is made a condition for abortion, or offered to a woman when she is in labor, drugged or in pain. This is sterilization abuse. It permanently denies a woman the choice of deciding when or how many children she will have. The decision is made for her, taken out of her control — just as it is with the only "positive" option that HEW saw to abortion — compulsory motherhood.

One Teenager's Story

The testimony given by a young woman named Barbara at abortion hearings in New York in 1970 gives us another vision of how destructive this lack of options is for a woman. Barbara was 17 when she got pregnant in the late 60's. "I was sane and healthy," she says, *and therefore ineligible for a legal abortion. Not being criminal or sophisticated I had no access to illegal means of abortion. I asked my mother for money to cover the cost of a trip to Japan where abortion was legal. She was not wealthy. She refused. She became hysterical. I became hysterical. Twenty-four hours later I was married. Eight months later I was delivered of an infant. Shortly afterwards, the child was adopted and my marriage dissolved.*

In this summary of Barbara's pregnancy, it may seem as though only one year of her life was affected. This is what "right-to-life" organizations like Birthright tell young women like Barbara, when they counsel them to choose adoption as a practical, more humane alternative to abortion. They fail to warn the women they counsel of the larger consequences of this decision in a society which ignores or punishes teenage sexuality and which treats pregnancy as a disability to be hidden away. When we look at the details of Barbara's testimony, we can see how carrying the pregnancy to term and giving the infant up for adoption changed her entire life.

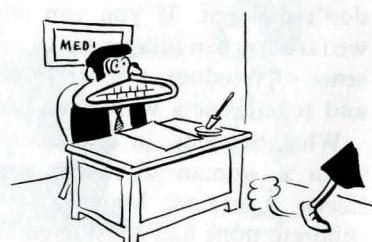




Photo by Elsa Dorfman Copyright © 1978

I was forced into a marriage relationship through pressure from my family... my husband had no money. I left college and took a full-time job. By taking a leave of absence from college I forfeited a regent's scholarship [which was the only reason I was able to attend college]. Also, the school had a rule which did not allow pregnant women to register. In effect, I had no freedom to pursue the goals which I had set up for myself. The state was punishing me for my sexual behavior. I no longer had control of my life. At 17 years of age it had been interrupted by forced maternity.

I decided to give the child up for adoption. I had to defend that decision against family and friends who had been so influenced by the legal sanctions given to motherhood that they found it impossible to accept my decision. They tried to convince me to stay married and become a mother. I was unprepared for motherhood

financially, emotionally and morally.

I decided to dissolve the marriage. After the birth of the child I returned to school. I was also working at the time to pay off legal bills, medical bills and to support myself [I had been fired from my previous job when they discovered I was pregnant]. After one term I had to leave school to get a full time job. My present occupation... can barely support me, let alone enable me to return to school.

The desire to pursue one's education, or to develop the skills to get a satisfying job shouldn't have to be weighed against the desire to have a child. Yet the decision to have a child — like all others is constrained by the society we live in: a society which allows only very few of us the best circumstances in which to have a child, to go on to school, or even the *time* to discover who we are and what we would like to do with our lives.

Having Children — Who Decides?

There would be a whole lot less conflict about deciding whether or not to have a child if this decision could always be made before we get pregnant. But it doesn't necessarily work that way. Women get pregnant even when we don't want to have children, or before we have really considered whether we want to. Because of the way our culture treats both sex and the role of women, we usually are not encouraged to think and talk about whether and when we want to have children.

"Before I got married no one talked about children; they all assumed that I wouldn't get pregnant because I wasn't married. I think I must have assumed that too. My boyfriend and I slept together — I guess I was lucky. Then all of a sudden after the wedding, I was supposed to have children. People even made jokes about it, asking me how my "health" was. Nobody asked about what I wanted."

Traditionally, our society has only accepted "childlessness" for single women, women who supposedly were not having sexual relationships. But choosing whether to have children can be a separate issue from choosing whether to have sexual relations with someone. After all, it isn't something which happens only in order to "make babies." And, as we are learning, it isn't something which only happens between women and men. There have always been lesbians, and today more women are openly demanding the space to be emotionally and sexually involved with other women.

Breaking free of the strict laws around sexuality is no easy task, however. A large part of this society, including many religious institutions, refuses to accept that teenagers and unmarried women have a right to engage in sexual relationships. As a result, in most schools sex education programs are either non-existent or totally inadequate.



Photo by Elsa Dorfman Copyright © 1978

"Yeah, you hear a lot going around, but you never know exactly what is true. People say things to scare kids off from having sex. They used to tell us you could get pregnant from necking. They don't really want us to know how to keep from getting pregnant, they want our only choice to be not to have sex. Getting pregnant is the ultimate threat they can hold over our heads. But it doesn't work — we're still having sex, and yeah, some girls get pregnant."

Punishing teenagers for their sexuality clearly doesn't work. Teenagers need information about birth control in order to protect themselves from pregnancies which they aren't yet ready to handle. But sex education programs which simply provide teenagers with technical information about birth control methods aren't much help. And efforts to shove birth control pills down the throats of teenage girls aren't any better. They don't help teenagers sort out their feelings about troublesome areas of sexuality. Sex education should involve openly exploring larger issues like deciding when and with whom to have sexual relations, and understanding why we get sexually involved with another person and what effect that may have on our lives.

Myth of Immaculate Sex

"You know, it's not as though I never knew about birth control. I might have taken the pill but I already have problems with my blood pressure. It's just that I couldn't stand the thought of using any of those other methods. I mean, sex is supposed to be romantic, beautiful, natural. You get swept up by your feelings, one thing leads to another, and you do it. You never see people in the movies fumbling around with rubbers, do you? Using birth control seems artificial, it makes sex seem mechanical ... and messy."



Many of us reject birth control because it doesn't seem to fit in with the image of sexual intercourse presented in movies, television, and magazines. In the media, sex always seems romantic and easy — something that "happens" without thought and effort. But sexual interaction is no different from other types of communication between two people. It requires effort — knowing and accepting each other's bodies. And part of that acceptance is knowing that we are not movie stars, but real live women who can get pregnant from sex and who may want to use some kind of birth control to prevent that from happening.

Many times a woman is not using birth control because she doesn't plan to have intercourse with the man she is going out with. All too often, however, the man puts so much pressure on her to sleep with him that she gives in and has intercourse without protection against conception. In such cases, fear of losing the relationship with the man, coupled with fear of being called a tease, makes it hard for us to say no.

This pressure to "do it" goes hand in hand with religious and societal pressures not to do it. It is not surprising that many of us respond to this negative pressure by feeling guilty about any kind of sexual interaction. Even if we believe sex is part of a loving relationship and

loving relationships can exist outside of marriage. So we avoid these guilt feelings by not using birth control, pretending to ourselves that we are not consciously breaking the commandment not to have sex. Then, if what we are doing is brought home to us, as it is by pregnancy, we can always say we were caught up in the "passion of the moment."

Sexual Revolution — Who Wins?

"Everybody's talking about the sexual revolution. It's supposed to have freed us to enjoy sex as much and as often as men. But I'm beginning to think that it's just another line men use to get women to sleep with them as often as they want. I haven't found that men are any more interested in finding out when I really want to have sex and when I don't. They don't respect my "no" any more now than they did before. In fact, now if I say 'no' to a guy, he can taunt me as not being sexually liberated."

Living up to the media ideal of being "sexually liberated" has put a lot of pressure on individual women and men, and in some cases is a factor in our failure to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Somehow, the notion of women's liberation and the sexual revolution has come to

mean "anything goes." This is partly the result of a commercial world which has latched on to the "sexual revolution" as a way to sell products. Too many companies use nude or seductively attired female bodies in their advertisements, marketing sex to increase profits. Because these ads turn us into objects (to be bought with "a flick of my bic" or a flashy new car), they reinforce the idea that women are sexual objects to be acted on, used by men, then discarded or traded in for a new model.

This is not at all what the sexual revolution or women's liberation are about. Supporting the right of women and men to enjoy sexual activity both outside of marriage and apart from procreation is very different from urging all people to have sex as often as possible. More and more, through talking to other women who have experienced similar conflicts, we are getting support to make our own decisions about when and with whom we have sexual relations. We recognize that we have a responsibility to respect and care for each other as whole human beings in any sexual relationship — and that expressing ourselves sexually should not involve treating other people as objects. As a result, we are demanding something different — that we be given respect for all our needs, needs for love and sex, for expression and independence.



MOTHERHOOD — PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

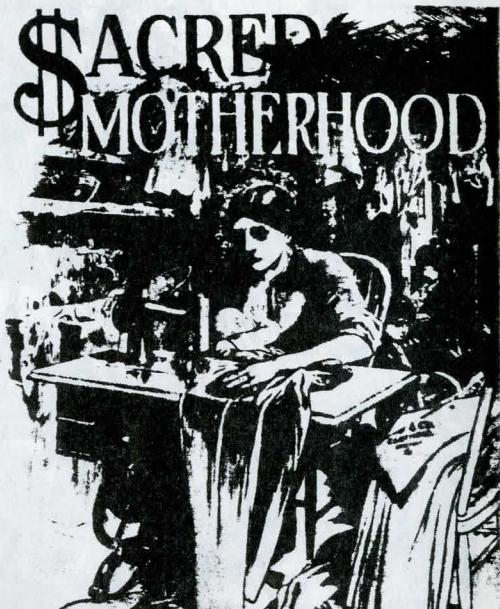
Women in our society are responsible for childbearing and almost entirely responsible for childrearing. As a result, the continuing lack of support for motherhood in our society affects most women's decisions about when, if and how to have children. For many women, the decision to have a first child or another child is affected by how emotionally and financially stable a marriage or relationship is, what family or friendship ties she can count on, or what job and income prospects exist for her.

Some women might not desire or expect the father of their children to play a major role in their lives. Other women might want the father to share in child-raising. Most men, however, are still not expected to do much more than "help out" with these major lifetime tasks. Men are expected to be the "breadwinners", responsible for keeping bills paid and a roof over their family's head. In fact, the world of paid work is organized on the assumption that there is a "free" worker in the home to cook, clean, nurture and raise children. We all know that this worker is supposed to be a woman, who will raise — or is expected to raise — children with similar expectations and assumptions.

A Woman's Work Is Never Done

This division of labor between the home and the paid work force assumes that women either don't have to work or shouldn't work. But today, most women don't have that choice. Twenty-five percent of U.S. households are headed by a woman. And in the majority of two-parent families, both woman and man have to work outside the home in order to ensure the family's survival.

Even though women today must work outside the home, the sexual division of labor still persists in important ways. First of all, the jobs



that are available to most women are the lower-paying, dead-end jobs — jobs that would discourage us from working if we did have a choice. And secondly, women who work outside the home must work a double shift: we are still the primary caretakers at home, no matter how many hours we work outside the home. Clearly, no matter how much the reality has changed, the assumption is still: home is where we really belong!

Parenting: Exploring Other Possibilities

Many men and women can and do struggle with these issues in individual relationships. Still, most institutions in our society demand that women be primarily mother and housewife, selflessly giving of herself to everyone BUT herself. Thus, it is not surprising that often women act cautiously in weighing whether the men in their lives are aware of what having a child means for them. And one of the questions women ask themselves, rightly so, is "if I have this child, who else, besides me, is going to be there?"

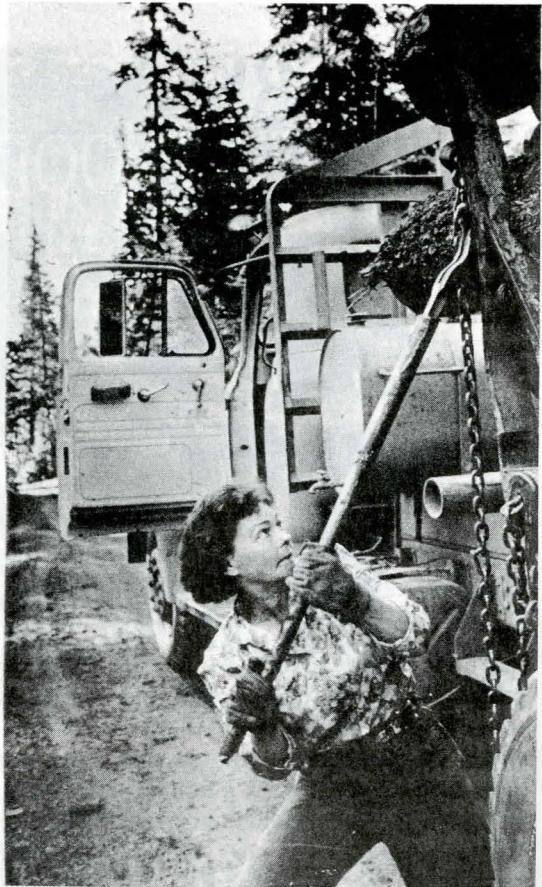


Photo by Bettye Lane UPI

Today some women are choosing not to have children. Society's disregard for women's needs as mothers is certainly a factor women have weighed in making this decision. Equally as important, however, is the attempt on the part of many women to challenge the notion that every woman must have her own biological child in order to lead a satisfying and fulfilling life. Or, that the only nurturing relationships possible are with one's *own* children. A lot more women today are asserting that adults can and should relate to children in ways other than as biological parents. Yet, challenging the parent-child relationship as the only legitimate basis for a family goes along with trying to challenge society's pressure on all women to be

mothers. None of these things are easy tasks! Women who are not mothers continue to be treated by social institutions and by society in general as "maladjusted" females or as "cold and selfish" human beings. This is the sort of explanation so-called "Right to Life" organizations offer the public for why so many women choose abortion today. This is a distortion of reality and represents the growing reaction against women who are changing their roles and expectations.

And what can we expect if we are or will be mothers? Although motherhood is exalted as some glorious state, women know that it is not really valued in the same way that work, for money, is valued. If you say you're a mother, people are always asking, "well, what else do you do?" And too often, we hear ourselves saying, "I'm only a housewife, only a mother." To be a mother in our society means being bombarded with the opinions of so-called "experts" who make us constantly insecure about what we're doing. No woman is ever being a "good enough mother" according to doctors, teachers, counselors, psychiatrists, etc. Our ability to deal realistically and honestly with our children is criticized. Our knowledge of childrearing and being a parent is challenged every day on talk shows, paperback bookstands and in newspaper columns, where "experts" make their opinions known. As one mother recently wrote, "I'm glad my daughter was already four years old before I found out it was all over at age three!" (5/25 *Boston Globe*) And too many of us have felt guilty and responsible when our kids get into trouble and we're told that their mother "should have been at home" instead of being out of the home.

Single Mothers

Single mothers — 25% of the mothers in this country — have to deal with the ways our culture, religious institutions, the schools we send out kids to, etc. are prejudiced against and

suspicious of motherhood which is not tied to marriage and the traditional nuclear family. To bear a child without the "sanctity" of marriage today continues to mean that one's kids are so-called "illegitimate". Our children are branded "born out of wedlock", "bastard" and "fatherless." And we are handed a label which perpetuates negative images of single women and single mothers like "loose", "unwed mother", "unmarried", "pathological", "unfit household head", etc. etc.

What IS true is that many mothers — out of necessity or choice or both — have not done things according to the status quo. And social institutions, religious institutions, the media, the government, etc. have so attempted to dehumanize single mothers, lesbian mothers and especially women on welfare, that society at large is expected to view (and often does view) "these women" as somehow "responsible" for their situations. For example, common beliefs state that women receiving welfare have only themselves to blame. Never mind that our society makes it near impossible for women with children to work. Never mind that if you're poor, Black or Third World you're lucky if you can support yourself let alone your children with the available jobs. Never mind that many people slave their whole lives and barely stay off welfare. Welfare should be a right, NOT a favor and a low priority in our society.

It is painfully clear to more and more of us today that the old notion that "if you work hard, you'll get ahead" isn't true. Most of us work hard and it hasn't necessarily gotten us anywhere. Welfare then is hardly the accidental result of one individual's failure in a social structure which insures some people in this country security, wealth and power, and leaves others with a life-long struggle for barely a decent livelihood.

Our devaluation as mothers is obvious in a hundred other ways. In a society like ours,

where 47% of the workforce are women, and 60% of working women are married, how else can we explain the lack of provisions for our needs as women? On the job, leaves of absence for pregnancy and childraising are not common. Recently, the Supreme Court declared that employers can choose not to include pregnancy benefits in their insurance policies for their workers. The court then tried to justify their decision in stating that employers weren't really discriminating against women since men don't receive pregnancy benefits either! Employers can also refuse to clean up workplaces where they use chemicals which are known to be harmful to pregnant women.



Photo by Ellen Shub



Photo by Shirley Parry

Instead, women are only permitted to work in these situations if they agree to be sterilized.

Daycare vs. the Neutron Bomb

Childcare poses a major problem. Fifty percent of working mothers today have children of school age. Any woman who has tried to find adequate and reliable childcare, where parents have a say, knows what a difficult search that is. This lack is particularly serious for the 30% of working mothers with children under school age. Six years ago Congress did pass a law which would establish federally subsidized childcare centers, but Nixon vetoed it. His assumption — like that of those people who oppose abortion — is that a woman's place is in the home *and* that the federal government should not fund human need. These people who march under the banner of "Right to Life" are the very same people who virulently

fight against the government playing any role in easing hardships and providing basic and needed human services. These are also the same people who support the most destructive, uncontrolled weapons race in the world, including the neutron bomb. As women we must distinguish between anti-abortion groups' lies and hypocrisy and a true support for life in our society.

We must all work to understand why it's so hard to be a mother today and why there are so many limitations on our ability to move and change even the smallest things in our lives. Too many of us blame ourselves for having so few options. Our struggle as women begins when we *stop* blaming ourselves. Then, perhaps we will be able to look around us — at all the women like us — and ask "why doesn't our society support more of the choices that women, and all people want to make. Why must our dreams remain only dreams?" How can our dreams become real?

Laws, Sexuality and the Church — The Fight for Control

Birth control is not a modern invention. For thousands of years women and men have been developing ways to space and limit pregnancies. They figured out how to prevent pregnancies *before* modern science: one method developed was a pessary, a vaginal suppository that could kill sperm. They also devised abortion techniques that could end unwanted pregnancies. And this knowledge was passed on from one generation to the next, through community and family networks.

Each generation, each society has also had its opponents to the practice of birth control and abortion. Today, the Catholic hierarchy is leading the fight to outlaw abortion. But the Church has not always been an outspoken opponent to these practices. In fact, for centuries the Catholic Church went back and forth on the question of both birth control and early abortion.

Up through the 19th century, most people, including Catholics, believed in something called "quicken." Quicken was the term used to describe the moment when life began, or in Catholic dogma, the moment when the soul was acquired. It was generally assumed that quickening took place sometime between the third and fourth month of pregnancy, but no one could agree on the exact moment when it took place. Generally, abortion before quickening was acceptable. The Church did not hold a consistent or universal position on quickening or early abortion until the second half of the 19th century. Since, however, the Church tends to mask the man-made, changing nature of its beliefs, many Catholics don't know the history of these changes.

It was not until 1869 — years after abortion was outlawed in the United States — that the Catholic Church declared that *all* abortions were a sin. Just a few years later, Congress

passed the "Comstock law". This law prohibited obscene matter from being sent through the mail. Since contraceptive devices were defined as obscene, distributing birth control information became a punishable crime.

Outlawing abortion and birth control did not stop these practices. Women clung to the tradition of quickening, regarding early abortion as a time-honored right. Now, however, women and lay practitioners were persecuted for practicing this right. Many were brought to trial. Just as many escaped, because they were protected from arrest by their communities. And, even those who did not escape were often acquitted by a "jury of peers" who shared the community's acceptance of early abortion.

Clearly, many people remained committed to early abortion, to making their own decisions about how many children to have. Yet, pressure to limit these practices came from different arenas. In general, the public morality in the 19th century was extremely prudish. Sexual relations for purposes other than motherhood were considered unrespectable. In fact, doctors and philosophers went so far as to say that women had no sexual desires. A woman's instincts, they agreed, were organized around childbearing and childrearing, in short, motherhood. And nothing was supposed to interfere with that. Her sphere of influence and duty was a home separated from the business of the world.

These beliefs about women were related to the fact that men's and women's lives had become more separate. Less and less were family units made up of co-workers, producing together, in the same space, for the family's survival. As farming became more commercially oriented, men worked to produce for the market (or did the marketing) and women did the gardening. As crafts became more indus-

trialized, men went to make shoes in the factories, while married women stayed home. Home and work became separate spheres. Women and men were seen as profoundly different.

Banning abortion and birth control then and now cannot be understood separate from how a society views the status of women and the meaning of female sexuality. Outlawing abortion and prohibiting birth control was an attempt to enforce restrictions on women's freedom, women's roles and women's rights to express their sexuality.

Voluntary Motherhood

But people don't just adapt to changes in the conditions of their lives; they react by trying to wrest back some control. The attempts to enforce strict sexual standards and "woman's place in the home" were both a response to and a cause of women's movements. Throughout the 19th century women had been fighting for the right to vote, the right to divorce, the abolition of slavery, etc. And during the time of anti-abortion, anti-birth control legislation, women began raising new demands like voluntary motherhood. Initially, voluntary motherhood meant that women could refuse the sexual demands made by their husbands so they could gain control over when they got pregnant. Decades later, the movement was more influenced by those who advocated freer sexual standards (women do have sexual desires) and by those who were active in working class movements. They saw birth control as a way for women to take control of their lives, to increase options and alleviate burdens. Margaret Sanger, a leader in the birth control movement, defied the law in 1916 when she set up her birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York, in an Italian and Jewish immigrant neighborhood. Surprisingly, many Catholics came. When Sanger asked one of the Italian women, what she would tell her priest, the

woman replied, "It's none of his business, my husband has a weak heart and works only four days a week... We have enough children."

At that time Sanger was part of a movement of socialists and feminists who advocated, among other things, that *all* women of *all* classes should have the right to reduce the burden of constant childbearing. However, those in power were not interested in giving women more control over their childbearing. They began to accept birth control and its legalization in the 1920's and 30's more as a way to limit the population of poor and ethnic "undesirables." Their fears of a "takeover" by immigrants and Blacks in the population were fed by a dropping White Anglo Saxon Protestant birthrate.

Birth Control vs. Population Control

The movement which sought that women should have more control over their lives became dominated by population control programs and ideology directed primarily against Black and other Third World people. Birth control became an appeal to constrain working class, immigrant and people of color in order to protect the interests of the dominant class and culture.

This legacy is still with us. When birth control was legalized in 1938, private organizations — like Planned Parenthood, the Population Council, etc., were created to focus on world over-population. In the 1960's, when this government began its "war on poverty" at home, these groups initiated massive propaganda campaigns that heralded population control as the answer to poverty, famine and disease.

The money these groups were given was intended to decrease population growth — not to directly address poverty and disease. Giving control to women was not viewed as the surest, quickest way to this goal. But sterilization was, and is. Thus, the birth control research performed by the medical establishment has pro-

duced no significant improvement in safe, accessible birth control (although many women, particularly Third World and poor women, often in countries outside the U.S., have served as unfortunate guinea pigs in the "search" for better methods). Instead, researchers have concentrated on inventing more efficient sterilization techniques, which are being offered to poor white, Black, Hispanic, and Native American women in particular, as the best, safest method of birth control. Clearly the impetus here is taking control away from women rather than giving it to us.

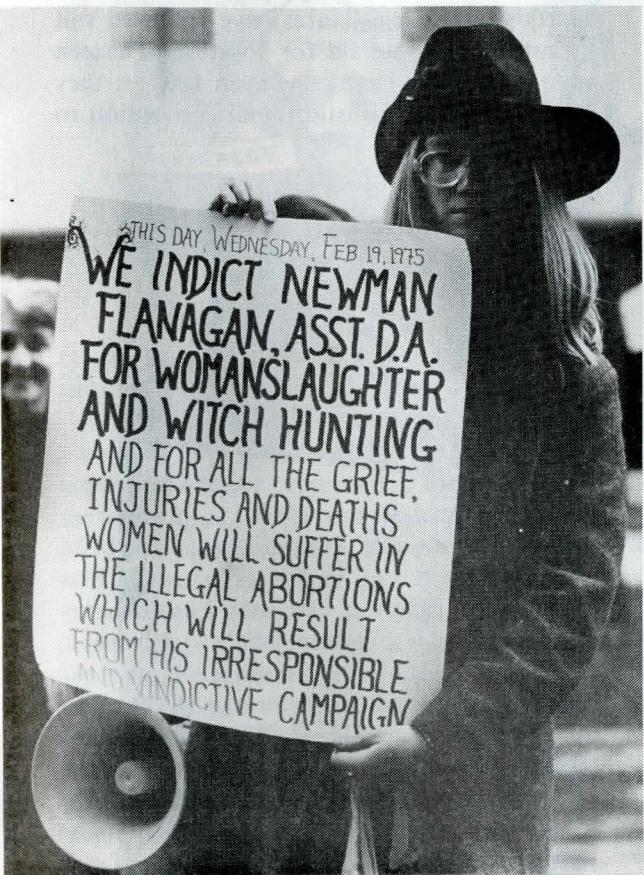


Photo by Ellen Shub

In February of 1975, Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Obstetrician/Gynecologist at Boston City Hospital, was convicted of manslaughter for performing a legal abortion. Women and men

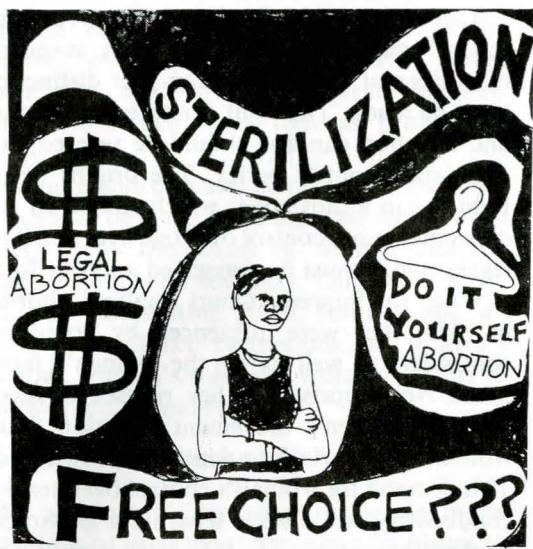
This fusion of birth control with population control makes many people rightly suspicious of notions of family planning. But distinctions must be made. The fight for safe birth control and abortion can and should be severed from population control policy. The origins of this fight lies in a movement which sought to gain *all* women more control over our lives and it is a legacy which must be reasserted and put forth.

When the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, they were influenced by population controllers as well as by the women's movement. Not surprisingly they refused to recognize the women's movement assertion that a woman has the right to control her own body. This demand for woman's control over her own childbearing will always separate a grassroots, feminist movement for safe birth control and abortion from the efforts of population controllers. For us, the fight for birth control and abortion must be connected to opening up more options for women, must be connected to movements demanding more control over our lives.

Conclusion (But Not The End)

Today, the issue of abortion is being publicly dramatized by those who oppose abortion. Their approach includes displaying sensationalist photographs of eight-week-old fetuses and using slogans that accuse individual women of murder. It includes harassing women who have come to terms with the issue in their own lives and have decided to go ahead with an abortion. On her way into the clinic, a woman may be surrounded by protesters, bombarding her with "facts" about the fetal development within her body, and with charges of the "crime" she is about to commit.

in Boston rallied to Edelin's defense. Newman Flanagan was the prosecutor. (Edelin's conviction was later overturned.)



In the city of Akron, Ohio anti-abortionists on the city council succeeded in passing an ordinance, on February 28, 1977, that makes some of these tactics law. The ordinance states that a woman having an abortion must have her husband's or parents' consent and must be informed of such "facts" as "the unborn child is a human life at the moment of conception." Opponents of this ordinance describe it as "punitive and sadistic toward women.... Its enforcement will create more mental health problems than you can shake a stick at." Under such circumstances, is it any wonder that women have trouble examining and voicing the feelings — about themselves, their partners and their children — that have led them to choose abortion?

Most women in this country felt their voices had finally been heard when, in early 1973, the Supreme Court decided that abortion was a private matter between a woman and her doctor. That ruling struck down all anti-abortion laws, making it possible — for the first time in 100 years — for women who were not rich or privileged to choose abortion without risking their lives. At that time anti-abortion groups

vowed to do anything in their power to reverse that decision. And now, five years later, women's access to medically safe abortion is, once again, in jeopardy.

In June 1977, the Supreme Court virtually reversed its earlier decision when it ruled that states did not have to pay for abortion with medicaid or other state funds. Soon after, the Hyde Amendment went into effect, cutting off federal HEW money for abortion except in cases of rape, incest, when the woman's life is in danger, or when a pregnancy would cause severe and long-lasting physical damage. Thirty-six state legislatures have followed suit by cutting off state aid for abortion. Thirteen state legislatures have gone even farther: they have called for a constitutional convention to

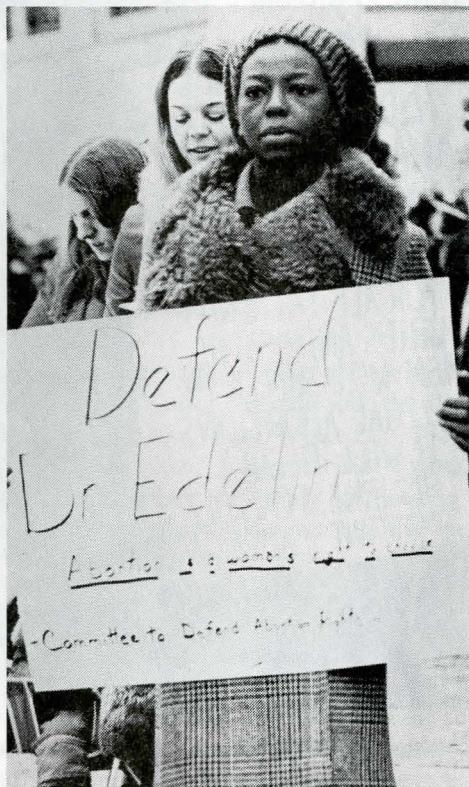
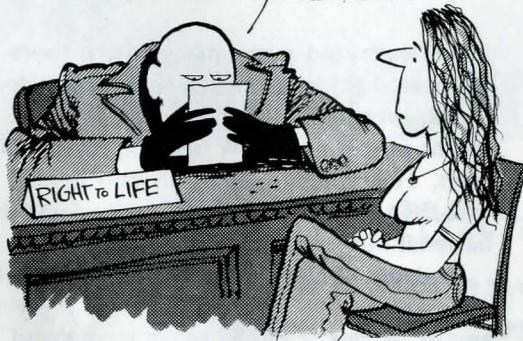
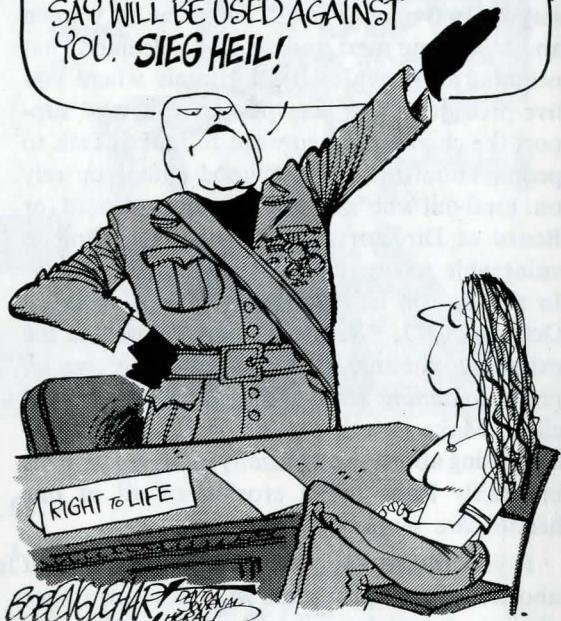


Photo by Ellen Shub

SINCE YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO HAVE THIS ABORTION, YOU ARE REQUIRED BY CITY ORDINANCE TO BE PROVIDED DESCRIPTIONS OF FETAL DEVELOPMENT BEFORE SIGNING YOUR CONSENT. IF YOU ARE A MINOR, YOUR PARENTS MUST BE INFORMED OR IF YOU ARE MARRIED, YOUR HUSBAND MUST BE NOTIFIED BEFORE THE OPERATION IS PERFORMED...



IF YOU HAVE NO PARENTS OR HUSBAND, THE COURT WILL APPOINT ONE FOR YOU. YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT. ANYTHING YOU SAY WILL BE USED AGAINST YOU. **SIEG HEIL!**



change the U.S. Constitution to prohibit abortion.

We want to make it clear that in passing such laws, city councillors and state and federal legislators are *not* representing the interests of the majority of people who elected them. A poll of Massachusetts citizens taken by Clark University two days before the state legislature voted to end Medicaid funding for abortion revealed how different the views of the people are from the actions of their legislators on this issue. While two-thirds of the legislators voted against funding for Medicaid, a solid majority of their constituents (53%) said they supported Medicaid financing of abortion. And an even greater number — 80% — said that they agreed with the 1973 Supreme Court decision: they felt that the decision to have an abortion was a private decision between a woman and her doctor.

Several sections of the Akron, Ohio ordin-

ance have already been declared unconstitutional. And Appeals Courts in several states — Illinois, Virginia, New Jersey and Massachusetts — have acted to temporarily set aside the legislatures' ban on Medicaid payments for abortion. It isn't enough though to sit back and wait for court reversals or to count on the fact that the political leverage of anti-abortion legislators outweighs their base of support. We must remember that anti-abortion legislators have been successful because of Right to Life's massive, public, grass-roots organizing and lobbying on the abortion issue. This has taken shape in just about every city in this country. If our own victories are to be more than temporary, we must voice our support for abortion openly and publicly. We must also enter the very arenas where our rights are being taken from us. We must organize women to insist upon representation on the abortion issue from elected state and federal officials.

No matter where we live in this country, there are a number of things to do right now! Abortion is one important part of birth control services and quality health care that all women and all people need and deserve. Demand that neighborhood clinics and hospitals where you live provide the services people want and support the choices women want to make. Talk to people about the neighborhood clinic you rely on. Find out who's on the community board (or Board of Directors) and whether the clinic is vulnerable to organized anti-abortion activity. In the Boston neighborhood of Roslindale in October, 1977, "Right to Lifers" unseated the existing community board and closed down *all family planning services* at that neighborhood clinic. Make sure that people you know realize that losing abortion and family planning services inevitably leads to an erosion of all of our health care services.

If you are working, demand with others that abortion be a provision in union insurance plans or in employee health plans, along with pregnancy benefits and other crucial health services. If you live in a state where Medicaid for abortion has been cut off or is likely to be cut off, find out what women's groups, health groups, community groups or welfare groups are doing to restore or defend Medicaid abortion coverage. Attacks on Medicaid abortion are part of overall cutbacks in welfare, in daycare, in our schools and with needed social services today. Demonstrate with others that women receiving welfare will not tolerate infringements on their rights to quality health care services. Encourage people you know who are active on related issues to make the connections to abortion, sterilization abuse, birth control, sexuality, etc., in all their work.

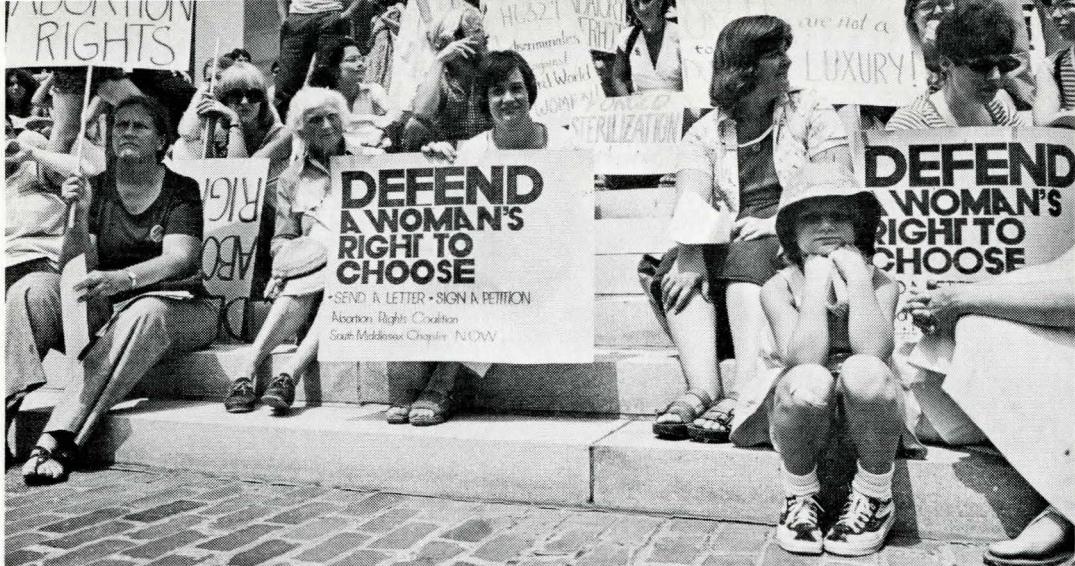
We need to protest attacks on abortion at every level! Petitions are a useful tool for talking with all sorts of people about how the abortion issue affects them and for explaining what further action can be taken. We need to

A Clark University Public Affairs Research Center poll in June, 1978 reveals: 83% of Massachusetts residents agree that "the decision to have an abortion is a private matter that should be left to the parents to decide without government interference."

picket each and every place where those who advocate against women's access to abortion speak, even at so-called "private" affairs. This means people like HEW Secretary Joseph Califano, Henry Hyde (Rep. from Illinois), and anti-ERA Phyllis Schlafly, to name some of the national out-spoken persons against us.

And, above all else, we, all women must keep discussions alive today! Each and every time any of us claims public space to demand support for our choices, including abortion, we make it easier for some other woman to begin to make her needs known to those around her. It has been grass roots movements which have initiated struggles for abortion, day care, quality health care, welfare, etc. Losing on any of these critical issues today affects more than merely a loss at the legislature. It presents a significant loss for the leverage and power of grass roots movements to fundamentally challenge social institutions and the control they have over our lives. If we are to be able to sustain movements for fundamental and meaningful change, the abortion struggle is not just a challenge for women today, it is a challenge for all people as well!

Photo by Ellen Shub taken at August 1977 rally in Boston.



Dear Mr. Califano:

Mr. Califano, we do not like being on your agenda. We are putting you on ours.

You may win this round. But there are many rounds to go. When we win back the right to safe abortion regardless of income, we're going to tell you we need more clinics. When we get more clinics, we're going to hit you for more jobs, more daycare, decent schools, and all the other things that add up to real reproductive freedom—the freedom to have babies if we want as well as not to have them.

Taken from leaflet written by CARASA [Coalition for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse] New York City Chapter

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