

## 10 Reasons to Rethink Reproductive “Choice”

by Marlene Gerber Fried

### Editors' note

The meaning of choice has long been a controversial issue in the reproductive rights movement. With the coming of a new administration in Washington it is urgent to question the choice framework again. In this issue of *DifferentTakes*, Marlene Gerber Fried analyzes why choice is a restrictive concept and why the bold vision advanced by the reproductive justice movement is the way forward.

— Co-Editors Elizabeth Barajas-Roman & Betsy Hartmann

Since 1973, when abortion was legalized in the United States, choice has been the dominant way of thinking and talking about abortion rights. The mainstream advocacy movement called itself pro-choice in hopes of appealing to a wide base of people, including economic conservatives. “Choice” was selected because it is compatible with being against “big government,” and it was less threatening than advocating directly for abortion and women’s rights. You could be *against* abortion but *for* choice. Choice puts the focus on a woman’s right to make her own decision about having a child rather than on the actual outcome of that decision. NARAL (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League), the largest single-issue abortion rights organization, takes this approach in campaigns featuring the question, Who Decides? And in 2003 they changed their name to NARAL Pro-Choice America.

At the same time, many supporters of abortion rights have been critical of this strategy. Women of color and low-income women have organized for reproductive and sexual rights outside of the choice framework. They have created organizations and re-defined reproductive rights to emphasize the needs of communities that have been negatively affected by inequalities and racism.<sup>1</sup> “Choice,” especially as it has been equated solely with the right to legal abortion, does not reflect the reproductive experiences and needs of these communities.



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Here are 10 compelling reasons why advocates for abortion rights should move away from “choice.”

### 1 Choice resonates most with women who see themselves as having choices; not with those who don't.

Because they are dealing with high rates of poverty and lack of access to education, jobs, and healthcare, low income and poor women often do not experience reproductive decisions as choices. Native American activist Justine Smith zeros in on

this lack of agency by asking, “If a woman has an abortion because she cannot afford to have a child she would otherwise want, is that a real choice?”<sup>2</sup> “Real choice” requires that a woman have the resources and support that would allow her to exercise any of her reproductive options.

## **2 Choice homogenizes reproductive experiences.**

Women’s reproductive lives vary tremendously, because they are shaped primarily by their race and class. White middle class women have gained increased control over their sexuality and reproduction with the legalization of contraception and abortion. Poor women and women of color have not. Theirs is a different history,<sup>3</sup> one in which they were systematically targets of reproductive oppression — public and private policies which deny them the ability to make their own childbearing decisions.<sup>4</sup>

## **3 Choice has not included the right to have children.**

Most often, reproductive oppression has consisted of attempts to prevent low income women and women of color from having children. Such practices have included coercive sterilization, targeting women of color for Norplant and other long-acting contraceptives, prosecutions for behavior during pregnancy<sup>5</sup> and welfare policies that penalize single women who have children while receiving public assistance. While women of color have consistently resisted these practices and fought for their right to be mothers, the pro-choice movement has not. Historically, the movement has included in its ranks population control advocates who want to restrict the fertility of poor women. Nor has society been supportive of mothering. The U.S. is one of only three developed countries not requiring paid maternity leave and lacking adequate childcare.<sup>6</sup>

## **4 Choice disconnects abortion from the rest of women’s lives.**

Like all other reproductive experiences, abortion occurs in the context of a woman’s entire life — including her economic and educational status, her sexual orientation, her other healthcare needs, and whether she is in a violent or abusive situation, has a disability, has other children, is incarcerated

or homeless, and so much more. A woman brings all of these aspects of who she is to her reproductive decision-making. Therefore, while preserving the legal right to abortion is a central aspect of reproductive freedom, it is only one part of what is needed.

## **5 Choice is a conservative framing.**

“Choice” became the primary way of talking and thinking about abortion in the 1980s when advocates were overwhelmed by the power of the New Right and the growing anti-abortion movement. The mainstream reproductive rights movement responded by trying to widen its base of support to include people who were more conservative. Thus the movement became “pro-choice” instead of being for abortion rights, sexual rights, and insisting on women’s bodily autonomy.<sup>7</sup> Pro-choice politics were framed defensively by what was considered winnable rather than by a positive vision of reproductive freedom. Instead of *Roe v. Wade* being the first step toward achieving full reproductive control for women, defending it became the end goal.

## **6 Choice is a market concept.**

In our capitalist society, choices are consumer decisions. If something is for sale, then supposedly we can choose it. This model is not adequate for dealing with basic needs, especially when almost 50 million people in the U.S. have no health insurance at all. The Hyde Amendment<sup>8</sup> demonstrated that “choice” is only for those who can afford it. Denied federal Medicaid funding, poor women needing an abortion must forego other basic necessities such as food and rent to pay for one. “Choice” is meaningless for those women who live below the poverty line and for the nine million women of childbearing age who have no health insurance at all.<sup>9</sup>

## **7 Choice is individualistic.**

The underlying assumption of the choice framework is that an individual is responsible for her economic status and for solving her own problems.<sup>10</sup> With this understanding, childbearing and abortion are privileges, not rights. That there are social, political, and economic conditions required to enable individual choices is completely invisible. Also ignored are histories of oppression that have

led to enormous differences in economic circumstances and social power. Poverty and other social problems require systemic not individual solutions.

### **8 Choice focuses only on women's reproductive decisions.**

While women must have the right to decide whether to become pregnant or to continue a pregnancy, this is only one aspect of reproductive autonomy. Gay men, lesbians, and intersex and transgendered people are also fighting for reproductive, sexual and health rights. These include the right to be parents, to bear children and to have access to the technologies and services which support their parenting decisions. If we understand the right to abortion as a necessary aspect of bodily integrity, equality, and full citizenship, it is integrally connected to these other struggles. Making the links will strengthen all of our efforts.<sup>11</sup>

### **9 Choice lacks moral force.**

In the abortion debate “choice” is pitted against life as the underlying ethical conflict, conceding the issue of “life” to the opponents of women’s rights. This allows the debate to center on the status/significance of fetal life as the primary moral question. Instead, advocates of abortion rights need to re-focus on the morality of forcing a woman to carry a pregnancy to term against her will and the ethical consequences of preventing women from terminating a pregnancy. At issue are women’s lives and livelihoods — their status, health, relationships, and ability to be in charge of the major decisions which affect their lives. Women who have abortions talk about them in terms of necessity and survival. Our language should reflect the significance that women attach to these actions. We are not merely “defenders of Roe v Wade.” We are advocates for women’s lives.

### **10 Choice is not the adequately compelling vision needed to mobilize a broad and inclusive movement. Reproductive Justice provides that vision.**

Since abortion was legalized, the opposition has organized a movement aimed not just at re-criminalizing abortion, but one that is inspired by a holistic conservative vision of gender roles, family

and sexuality. Restoring traditional gender hierarchies and behavior, and taking back gains made by movements for women’s equality, gay liberation and reproductive rights, are all part of that agenda. In order to combat the multi-faceted nature of this attack, and to fully encompass the reproductive needs and concerns of all women, we must build a reproductive justice movement — a movement that is broad-based, linking issues and communities. The mainstream pro-choice movement lacks the commitment, the analysis, and the vision to lead this effort.<sup>12</sup>

Today there is widespread agreement among abortion rights advocates that the “choice” framework should be replaced. However, there is no agreement on the new frame, and some of the leading alternatives perpetuate the negativity and stigma surrounding abortion.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, reproductive justice brings abortion rights into a broader positive frame. The growing movement for reproductive justice is breathing new life into reproductive politics.

*Reproductive Justice exists when all people have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our gender, bodies and sexuality for ourselves, our families and our communities. Achieving this goal requires changes at all levels and ending all forms of oppression ... including forces that deprive us of self-determination and control over our bodies, and limit our reproductive choices.<sup>14</sup>*

While the concept of reproductive justice is being developed by women of color, I see it as the way forward for the entire movement. It is powerful on many counts: it links the well-being of individuals to that of their communities; it is a holistic understanding of a person — a vision that matches our experience; it is a bold and inspiring political vision, formulated in terms of what people in all communities need to exercise reproductive freedom. Because it is a lens and not a list, reproductive justice is an expanding and inclusive political agenda, allowing reproductive rights activists to connect with new allies and constituencies. Finally, making reproductive rights part of the struggle for social justice and human rights is a compelling moral and political vision.

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## Notes

- 1 For more on this, see Jael Silliman, Marlene Fried, Loretta Ross and Elena Gutiérrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*, South End Press, 2004.
- 2 Smith, Justine, "Native Sovereignty and Social Justice: Moving Toward an Inclusive Social Justice Framework," in Jael Silliman and Ynestra King, eds., *Dangerous Intersections: Feminist Perspectives on Population, Environment and Development*, South End Press, 1999, p. 211.
- 3 Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*, Vintage Books, 1997, p. 4.
- 4 Women's reproductive lives are constrained by overlapping systems of oppression. "Our ability to control what happens to our bodies is constantly challenged by poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and injustice in the United States," Loretta Ross et al, "Just Choices" in Jael Silliman and Anannya Bhattacharjee, *Policing the National Body*, South End Press, 2002, p.147.
- 5 Since the 1980s, women have faced prosecution for a series of alleged "offenses" committed during pregnancy. These have included drinking alcohol, taking illegal drugs, and refusing to follow their doctors' orders. For more information about this please see the website of National Advocates for Pregnant Women: [www.advocatesforpregnantwomen.org](http://www.advocatesforpregnantwomen.org)
- 6 Lynn Paltrow, "Abortion Issue Divides, Distracts Us from Common Threats and Threads," *Perspectives*, Volume 13, No. 3, Winter 2005.
- 7 William Saletan, *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, University of CA Press, 2003.
- 8 The Hyde Amendment, originally passed by Congress in 1976, prohibits federal Medicaid funding for abortion. Before Hyde, Medicaid paid for approximately one-third of all abortions (about 333,000/yr); after Hyde, virtually no abortions qualify for Medicaid funding (fewer than 200/yr).
- 9 "The Incompatibility of Neo-Liberal 'Choice' and Reproductive Justice," Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice Briefing Book: A Primer on Reproductive Justice and Social Change*, Summer, 2007.
- 10 This is also sometimes called "blaming the victim."
- 11 See [www.causesincommon.org](http://www.causesincommon.org)
- 12 In 2004, when a March for Choice was announced, a wide range of groups including women of color, young women, and labor groups argued that this missed the linkages among movements. After a political struggle, the organizing committee was broadened to include young women and women of color, and the name was changed to the March for Women's Lives. With this broad approach it became the largest national mobilization in U.S. history.
- 13 Examples include: emphasizing the need to decrease the number of abortions as in the slogan, "Make Abortion Safe, Legal and Rare"; claiming that abortion is a tragedy, a necessary evil; arguing that abortion rights advocates must acknowledge the immorality of abortion while also defending legality.
- 14 "A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Rights, Reproductive Health and Reproductive Justice," ACRJ (Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice), [www.reproductivejustice.org](http://www.reproductivejustice.org), accessed June 22, 2008.