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Abortion: Silencing of Women's Experiences by Molly Stanton



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The abortion debate, most known for drastic use of the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice”, is visible throughout the media. Slogans tend to target those considering abortion in varying negative and positive manners. Laws and language play a large part in skewing and silencing women’s voices, decisions and experiences. Without capturing and understanding that women live very different lives, the abortion debate may remain silent of women’s voices. My research seeks to discover why women have abortions, how they are judged and by whom, and where their voices get lost.

INTRODUCTION

Abortion, in the United States at least, has a very controversial and usually negative connotation. Performing a quick internet search the on the terms pro-life or pro-choice will show dozens of statements, pictures, and billboards examining this debate. Not only is there much debate about abortion, there is recent talk of the potentially problematic nature of the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” As much of this debate focuses on the fetuses of women receiving abortions, women’s experiences and opinions are placed on the back burner. With one in three women receiving an abortion in their lifetime, and four in ten pregnancies ending in abortion women deserve to be given the opportunity to make their own choices about their bodies

(Guttmacher Institute, 2013). One can start to wonder, however, where their voices lie in this seemingly never-ending dispute. In 2005, Susan Hill stated that it is “frustrating to hear other people discussing the fetus but not discussing the women” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 30). This quote very much sums up my interest in the topic of abortion. I personally tend to define myself as pro-choice. While in college the past few years, I have realized more and more that everyone’s experiences are different. Because of that, I support women coming to their own conclusions about their bodies. Still, I feel that my own views and the views of others about abortion do not have strict boundaries. Through my research, I was relieved to discover that many other pro-choice supporters also hold the belief that “abortion should not be used as birth control” as stated by Senator Hilary Clinton back in 2005 (Ludlow, 2008b, p. 32). With this understanding in mind, my research seeks to discover why women have abortions, how they are judged and by whom, and where their voices get lost.

The Abortion “Debate” and Slogans

The idea of abortion as a debate is, in itself, problematic. As one side usually argues for the choices of women/family

and access to adequate sexual health education, the other argues for the life of unborn children. This debate has strengthened the already wide disconnect in thoughts on abortion between groups of people, and has led some away from learning more about abortion in general. However, examining the two sides of this debate reveals that certain topics within abortion are ignored, such as late-in-pregnancy abortion, women who grieve the loss of their fetuses, and mothers who have abortions (Ludlow, 2008a). The feelings of women who experience these instances are often overlooked, for they are sometimes shamed or otherwise questioned for their decisions. Therefore, it is all the more important to examine the experience of every woman who has received an abortion.

Within the current discussion on abortion, typically “we are forced to choose between pregnant women and their potential babies” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 31). The absence of women’s voices in the decision to choose abortion is troubling on many levels. Working towards looking at the fetus and its place in a woman’s abortion, rather than iconizing it, is important for shifting this debate. Slogans aimed towards the pro-life belief have played a

negative role on trying to open up this discourse as well (Ludlow). These slogans, which range widely from “women need love, not abortion” on the pro-life side to “someone you know needs a choice” on the pro-choice side, are another area I am highly interested in, for they capture the extreme differences in opinion on abortion. Because these sides are so drastically opposed, there is a certain middle ground that is often overlooked for those whose opinions do not fit anywhere in the existing conversations.

Pro-life/anti-abortion slogans and advertising tend to focus on the fetus and its “right to life.” Using images of fetuses in these ads proved more popular after the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, a landmark case that found that abortion should be a fundamental right. Utilizing images of aborted fetuses strikes an inner chord with anyone who sees it, since we highly value children in our society. A lot of pressure also falls on mothers, but much like within abortion politics, voices of young and poor mothers or mothers of color, compared to their white, middle class counterparts, are lacking (Ludlow, 2008a). You see the hit on potential mothers occurring frequently in anti-abortion slogans such as “Smile, your mom chose life!” and “Abortion kills

children.” These slogans, which appear on bumper stickers, picket lines, or anything in between, scream at all those individuals who are already mothers, or those women who cannot fathom anyone terminating a pregnancy. While anti-abortion slogans and images are drastic and certainly shocking, they ignore those voices of women facing an unwanted pregnancy or contending with post abortion emotions. An interesting spin on slogans comes when pro-choice phrases also start to be problematic. Ludlow (2008a) uses the example of “My body, my choice” which implies understanding of women’s feelings. Some would argue, however, that this particular phrase begins to abolish any existence of a fetus at all. Assigning “personhood” to fetuses has emerged as an increasingly controversial abortion issue, especially when images of dead women (due to abortion) started to surface in part to combat dead fetuses versus dead women. How this helps an already complicated and complex reproductive circumstance is unclear, in my view, but both pro-life and choice images are honestly unforgettable, even if for all the wrong reasons.

Planned Parenthood, an organization that has long associated itself with pro-choice arguments, is now

stating that identifying as pro-choice may not fully explain what their views on reproductive freedom truly mean. Cecile Richards, Planned Parenthood president, stated that the trouble here is that the “labels have become irrelevant” (Pollitt, 2013, para 2). The organization argues that the word choice does not account for gray areas of a woman’s life, nor does claiming the pro-choice platform account for the different circumstances women find themselves in throughout their lives. “Not In Her Shoes” is a new slogan Planned Parenthood is developing to emphasize that every woman chooses reproduction differently depending on what has or will happen in her life (Pollitt, 2013). This slogan also stresses the need to keep abortion safe and legal if a woman chooses this option. It is very imperative, therefore, that labels associated with the abortion debate be looked at through a wider eye, and the “Not in her Shoes” campaign is one attempt at clearing up the pro-choice versus pro-life language divide.

Laws and Language

Laws also play a large role in women’s access to abortion. Policies and laws tend to imply that a woman should not make a decision about her body while simply thinking about her own self. The

Partial-Birth Abortion Ban, put into place in 2003, prohibits late-term abortions in some states. This type of abortion was apparently banned not because it was unsafe, but because it was disliked and “deemed by politicians to be disturbing” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 32). This law also banned a form of abortion that is called Intact Dilation and Evacuation (D&X for short: a process where dilation is used to remove contents of the uterus). Unfortunately, these laws mostly affect those women who are young and living in poverty, since access to reproductive healthcare is potentially limited. Ludlow (2008a) points out that this law, therefore, largely affects their most vulnerable group of women. Pro-life activists will sometimes argue that “abortion hurts women” but as one woman claimed, “illegal abortion hurts women, and I am living proof of that” (Lane, 2005). As legal issues grow and laws tighten around abortion, access to safe and legal abortion is becoming even more of a problem with a decrease in doctors trained or willing to give abortion procedures (Ludlow, 2008a). Language on the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban similarly tends to downplay the role of the pregnant women in the abortion process. For example, in the ban, the woman receiving the abortion

is referenced to as “the body of the mother” (qtd.in Ludlow, p. 33) which silences her role as a woman and person in general. Referring to the woman as a body and not a woman becomes very problematic. Language of this sort does nothing to help the women whose experiences and voices continue to be silenced before, during, and after their abortions. The use of this language in the ban supports anti-abortion ideals by removing the personality of the woman and focusing mainly on the life of the fetus.

As of May 2013, thirty-eight states in the U.S. require parental involvement in a minor’s abortion decision (Guttmacher Institute, 2013). These parental consent laws can become damaging, even though formed with good intent to keep younger abortion patients safe and healthy. William Bell is a father from Indiana whose daughter died from the effects of an illegal abortion and requirement of parental consent (Connecticut State Legislature). Bell wishes that his daughter had felt comfortable enough to tell him about her unwanted pregnancy, as it could have saved her life, but he recognizes that this is not always realistic, and thus, argues for states to abolish parental consent. Bell claims that parental consent laws for abortion are punishing

and restrictive, often denying women “safe and reasonable options” (Connecticut State Legislature, 2003). He is not alone in his loss either: it is assumed that over two hundred thousand women die from unsafe abortion procedures every year, and this number could be much higher due to underreporting (Maguire, 2001). Still, a young women’s decision not to involve her parents in her pregnancy is usually well intended: she wants to maintain a good relationship or fears being kicked out of her home (Flavin, 2009). The need to provide women with safe and legal abortions is, then, not only smart, but potentially lifesaving.

Abortion Experiences

Dr. Jeannie Ludlow, an Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of Women's Studies at Eastern Illinois University, worked in and researches abortion clinics. She reports women’s reasons before they get abortions, and shows that even though not required, many women recount their statements during the actual procedure. Having heard many reasons why women have chosen abortion while assisting with around seven hundred abortions, Ludlow (2008b) points out that many struggles women have surrounding bearing children are seemingly ordinary

reasons. These include finances, balancing work and children, setting priorities, and making plans for the future. Avoiding assumptions about women who receive abortions is then very important. Realizing that women seeking abortions are not always single and young, and have other financial responsibilities, may perhaps dispel myths and help others to understand, at least in part, reasons for seeking an abortion.

Ludlow (2008a) recommends that in order to steer away from simplistic ways of fixing what is known as the abortion problem, people in general must gain a more complex understanding of abortion experiences. Women, like everyone else, have morals and feelings about abortion, and sometimes even women who choose abortion have ethical issues with the procedure. The morality of abortion comes, in part, because the human fetus is unique and therefore requires extra consideration (Vilar, 2009). Respecting that a woman's life is far more developed than the life of her unborn fetus (Lane, 2005) acknowledges the right to choose but also the potential to "feel sad or ambivalent about making that choice" (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 30). Stressing that abortion does not erase emotion is crucial to ensuring those

women's voices are not lost when talking about an abortion decisions and experiences.

Part of the silence surrounding discussion of abortion may have to do with women's unwillingness to talk about fetuses at all. Since pro-life individuals focus on the fetus, pro-choice persons and women receiving abortions may simply want to steer clear of causing more trouble. Perhaps the awkwardness surrounding discussion of abortion has something to do with lack of acknowledging the point of an abortion in the first place. For example, an abortion clinic director was quoted as stating,

Yes, it's a baby and yes, it is killed. I want to talk about all the reasons why so many women choose to have abortions even though they know this and why it is important that women are allowed to make that choice (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 42).

This provocative yet direct statement gets across the need to address women's reasoning for abortions and how the many factors in their lives played a role in their decisions.

Silence, Myths and Potential Reasons for Abortion

In an effort to explore what types of women have abortions and why, Penny Lane created her 2005 documentary *The*

Abortion Diaries. One of the opening statements on the screen sets the mood for the whole dialogue of the movie: if it is so common, why is it such a secret? The silence focused around abortion often made the women in the movie feel isolated, not even knowing that some of their closest friends and family members have had an abortion at some point in their lives. One woman claimed that the social stigma surrounding abortion was so extensive that “the only women speaking about their abortions were the ones who joined the anti-abortion movement” (Lane). The same woman also felt judged on both “sides” of the abortion debate, making her feel all the more isolated. The most remarkable aspect of this movie is the range in characteristics of the women: a large variety of ages, races, and classes, and all different reasons for receiving an abortion.

A frequent myth of women who choose abortion (or even women who get pregnant accidentally) is that they did not have proper knowledge on contraception and safe sex. In reality, about ninety percent of couples use birth control, though not always correctly or consistently (Vilar, 2009). Also, a large number of repeat abortions happen in populations with high contraceptive use. This

unfortunately leads to a lot of “slut-shaming” for women seeking abortion. For example, after confiding in a loved one that she was pregnant, one woman said she was told “that’s what you get when you open your legs” (Lane). It is crucial that society starts to view women seeking abortion not as sluts or ignorant, but as women who need all the help they can in order to make informed decisions, whether that decision includes abortion or not.

Many believe that most women seeking abortion are unmarried and young, but sixty-one percent of women who have abortions already have one or more children (Guttmacher Institute, 2013). In addition, even though some of these women consider adoption, they claim that the adoption process is too emotionally disturbing. Most mothers seeking abortion feel that their present responsibilities for taking care of their children play a large role in their abortion decision. Finances also play a role, as one in five women of reproductive age lacks health insurance (Jones, Frohwirth & Moore, 2008). Without proper and stable insurance and other resources, as well as access to further child care, mothers may feel that it is best to have an abortion rather than risk not providing her children with the best care available (Jones et al). It seems

that mothers who have abortions are rarely talked about, and with the number of these women being so high, it is even more puzzling to consider that not all women's voices are present in the abortion discussion.

There are numerous other reasons that a woman may receive an abortion, including reasons that cannot be seen on the surface. Unlike the popular myth that women use abortion as birth control or to correct other mistakes, rarely do women "take the decision lightly" (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 30). This myth encompasses the belief that pregnant women seeking abortion could not possibly have any feelings towards their fetus. Also important to note is that many qualitative studies on women who have received abortions have found that the decision is very situational (Jones et al). Breaking down the stereotype that the decision to have an abortion is a fast, easy process is central in allowing individuals to understand that abortion is more than just a physical experience. It is often a very difficult, emotional, long and draining process, and depends on the individual life of the women involved. Importantly, advocating for reproductive choice does not remove the tensions and internal struggles that come with an abortion decision.

Late stage abortions add to the abortion controversy. The stage of pregnancy during which a woman receives an abortion and the reasoning for waiting that period of time to seek an abortion plays another large role in the abortion debate. Ludlow (2008a) again uses her assistance in abortion procedures to conclude that the top reasons for later abortions are women not knowing they are pregnant, difficulty in arranging the procedure (including financial struggles), fear of telling family/partner of the pregnancy, and needing more time to think their decision over. With many pro-life supporters believing that the closer a woman gets to full term, the more an abortion may be considered killing a child, it becomes very important to educate individuals on these reasons, and stressing that that not all decisions are straight forward.

Among the explanations of why women may choose abortion, social stigma implies that certain reasons are more normalized than the others. As an example, one might seek an abortion after a rape with more ease of conscience, as opposed to getting an abortion due to failure to use birth control. However, stories from abortion clinics and the people that staff them show that the most occurring reasons

for abortions are often the “the things [they] cannot say” (p. 32) and are typically not the ones everyone else on the outside asks about (Ludlow, 2008b). Those who are not familiar with abortion and the many circumstances under which women choose this option therefore have a hard time understanding the range of experiences, simply because they may not be shocking enough. Ludlow argues that women seeking abortions should therefore talk about their abortion experiences and relationship to their fetuses. This might would allow for a more frequent and less sensationalized abortion conversation.

Availability and Fear

Life aspects such as class and location impact a women’s decision about a pregnancy. The availability of local resources also has a constant effect on decisions to have abortions. For instance, eighty-seven percent of United States counties have no abortion provider and one in ten women have to travel more than one-hundred miles to receive their abortion (Flavin, 2009). Lack of finances causes a large number of women to struggle to make a decision about their pregnancy. The areas in which they reside often do not help much either: only seventeen states

provide financial help for poor women seeking abortion (Lane, 2005). Rachel Roth, the author of *Making Women Pay*, states that poor women in particular are automatically assumed as caregivers of children and when the resources to do so are not available to them, they are blamed for not providing adequate enough care (Flavin, 2009). Reproductive freedom is not only about choosing abortion, it is about being free to raise a family under healthy and supportive circumstances. Resources may not prove very useful to women, then, unless they become more visible and common, and ideas about how this can happen must be present in the abortion discussion.

Women’s choices about their bodies and whether or not to continue a pregnancy depend largely on their own abilities to take care of a child or not. This is where some women’s voices start to be silenced. One woman in *The Abortion Diaries* was told about a dream from her partner in which he saw a naked child leave her body and enter into the woods. He believed it to be a sign that she had to keep the child. Another woman honestly stated that she “couldn’t raise the child if [he] decided to leave. Everything I had worked for up until that point would have been gone” (Lane, 2005). Whether

due to financial or physical stress, or their partner's perspective, women attempt to make the best decisions about abortion that they could make for that time in their life, in order to help themselves in the future.

Some women fear choosing abortion for the worry that they will never have another child. They are afraid of not finding another partner, not being physically able to get pregnant again, or perhaps contemplate and grieve what their lives would have been like if they had kept the child. Because of the expectation in our society that you have to bear children in order to be a fulfilled woman, this is a large area where women's voices are silenced. People often do not take the time to understand the immense pain and suffering women often go through when making their decision. Just the fact that not everyone supports choosing abortion made one women believe that "a lot of people thought [she] was a murderer" (Lane, 2005). Since one of the most common reasons for women having abortions is the timing not being right, recognizing that not all people desire to have children or want them during a certain time will aid in helping to ease the fright of these women (Jones et al, 2008).

Fear of telling someone about their abortion, especially the partner that they conceived the fetus with, is another large barrier to open and honest communication. Many unmarried heterosexual women find themselves fearing that their partners would leave them when they stated that they were pregnant (Vilar, 2009). This is very scary for someone to experience, and can also lead to women never wanting to take a pregnancy test in the first place. Young single women who have conceived outside the context of a relationship also have fears. They may question who will be there to support them, and one of the most common reasons for women receiving abortions is fear of being a single mother (Jones, Frohwirth & Moore, 2008). Ultimately, availability, or lack thereof, and financial and emotional help from a sexual partner can alter a women's decision.

Conclusions: Abortion as a Comprehensive Discussion

Understanding abortion and sex elsewhere in the world is necessary to further acknowledge the silencing of women's voices through abortion. Sex education is often non-existent or incorrect not only in parts of the United States, but all over the globe. Maguire

(2001) points out that contraception remains unavailable for women all over the world. Social class and its link to poverty cross national borders and leads to many unplanned and sometimes dangerous pregnancies. Making contraceptives more readily available and promoting sex education could be the most effective way to cut back on unsafe abortions. Maguire claims that labeling abortion as shameful and illegal is actually anti-woman and not just pro-life. This statement truly captures the need to open the discourse on abortion and make it safe and available to all those who need it in an effort to save lives.

Asoka Bandarage, a religious scholar, offers some advice on women's abortion anywhere in the world. She suggests that support systems for women, including those receiving abortion and other sexual health care, should exist to help women come to

their own decisions, instead of attempting to punish them on their difficult journeys. She goes on to note that the decision to abort should not be made by the government or a law, but should occur because the woman decided it to (Maguire). This goes to show how abortion and its debate have created plenty of controversy over the past few decades. As women's voices persist being absent from abortion discussions, media and organizations will continue to utilize pro-life/pro-choice slogans. These slogans rarely address the vast differences in the experiences of women, and what life and personal events led up to their abortions, nor can they describe how truly emotionally impacting abortion can be. Without capturing and understanding that women live very different lives, the abortion debate may remain silent of women's voices.

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