

Voices

Abortion Issue Divides, Distracts Us from Common Threats and Threads

By Lynn M. Paltrow

I started my career defending a woman's right to choose abortion and now run National Advocates for Pregnant Women, an organization that works on behalf of pregnant women and families. No, I haven't had a political or religious conversion. What I have had is the opportunity to see how the abortion issue distracts us from shared political and family values.

While politics and media like to divide the world into neat bundles of opposites—pro choice vs. pro life—the reality of women's lives simply doesn't fit these patterns. For example, it is widely known that women who profoundly oppose abortions still sometimes have abortions. What is rarely discussed is the fact that most women who have abortions are already or will someday become mothers. In other words, the overwhelming majority of women who have abortions also have children they will raise and spend a lifetime worrying about. They have pregnancies they carry to term and, like other pregnant women, they hope their birthing experiences will be respectful, healthy, and supportive.

The abortion issue divides us and distracts us from common threats and threads. For example, we tend to think of laws restricting access to abortion and attacks on abortion providers as unique intrusions on women's reproductive lives. But women who want to have doulas present at their deliveries, or who prefer midwives to ob-gyns, also find that their choices are under attack—their providers are portrayed as dangerous, prohibited from being in the delivery room, or arrested for practicing without the right kind of license.

Today, even pregnant women who vehemently oppose abortion are finding that they are hurt by claims of fetal rights that are being advanced as part of the campaign to outlaw abortion. Amber Marlowe, a deeply religious woman who is profoundly opposed to abortion, found this out when she went to deliver her seventh wanted child. Marlowe did not believe she needed a C-section and did not want to subject herself or her unborn baby to unnecessary surgery. The hospital disagreed, and, relying on the anti-abortion argument that fetuses are legal persons with rights separate and hostile to those of the pregnant woman, got a court order giving it custody of the fetus before, during, and after delivery—and the right to force Marlowe to undergo the procedure.

While still in labor, Marlowe fled to another hospital. There, she delivered a healthy baby—naturally. Angela Carder was not so lucky. Based on the argument that a fetus is a separate legal person, she was forced to have a C-section: Both she and her baby died.

Anti-abortion and fetal-rights arguments have also been used to justify the arrest of hundreds of pregnant women who used an illegal drug, drank alcohol, or disagreed with their doctor's advice. These are not women who intended any harm to their fetuses; most personally oppose abortion, and most found that the health services they needed were simply not available to them. A Missouri woman who admitted smoking marijuana once while pregnant was arrested for child abuse. Women in Oklahoma, Tennessee, and South Carolina who suffered stillbirths have been arrested as murderers.

While abortion issues are used to divide the electorate, pregnant women and mothers are united by the fact that America is one of only three industrialized nations that does not require any paid parental leave.

Similarly, millions of pregnant women, especially those who work part time or for small companies—and regardless of their views on abortion—lack legal protection from workplace discrimination based on pregnancy.

Other threats to bearing and raising healthy children persist as well. Consider that while President George W. Bush was signing the Unborn Victims of Violence Act into law and declaring his commitment to a "culture of life," he was deregulating coal burning power plants. Such plants release mercury into the environment, creating health hazards that are most dangerous to pregnant women, fetuses, and children. And while President Bush was reinterpreting the Children's Health Insurance Program to allow states to cover "unborn" children, 43 million Americans, including 8.5 million actual children, were without health care coverage.

Regardless of their views on abortion, women are likely to spend significant time working as mothers and homemakers. This labor makes up a huge part of U.S. gross domestic product, yet it is ignored or trivialized.

A recent *New York Times* story, "Survey Confirms It: Women *Outjuggle* Men," reported that the average working woman spends about twice as much time as the average working man on household chores and child care. According to this headline and the political culture it represents, child care and homemaking are what clowns do, requiring some skill at balancing but no real work.

Birthright activists and abortion rights activists, pro choice and pro life, Republicans and Democrats all need to work to change the conversation. We will continue to disagree about abortion, but together we must acknowledge that anti-abortion laws are being used to hurt women who want to carry their pregnancies to term and that all of us are harmed by an overriding U.S. policy that fails to value mothers and families.

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