The War Between the Women
Author(s): Kristin Luker
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Guttmacher Institute
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2134998
Accessed: 27/01/2013 00:04
Abortion and arguments about abortion have been a common feature of the American scene for at least the last century and a half. The 19th century had its own right-to-life movement, made up of male physicians who argued that abortion was murder if performed by women, but a therapeutic measure if performed by themselves. The abortion debate today is different in important ways from earlier rounds. For most of its history, the discussion about abortion in this country was conducted by professionals, usually physicians, and men. As a result, until very recently, the abortion debate most resembled the disputes over other bioethical issues: It was for the most part quiet, collegial and restrained. None of these adjectives begins to describe the emotional and volatile abortion debate today. On the contrary, over the last decade the subject has galvanized—and polarized—Americans in the same way that such moral issues as abortion and temperature once did. What accounts for this remarkable transformation?

The full answer is complex. Physicians, who had successfully controlled the right to make all decisions about legal abortion since the 19th century, began to disagree among themselves. Technical advances in obstetrics meant that only a minority of abortions after 1940 were undertaken to preserve the physical life of the pregnant woman. Once abortion could no longer be presented as a case of trading the life developing in the womb against that of the pregnant woman, physicians were forced to confront the underlying dilemma: Is the embryo or fetus a person or only a potential person? Both positions have long philosophical traditions, and have existed side by side over the long history of abortion in America.

In the early 1960s, some physicians began to press state legislatures to reform laws that permitted abortion only when the pregnant woman’s life would otherwise be endangered. The proposed laws were designed to guarantee to those doctors the right to perform the kinds of abortions that they had been doing—those that would protect the social, psychological and emotional life of the woman as well as her physical life. Increasingly, however, physicians were unable to agree among themselves about the conditions under which an abortion was justified. When the doctors signaled that they were no longer willing or able to control the abortion issue in house, the stage was set for the first time for a public debate about abortion.

To explore what it is that makes that public debate so heated and passionate, interviews with activists on both sides of the issue were conducted over a five-year period. A sample of more than 200 prolife and prochoice activists in California was the source of these interviews. We identified a beginning pool of activists from letterhead stationery, newspaper accounts and citations in advocacy literature, and asked those activists who were the people most involved in the issue, both on their side and among the opposition. All those selected for this study were named by at least two others as active as themselves (most were named by many more people), and they met the study criterion of time spent on this issue—at least ten hours a week on the issue if prolife, five hours a week if prochoice.* We have reason to believe that for the years under study, we interviewed a representative, and at times exhaustive, sample of the prominent “positional” leaders (people who hold elective office) and “reputational” leaders (people who are highly visible workers) on both sides of the abortion debate. Interviews were intensive, lasting for at least two hours, and often for as many as six, and were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. What follows are selected excerpts from the research. The quotations are verbatim from the interviews. These five years of interviews with those most intensively involved make three things clear:

- The present-day abortion debate, unlike prior rounds, largely involves two very different groups of women.
- These women are differentiated not only by their beliefs about abortion, but by the circumstances of their lives as well.
- The life circumstances and beliefs of the activists on both sides of the issue serve to reinforce one another in such a way that the activists have little room for dialogue, and few incentives for it.

**Who Are the Activists?**

Whereas the abortion debate used to be dominated by male professionals, it is now controlled on both the prochoice and prolife sides by women from the grass roots. It is not surprising, given historical patterns of power in American society and the history of earlier rounds of the abortion debate, that the top of the leadership structure still contains many male activists—especially in California, where this study was centered. (This pattern is more noticeable in prolife than in prochoice organizations.) However, more than
80 percent of those people identified in their communities as highly involved on either side of the abortion issue are women. In a nationwide sampling of mailing lists of the National Abortion Rights Action League and the National Right to Life Committee, University of Missouri sociologist Donald Granberg found very similar results.\(^5\)

Perhaps one of the most remarkable findings to emerge from this research is how distinct the women activists on the two sides are, but how much alike the prochoice and prolife male activists are. The male activists tend to be holdovers from the early phases of the debate, when the major disputants were male physicians, lawyers and theologians. Since practitioners of those professions often have similar social and demographic profiles, it is not surprising that the male activists have a great deal in common with one another, even though they are on opposite sides on this particular issue.

When women activists are considered, a very different story emerges. Women who are engaged in the abortion debate are separated from one another by income, education, family size and occupation, as well as by their different opinions about abortion. Thus, the abortion debate grows out of two very different social worlds that support very different aspirations and beliefs.

Keeping in mind the pitfalls inherent in statistical averaging, one may ask who is the "typical" prolife and prochoice activist that emerges from this study? Two profiles stand out: The typical prochoice activist is a 44-year-old married woman whose father was a college graduate. She married at age 22 or older, has one or two children, and has some graduate or professional training after her B.A. (Thirty-seven percent of all prochoice women in this study have received at least some post-baccalaureate training.) She is married to a professional man, is herself employed, and has a family income of more than $30,000 a year. She attends church rarely, if at all; indeed, religion is not particularly important to her.

The average prolife activist is also a 44-year-old married woman. She, however, married at age 17, and has three or more children. (Sixteen percent of the prolife women in the study have seven or more children.) Her father was graduated from high school only, and she herself has a good chance of having gone no further in school. (Forty percent of prolife women do not have a baccalaureate degree.) She is not employed, and is married to a small businessman or a lower income white-collar worker; her family income is less than $30,000 a year. Her religion is one of the most important aspects of her life; she attends church at least once a week. She is probably a Catholic, but may be a convert to Catholicism. (Almost 80 percent of the prolife activists in this study were Catholics at the time of the study, but only 58 percent had been raised as Catholics. Thus, just over 20 percent were converts.) A number of public opinion polls have shown that Catholics and evangelical Protestants are beginning to approve of abortion in proportions close to those of non-Catholics and nionevangelicals; the results of those polls suggest that Catholicism is a proxy for something other than doctrinal belief. The findings of this study suggest that the Catholic Church contains (and in the case of converts, attracts) devout, traditional women who are committed to family roles.

It is not surprising that prolife and prochoice women have little in common. Few of those on either side of the issue have any friends or even acquaintances who disagree with them about abortion; and a number of prolife women spontaneously declared during the interviews that they would end a friendship if they discovered that the friend did not share their views on abortion. Again, this is in marked contrast to what we know about the men in the study. Because the men are often the colleagues of other professionals, most have acquaintances and even friends who oppose their point of view on abortion. Among male activists, a "live-and-let-live" stance on the abortion issue is much more likely than it is among women.

**World Views**

Women (and to a lesser extent male) activists are separated by far more than their values on abortion. Beliefs about abortion, as many of them noted, are simply the "tip of the iceberg." The two sides have very little in common in the way they look at the world, and this is particularly true with regard to the critical issues of gender, sex and parenthood. The views on abortion of each side are intimately tied to, and deeply reinforced by, their views on these other areas of life. Even if the abortion issue had not mobilized them on opposite sides of the barricades, they would have been opponents on a wide variety of issues.

With respect to gender, for example, prolife activists believe that men and women are intrinsically different, and that this is both a cause and a product of the fact that they have different "natural" roles in life. Here are some representative comments from the interviews:

*The women's lib thing comes in, too. They've got a lot of good ideas, but their whole thing ran off so far from it. How can they not see that men and women are different?*

Men and women were created differently, and were meant to complement each other, and when you get away from our proper roles as such, you start obscuring them. That's another part of the confusion going on now; people don't know where they stand, they don't know how to act, they don't know where they're coming from, so your psychiatrists' couches are filled with lost souls, with people who have gradually been led into confusion and don't even know it.

Men, the prolife activists believe, are best suited to the public world of work, and women to the private world of rearing children, managing homes and caring for husbands. Most prolife activists believe that the raising of children is the most fulfilling work women can have. They subscribe quite strongly to the traditional belief that women should be wives and mothers first. Mothering, in their view, is so demanding that it is a full-time job, and any woman who cannot commit herself fully to it should avoid it entirely. Moreover, they believe that the kinds of emotional sets called for in the larger world are at odds with those needed at home:

*When you start competing in the marketplace for what you can do and how you can get one-up or whatever, then I think we get into problems. It's harder to come down off that plane of activity and come home to a life where everything is quite mundane, and the children are way beneath you. It's hard to change from such a height to such a depth in a short time, and it becomes more and more difficult, I would think, as time goes on, to relate to both planes.*

Prolife activists see the world divided into two spheres—public and private life—and each sex has an appropriate, natural and satisfying place in his or her own sphere. In this view, everyone loses when traditional roles are lost. Men lose the nurturing that women offer, and the nurturing that gently encourages them to give up their potentially destructive and aggressive urges. Women lose the protection and cherishing that men offer. And children lose full-time loving by at least one parent, as well as clear models for their own futures.

Prochoice activists reject this notion of separate spheres. They believe that men and women are fundamentally equal, by which they mean substantially similar, at least as regards rights and responsibilities. As a result, they see women's reproductive and family roles not as a natural niche, but as a potential barrier to full equality. So long as society is organized to maintain motherhood...
as an involuntary activity, they argue, "women's sphere" connotes a potentially low-status, unrewarded role to which women can be relegated at any time:

I just feel that one of the main reasons why abortion is allowed was because women have been in a secondary position culturally is because of the natural way things happen. Women would bear children because they had no way to prevent it, except by having no sexual involvement. And that was not practical down through the years; so without knowing what to do to prevent it, women would continually have children. And then if they were the ones bearing the child, nursing the child, it just made sense for them to be the ones to rear the child. I think that was the natural order. When we advanced and found that we could control our reproduction, we could choose the size of our families, or whether we wanted families. But that changed the whole role of women in society. . . . It allowed us to be more than just the bearers of children, the homemakers. That's not to say that we shouldn't continue in that role. It's a good role, but it's not the only role for women.

These different views about the intrinsic nature of men and women in turn help to shape how the two sides view sexuality. For the prolife people we talked to, the primary purpose of sexuality is procreation:

You're not just given arms and legs for no purpose. There must be some cause for sex, and you begin to think, well, it must be for procreation ultimately, and certainly procreation in addition to fostering a loving relationship with your spouse.

It is not surprising, given this commitment to the procreative dimension of sexuality, that the prolife activists in this study are opposed to most contraceptives. Although they are careful to point out that the prolife movement is officially neutral on the topic, most of the activists are confident that any law outlawing abortion would also outlaw the pill and the IUD, a result that they favor:

I think it's quite clear that the IUD is an abortifacient 100 percent of the time and the pill is sometimes an abortifacient—it's hard to know just when, so I think we need to treat it as an abortifacient.

Moreover, a substantial number of prolife activists use periodic abstinence, or natural family planning, as their only form of fertility control, rejecting other methods of contraception on moral and social grounds:

Well, you know the natural family planning books make a big thing out of how affection should be shown during the period of abstaining, and how this can bring you closer together than you might otherwise be. It would be easy to fall into a mechanical view of the spouse if you were to use a mechanical means of contraception. You have a better buttress if you use a natural means.

Because prolife activists regard the procreative dimension of sex as the most valuable, when they do use natural family planning, they use it to time the arrival of children, rather than to foreclose entirely the possibility of having them. For them, the fact that the method may not be highly effective in preventing pregnancy is a plus, not a minus. ³

The frame of mind in which you know there might be a conception in the midst of the sex act is quite different from that in which you know that there could not be a conception. . . . I don't think that people who are constantly using physical, chemical means of contraception ever really experience the sex act in all of its beauty.

Thus, the one thing family planners commonly assume that everyone wants from a contraceptive—that it be 100 percent effective and reliable—is precisely what prolife people do not want from their chosen method of fertility control. And, as is so often the case, the attitudes that profile activists hold toward contraception are intimately tied to the realities of their lives. Since prolife men and women believe in, and live in, a world of separate spheres where each sex has its appropriate task, for them to accept contraception (and by extension, abortion) would devalue the one secure resource profile women have—the private world of home and hearth. This would be disastrous not only in terms of status but also in terms of meaning. For prolife men and women to accept highly effective contraception, which symbolically and actually subordinates the role of children in the family to other needs and goals, would be to take away the meaning from at least one partner's life. Contraception, therefore, which sidelines the reproductive capacities of men and women, is both useless and threatening to prolife people. Moreover, if positive values about fertility and family are not essential to a marriage, they ask, what support does a traditional marriage have in times of stress?

These views about gender roles and the purpose of sexuality come together to shape attitudes toward premarital sex, particularly among teenagers. ⁴ People who feel that sex should be procreative find premarital sexuality disturbing. Since, for them, the purpose of sex is procreation (or at least requires a willingness to be "open to a new life"), people who are sexually active before marriage are by definition not actively seeking procreation; and in the case of teenagers, they are seldom financially and emotionally prepared to become parents. So for prolife people, premarital sex is both morally and socially wrong. Although prolife people agree that teenage pregnancy poses a very real problem.

---

*People interviewed in this study tended to use the terms teenage sex and premarital sex interchangeably. But teenagers premarital sex represents the worst of both worlds for most prolife people. In their view, teenagers should not be having sex because they are not married and are too young even to contemplate marriage seriously.
in the United States today, they feel that the availability of contraception is what encourages teenagers to have sex in the first place, so that sex education and contraception only add fuel to the fire:

Planned Parenthood . . . it seems so logical—we’ve got all of these problems here, and if we just do sex education and contraceptives and everything, we’ll solve all of them. It’s kind of like two people coming to a fire. One says “Let’s put this fire out by throwing water on it.” The other says, “Oh, no, we always did it that way. I’ve got something better, it’s called gasoline, and it’s cooler than water.” Well, there’s a term that’s being overlooked, and that term is responsibility—caring, real honest-to-God caring for other people.

On all of these dimensions, prochoice attitudes are very different. For example, prochoice people in this study focus on the emotional aspects of sexuality—what our 19th century ancestors called amative sex—rather than on the procreative aspects. Prochoice people, therefore, value sex as an end in itself rather than as a means to procreation. For much of a lifetime, they argue, the main purpose of sex is not to produce children but to afford pleasure, human contact and, perhaps most important, intimacy. In their view, too exclusive a focus on the procreative function of sexuality leads to social control of sexuality, and, in turn, what they call sex-negative values. When prochoice people speak of sex-negative values, they mean values that prevent people from talking openly about sex, and thinking of sex as something to be enjoyed for its own sake, but that lead them to treat budding childhood sexuality—masturbation and adolescent flirtation—harshly.

Such harsh and negative treatment of sex makes sense, of course, if a community believes strongly that it is the only way to control the production of children and, in particular, the production of children born out of wedlock. But prochoice activists, in part because of their faith in the ability of humans to use reason to change the environment, believe that there are better ways to control the consequences of sexuality than to repress it and, in turn, to keep close control over women. As a result, prochoice people see contraception as a social good. In their view, the point of sexuality is intimacy; but since such closeness requires trust, familiarity and security, the establishment of intimacy takes practice. As a result, contraception, which allows people to focus on the emotional aspects of sex without worrying about its procreative aspects, is a social good.

For virtually all of the prochoice people in this study, contraception is not a moral issue. While they do have some pragmatic concerns about contraceptive methods—how unpleasant or how unsafe some are—contraceptive use in itself has no moral connotations. A good contraceptive method, from the pro-choice point of view, is one which is safe, undistracting and pleasant to use—in short, one which enhances the intimacy available during sex, rather than one which detracts from it.

What is perhaps surprising to those unfamiliar with the issue is that prochoice people do have one moral concern about an aspect of birth control. With very few exceptions, the prochoice people interviewed do not accept abortion as a routine method of fertility control:

I take the idea of ending the life of the fetus very, very gravely. . . . That doesn’t in any way diminish my conviction that a woman has the right to do it, but I become distressed when people regard pregnancy lightly and ignore the spiritual significance of a pregnancy.

A great many prochoice people in this study, particularly those active in helping women obtain abortions, find multiple abortions morally troubling. Some of them even volunteered the information that they feel like personal failures when a woman comes back to them for a repeat abortion. At first glance, this reaction would appear to be illogical. If the first abortion is a morally acceptable act, why isn’t the second or the fifth abortion equally moral?

Prochoice opposition to abortion as a routine method of birth control is based on complex and subtle moral reasoning. For most prochoice people, parenthood does not exist at conception, but it does develop at some later time. The prochoice view of parenthood is therefore a gradualist one. A fetus may not be fully a person until it is viable, but it does have potential rights at all times, and these rights increase in moral weight as the pregnancy continues. Prochoice people tend to argue that the potential rights of the embryo or fetus at times must be sacrificed to the actual rights of the woman involved. But a woman who carelessly or capriciously conceives when she has the alternative of preventing pregnancy by the use of birth control is seen by prochoice activists as unjustifiably usurping the potential rights of the embryo by trivializing them.

Thus, for prochoice people, opposition to abortion as a routine form of fertility control stems from both the gradualist and contextual moral reasoning outlined above. A first abortion represents presumably the lesser of two evils, because the abortion of an embryo or fetus is seen as less morally wrong than bringing a child into the world whom one cannot properly raise. Since most women are offered a contraceptive method after an abortion, every abortion after the first represents a case where a woman had the option of avoiding pregnancy and did not do so. In most cases, prochoice people tend to find this kind of carelessness morally wrong.

Their views about the meaning and nature of gender and sex combine to influence how the two sides see parenthood. Prolife activists, because they see motherhood as a natural role, believe that being a parent is something that one learns by doing. Thus, the kinds of financial and educational preparations for parenthood that prochoice people see as necessary are considered irrelevant by prolife people.

It is interesting that many prolife activists commented that few women, including themselves, actually enjoy being pregnant:

I never wanted to have a baby, I never planned to have five children. I never felt the total joy that comes from being pregnant. I mean I was sick for nine months. I mean my general attitude was, “Hell, I’m pregnant again.” But I thought pregnancy was a natural part of marriage, and I believed so much in the word natural, and so I loved the babies when they were born. I realized that a lot of women have abortions in that first trimester out of the . . . physical and psychological fear that they experience, and the depression. . . . A lot of them will regret having that abortion later on.

A general theme in the interviews with prolife activists—many of whom have large families, it will be recalled—is that there is an antichild sentiment abroad in American society, as exemplified by the strong pressures to have only two children:

My husband, being a scientist, gets a lot of questions. You know, having a large family, it’s just for the poor, uneducated person, but if you have a doctor’s degree and you have a large family, what’s wrong with you?

The values of prolife activists about parenthood follow from their views on gender, sex and contraception. Since the purpose of sex is procreation, they believe, married couples should be willing to have whatever number of children come, at whatever time they are conceived. Second, since motherhood is a natural role, one should not try to plan carefully for it through contraceptive use, and one need not prepare for it. Finally, since motherhood is the most satisfying and meaningful role for a woman, it is incomprehensi-
bile to prolife people that a woman might want to postpone or avoid pregnancy in favor of something else, such as work, education or worldly success.

In much the same way, prochoice beliefs about parenthood are rooted in their other cherished values. Since prochoice activists see the main purpose of sexuality as intimacy, they feel that parenthood must be postponed until the couple have attained a level of trust and security that will enable them to be successful, loving parents to a new baby. By the same token, since parenthood is seen as a social rather than a natural role, couples are best advised to wait until they have the social and emotional resources they need to move successfully into such a new and demanding role. Otherwise, under pressure, parents will come to resent their child, and this will limit their ability to be caring, attentive and nurturing parents and, eventually, their ability to raise children who feel loved, have self-esteem and, as one activist put it, "feel good about themselves."

Because prochoice people see raising children as requiring financial resources, interpersonal and social skills, and emotional maturity, they often worry about how easy it is to have children. In their view, parenthood is far from natural—too many people stumble into it without appreciating what it takes:

I would say that the tip of the iceberg is purposeful parenthood. I think life is too cheap, I think we're too easy-going. We assume that everyone will be a mother—that's Garrett Hardin's "compulsory motherhood." Hell, it's a privilege; it's not special enough. The contraceptive agent affords us the opportunity to make motherhood really special.

Since prochoice activists think that in the long run, abortion will enhance the quality of parenting by making it optional, they see themselves as being on the side of children when they advocate abortion. In contrast to prolife people, who believe that parenthood will be enhanced by making it inclusive, that is, a mandatory part of the package of being a sexually active person, prochoice people feel that the way to improve the quality of parenthood is to make it more exclusive:

My attitude on abortion stems out of, I think, the same basic concern about the right [of children] to share the good life and all these things. Children, once born, have rights that we consistently deny them. I remember once giving a talk [in which I said] that I thought one of my roles was to be an advocate for the fetus, and for the fetus' right not to be born. I think the right-to-lifers thought I was great until that point. . . . I think if I had my druthers, I'd probably advocate the need for licensing pregnancies.

All of these values come home for prochoice people when they talk about the quality of life. By this term they mean a number of things. In part, they use this phrase as a short-hand way of indicating that they view life as having social as well as physical dimensions. The embryo, for example, is only a potential person to them in large part because it has not yet begun to have a social dimension to its life, only a physical one. As a consequence, a pregnant woman's rights, being both physical and social, transcend those of the life that is only developing. This view is rooted in their beliefs about reason: Biological life is of the body and is physical; humans share physical life with all other living beings, but reason is the gift of humans alone. Thus, social life, which exists only by virtue of the human capacity for reason, is the more valuable dimension for prochoice people. This explains in part why many prochoice activists find the question "when does life begin?" unfathomable. For them, it is obvious: Physical life began only once, most probably when the cosmic soup yielded its first complex amino acids—the forerunners of DNA. Social life begins at viability, when the fetus can live and form social relationships—outside of the womb.

Motherhood and Morality in America

As this overview of some of the most central values of prolife and prochoice activists makes clear, abortion pits two groups of women against one another. Fundamentally, it divides those women who live in and believe in a world of separate spheres from those who do not. Put another way, the abortion debate forces a confrontation between those women for whom traditional roles— that set of social relations we call patriarchy—still work and those women for whom such roles do not work.* What makes the abortion debate so passionate, therefore, is that these women have very deep vested interests in their chosen ways of life, and abortion has become both the marker and the symbol of their different interests. For example, the prolife women interviewed have always valued family roles, and have arranged their lives accordingly. At an early stage in life, they made the decision not to acquire high-level educational and occupational skills, but to get married instead. They got married because their values suggested that marriage would be the most satisfying life open to them. Similarly, prochoice women postponed (and in some cases avoided) marriage and family roles in order to achieve the skills they needed to be successful in the larger world, having concluded that the roles of wife and mother were too limited for them.

As a result of these early life decisions, women on each side have different investments in alternative views of the role of children and family and the related issues of contraception and sexuality. Prolife women, for example, have built their lives on the premise that reproduction is a resource, and they, therefore, resist all those cultural values—small families, contraception, abortion, nonfamily roles for women, day care—which diminish the value of children, or dilute the unique value of mothers. As perhaps the most interesting example, their commitment to periodic abstinence as a method of family planning, although it is based on very strongly held values, also serves to reinforce their marriages, and to stabilize their own power within marriage. When couples refrain from using "artificial" contraceptives, and it is up to the woman to decide when sex is possible, then sex becomes a scarce resource, and women hold the decision-making power, much as they did before the sexual revolution.

In the same way, prochoice women, having made commitments to the world outside of the home, have based their lives on the notion that pregnancy is a potential burden for women; they resist those values which suggest that motherhood is a natural, primary or inevitable role for a woman. Prochoice activists believe that men and women are equal because, in their own lives, men and women have substantially the same kinds of experiences. The prochoice women in this study have had approximately the same education as their husbands, and many of them have the same kinds of jobs—they are lawyers, college professors, physicians. Even those who do not work in traditionally male occupations have salaried jobs and thus share common experiences. They and their husbands share many social resources—status outside of the home, a paycheck, and peers and friends located in the work world rather than in the family world. In terms of family power, then, prochoice husbands and wives use the same bargaining chips and have roughly equal numbers of them.

Prochoice women, therefore, can afford to believe in a constellation of values around contraception, sexuality and abortion which, by sideling reproduction, diminish the differences between men and women; and they can afford to do this because they have other resources on which to build a marriage.

*"Work" may be ambiguous here. Prochoice women believe that prolife women are only "one man away from disaster." In a world of separate spheres, they note, the death, divorce or desertion of a spouse can plunge a displaced homemaker into sudden and dramatic poverty.

Volume 16, Number 3, May/June 1984

109
They believe the purpose of sex is intimacy; and since the daily lives of men and women on the prochoice side are substantially similar, intimacy in the bedroom is merely an extension of the intimacy that they enjoy in the larger world.

Thus, activists on each side of the issue are women who have a given set of values about what are the most satisfying and appropriate roles for women, and they have made life commitments that now limit their ability to change their minds. At the same time, the choices they have made lead them to believe that their own values are the most reasonable and appropriate ones for all women.

Perhaps one example will serve to make the point. A number of prolife women in this study emphatically reject an expression that prochoice women tend to use almost unthinkingly—the expression unanticipated pregnancy. Prolife women argue forcefully that a better term would be surprise pregnancy, asserting that although a pregnancy may be momentarily unwanted, the child that results from the pregnancy almost never is. Even such a simple thing—what to call an unanticipated pregnancy—calls into play an individual’s values and resources. As our profile of the average prolife person makes clear, a woman who is not employed, who does not have a college degree, whose religion is important to her, and who has already committed herself wholeheartedly to marriage and a large family is well equipped to believe that an unanticipated pregnancy usually becomes a beloved child. Her life is so arranged that for her, this belief is true. This view is consistent not only with her values, which she has held from earliest childhood, but with her social resources as well. It should not be surprising, therefore, that her world view leads her to believe that everyone else can “make room for one more” as easily as she can and that therefore abortion is cruel, wicked, and self-indulgent.

It is almost certainly the case that an unplanned pregnancy is never an easy thing for anyone. However, from our profile of the average prochoice woman, it is evident that a woman who is employed full-time, who has an affluent life-style that depends in part on her contribution to the family income, and who expects to give her child a life at least as advantaged, educationally, socially and economically, as her own, draws on a different reality that makes her skeptical about the ability of the average person to transform unwanted pregnancies into well-loved and well-cared-for children.

What this example makes clear is that activists’ beliefs about abortion are intimately tied to the realities of their lives. Since for prolife women, pregnancy is a resource, they are reluctant to see it devalued, either on the practical or on the symbolic level. Since for prochoice women, pregnancy is a burden, they are reluctant to see it emphasized. In consequence, anything that supports a traditional division of labor into male and female roles is, broadly speaking, in the interests of prolife women, because it is in that division that their resources lie. For them, to be “liberated” to compete with men would be a very real loss, because their lack of educational and occupational skills would doom such competition at the outset. Conversely, the traditional division of labor, when strictly enforced, is against the interests of prochoice women, because it limits their abilities to use the valuable “male” resources—education, labor-market experience—which they have in such abundance. Attitudes toward abortion, although rooted in childhood experiences, are also intimately related to present-day interests.

Thus, the two sides are fundamentally opposed to each other not only on the issue of abortion but also on what abortion means. Women who have many “human-capital” resources of the traditionally male variety want to see motherhood recognized as private and discretionary. Women who have few of these resources and limited opportunities in the job market want to see motherhood recognized as the most important thing a woman can do. For prochoice women to achieve their goals, they must argue that motherhood is not a primary, inevitable or natural role for women. For prolife women to achieve their goals, they must argue that it is. In short, the debate about abortion rests on the question of whether women’s fertility is to be socially recognized as an asset or as a burden. In a world where men and women have traditionally had different roles to play, and where male roles have traditionally been the more socially prestigious and financially rewarding, abortion has become a symbol distinguishing those who wish to maintain this ancient division of labor, and those who wish to challenge it.

For all these reasons, it is most likely that the abortion debate will remain heated, passionate and bitter. It will be heated because it calls into question individuals’ most cherished beliefs—those aspects of life held so dear that it cannot be imagined that all right-minded people do not agree with them. It will be passionate because women’s lives, as well as the life of the developing embryo or fetus, are at issue, and the activists involved have very deep vested interests. It will be bitter because, since the core issue is motherhood, a gain to one side is matched by a loss to the other. If society agrees that the life developing in a woman’s womb is a non-person, and that motherhood is something a woman must prepare for, then those who believe that motherhood is a natural role have been dealt a severe blow. Conversely, if a baby exists from the moment of conception, and women must subordinate other roles to that of mother, then women who value and have access to other roles will find them relatively devalued by virtue of the fact that they may have to put them aside without advance notice.

Perhaps the one sure conclusion about the abortion debate which one can draw from this research is that it is likely to be with us for some time to come.

References


