

Abortion

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There's a debate raging in our nation about something I consider to be undebatable. What the debate really boils down to is who owns women's bodies. Do women own their bodies and their uteruses--or are they government property? Is a woman's body her own or is it owned by her husband? Is a woman's body her own or the Catholic Church hierarchy's? Is it she, the woman who gets to decide something as intensely personal as whether or not to continue a pregnancy or do politicians get to make the decision?

All major health-care organizations in the U.S. support legal abortion. These include the: American Medical Association, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychiatric Association. Abortion is far safer than childbirth and has drastically reduced the maternal mortality rate.

Despite anti-abortion claims to the contrary most abortions occur very early in pregnancy, months before viability. In Pennsylvania 93.6 percent occur in the first trimester when the embryo weighs less than an ounce. Less than 1 percent occur in the last trimester.

Over 825,000 women have had safe legal abortions in our state. Many don't remember the days when the word "choice" meant compulsory pregnancy or risky illegal abortion. Unless Pennsylvanians make their voices heard a woman's most personal decision will be dictated by politicians.

Our State Legislature has 253 members, 236 of whom are men. In essence the decisions about women's lives will be made by a group of male politicians who will never experience pregnancy, childbirth or the anxiety of a late or missed menstrual cycle.

Since many women have men in their lives who love and respect them, it's hard to imagine that there are men who would sacrifice women's lives purportedly so that a fertilized egg might continue to develop. The reality is, however, that most Pennsylvania legislators couldn't care less about the abortion issue nor do they have obsessive concern for the fertilized egg, embryo or fetus. Most legislators vote anti-abortion because they lack the back bone to stand up to "operation rescue" type fanatics or the pressures of a particular religious group.

Others such as Rep. Stephen Freind who last year erroneously stated that it was impossible for women to become pregnant due to rape because in the stress of the rape a woman "secretes a certain secretion which tends to kill the sperm" and who stated during debate on a spousal rape bill that "I don't rape my wife, I pay her each time" can only be described as bullies hostile to women's interests.

Every advocacy organization for women in the state supports keeping abortion safe and legal. They also support contraceptive use and sex education in schools so that unwanted pregnancies will be prevented. Ironically, many opposed to abortion do not. Freind has bill (H.B. 1630) with 86 sponsors that would make sex education difficult and costly for schools to offer. It would also prevent eliciting information concerning "mental and psychological problems that are potentially embarrassing to the student or his family"--a category child molestation, abuse and incest usually fall into.

The fact is Freind doesn't care if women are impregnated by rape or incest. He doesn't care if they are too old or too young to give birth. He doesn't care if they can't emotionally or financially support a child. He doesn't care if they have cancer or some other catastrophic disease. The fact is he just doesn't care about women's lives, and those who vote with him don't care.

Votes against legal abortion demand that women cease the use of their brains, ignore their health, their responsibilities and financial and emotional status to bear children regardless of the circumstances in their lives. Such votes force women to mimic the behavior of animals who bear young whether or not conditions are favorable.

There is no law in our nation that compels a person to give blood or a body organ to sustain the life of another. Yet extremists would use the law to compel a woman to sustain the life of a fertilized egg. Controlling and dominating women is the real issue at hand. It isn't respect for life that would force a woman to sustain a pregnancy--it's mysogyny. It's impossible to purport true concern for the fertilized egg while callously

ignoring the life of the woman who carries it.

Freind appears to view women as nothing more than receptacles for men's sperm and incubators to any pregnancy that results from a sexual union, including those caused by rape and incest. One section of Freind's newest Abortion Control Act is designed to "protect a father's right to procreate within marriage"--a phrase that is in direct conflict with the law that makes spousal rape a crime.

Those opposed to women's autonomy yell to women entering clinics "don't murder your baby," "adoption not abortion." Yet when miscarriages occur early in pregnancy society doesn't treat the miscarried remains as person. There typically are no death certificates issued, no burial, no church service and no funeral home visitations for an embryo or fetus.

This nation has 36,000 children available for adoption. When Freind was asked by Delaware County NOW to put his money where his mouth is he responded that he was doing his very best to "adequately support" his six children and that his anti-abortion stance in no way "obligates" him to "adopt one."

What would happen if Freind and others who vote against legal abortion were compelled to adopt by a law that provided no exceptions. It would not matter if legislators were struggling to adequately care for the children they already have, suffered from a debilitation or catastrophic disease, preferred to remain childless, were unmarried, too old, too young, ill-equipped for parenthood, ready to retire, had an alcohol or drug problem, lacked funds for the food, housing and clothing necessary to raise a child.

Perhaps, debating the merits of such a law would force legislators to realize that parenthood is much too serious a commitment and obligation to force on any unwilling person be it a state legislator or a woman faced with an unwanted pregnancy. As a parent of three, a former foster parent and childcare provider I believe children should be wanted and loved and that there should be strong commitment to seeing that a child's needs are met. It's usually tragic for everyone when these elements are missing.

Legislators who vote against legal abortion must be told that they are at odds with mainstream opinion on the issue. As passionately as I and other leaders in the women's movement feel about women's lives we cannot win this fight alone. We need everyone who cares about women's lives and the lives of our daughters to speak up and to contact their state legislators and tell them that a vote to keep abortion safe, legal and accessible is a vote that saves women's lives. Freind had indicated that he will pass his restrictive abortion law by October 23rd, so everyone who cares about women's lives needs to speak up now, before it's too late.

Editor's note: The Capital Times neither endorses nor opposes the above commentary. If one of our readers has an opposing viewpoint, we will be happy to provide space for a commentary. And, as always, we welcome letters to the editor.

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