

## **How Abortion Hurts Women: The Hard Proof**

**By Erika Bachiochi** ~ *Crisis* magazine, June 2005

Over the last three decades, the abortion debate has been characterized as the clashing of rights: the human rights of the unborn on the one hand and the reproductive rights of women on the other. This decades-long rhetorical deadlock has left a good number of Americans—the great majority of whom understand that an individual human life is taken in each abortion—personally opposed, yet unwilling to “impose their beliefs” on anyone else.

The popularity of this so-called pro-choice position is due, in large measure, to the success abortion advocates have had in convincing Americans that abortion is a necessary precondition to women’s well-being and equality. If you want to stand for women’s progress, the line goes, then you have to stand for abortion. Indeed, in our current cultural milieu, to oppose abortion is to risk being called anti-woman—and few, regardless of their sense of the moral wrongness of abortion, can withstand that accusation. “Personally opposed, but can’t impose” seems to many the only pro-woman option.

I once numbered myself among the ranks of “personally opposed” pro-choicers, though I must admit to being more “pro-choice” than “personally opposed.” I penned the following words during my junior year at Middlebury College while one of the leaders of our women’s center: “The state’s suppression of a woman’s right to choose [was] simply a perpetuation of the patriarchal nature of our society.... To free women from [the] gender hierarchy, women must have a right to do what they please with their bodies.”

The story of how I came to change my mind about abortion is rather lengthy, complicated by elements that are philosophical, religious, moral, psychological, and political. Suffice it to say, my unwavering support for abortion was based on my status as a feminist. Thus, central to my eventual opposition to abortion was the dual realization that abortion both harms women’s well-being and that it is antithetical to a genuine feminism—one that recognizes and celebrates the uniqueness of women as women.

In order to persuade the “personally opposed” pro-chooser like me, then, we must address this 1970s feminist fallacy that abortion is necessary for women’s sexual equality and well-being. In point of fact, medical evidence, sociological data, and the lived experience of many women tell a very different story: Abortion harms women physically, psychologically, relationally, and culturally.

Here’s the proof.

### **Destroying Women’s Health**

Women who have had abortions suffer an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and suicide. A study published in a recent edition of the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* found that women who aborted their unintended pregnancies were 30 percent more likely to subsequently report all the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder than those women who had carried their unintended pregnancies to term. A study of a state-funded medical insurance program in California published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* in 2002 showed that the rate of mental health claims for women who aborted was 17 percent higher than those who had carried their children to term. And, according to a 1996 article in the *British Medical Journal* and a 2002 article in the *Southern Medical Journal*, the risk of death from suicide is two to six times higher for women who have had abortions when compared, again, with women who

have given birth.

Several studies analyzed in a landmark 2003 article in the *Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey* show that induced abortion also increases the risk of placenta previa by 50 percent and doubles the risk of pre-term birth in later pregnancies. Placenta previa—where the placenta implants at the bottom of the uterus and covers the cervix—places the lives of both mother and child at risk in that later pregnancy. Pre-term birth is associated with low birth-weight babies, and very low birth-weight babies (those born between 20 and 27 weeks) have 38 times the risk of having cerebral palsy—not to mention medical costs 28 times greater—than full-term babies. According to Dr. Byron Calhoun, director of the Antenatal Diagnostic Center at Rockford Memorial Hospital in Illinois, approximately 30 percent of pre-term births—which now account for 6 percent of all births—are attributable to prior abortions.

But that's just the beginning. The link between abortion and breast cancer has attracted much media attention. It is important to understand that there are two different mechanisms by which abortion can increase the risk of breast cancer—one is beyond dispute, the other hotly contested. It is now common medical knowledge that a full-term pregnancy, especially before the age of 32, acts as a protective mechanism against breast cancer. Thus, research shows that teenagers with a family history of breast cancer who have abortions before their 18th birthday have an incalculably high risk of developing breast cancer. Indeed, an abortion clinic in Portland, Oregon, recently settled a lawsuit with a 19-year-old woman who claimed the clinic had failed to inform her of this link between abortion and breast cancer—especially since she'd indicated a family history of breast cancer on her intake form. Approximately one-fifth of women procuring abortions are teenagers, and half are younger than 25 years old. The risk of breast cancer is high for those young women who are delaying their first full-term pregnancy through abortion, yet such women are rarely informed of this indisputable link.

The more hotly contested link—though one supported by numerous epidemiological studies and breast physiology—is that abortion itself can cause breast cancer. Through abortion, a woman artificially terminates her pregnancy at a time when her breast cells have been exposed to high levels of potentially cancer-initiating estrogen but before those cells have matured into cancer-resistant cells (as they ultimately do in a full-term pregnancy). According to breast surgeon Dr. Angela Lanfranchi, "The same biology that accounts for 90 percent of all risk factors for breast cancer accounts for the abortion–breast cancer link."

Astonishingly, many states do not require that abortion-related complications be reported to their health departments. Nevertheless, a review of available data reveals that thousands of women are injured each year from short-term complications such as hemorrhaging, uterine perforation, and infection. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) approximates that one woman in 100,000 dies from complications associated with first-trimester abortions. A 1997 study reported in *Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey*, however, found maternal deaths from abortion to be grossly underreported to the CDC—probably because such reporting is entirely voluntary.

Further, a 1994 article in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* revealed that abortions performed at more than 16 weeks' gestation have 15 times the risk of maternal mortality as those performed during the first trimester. The same study also showed that black women and other minorities—who have a disproportionate number of abortions when compared with white women—are also 2.5 times more likely than white women to die of an abortion.

Finally, due to the FDA's rush to get RU-486, the so-called abortion pill, onto the market quickly, three American women have already died, and scores of others have suffered serious

drug-related complications.

When Planned Parenthood estimates that 43 percent of women will have abortions before they turn 45 years old, and with more than a million abortions performed each year, these collected data reveal a serious women's health issue that must be addressed. Yet all too often, the evidence is simply denied or ignored.

### **Is Legal Abortion 'Rare and Safe'?**

One of the common arguments used in the run-up to *Roe v. Wade* was the claim that legal abortion would be safer than the "back alley" abortions that—advocates alleged—killed 5,000 to 10,000 women each year. As many now know, one of the two men leading the change, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, OB-GYN and co-founder of NARAL Pro-Choice America, later recanted the claim, admitting that he and other pro-abortion activists simply fabricated the figure to further the cause of abortion rights.

This is not, of course, to say that illegal abortions were safe; though the actual data are nowhere close to the 10,000 claimed, at least 39 women died from illegal abortions in 1972. But an additional 24 women died that year from legal abortions in states that had weakened their laws in the years before *Roe* came down. As the medical data above reveal, more than three decades of legal abortion have not made the procedure much safer—women are still dying or suffering serious harm. Even Warren Hern, noted abortionist and author of *Abortion Practice*, a leading medical textbook, writes, "[T]here are few surgical procedures given so little attention and so underrated in its potential hazard as abortion."

Another consistent argument one hears in defense of the abortion license is that the government should never come between a woman and her doctor. Indeed, the Court in *Roe* considered this relationship paramount. Until viability, the *Roe* Court said, "the abortion in all its aspects is inherently, and primarily, a medical decision, and basic responsibility for it must rest with the physician." Yet only about 2 percent of women having abortions do so for health reasons, and studies have shown that two-thirds of obstetricians and gynecologists—especially female doctors and those under 40—refuse to perform abortions at all. The vast majority of women who have abortions, then, are not contemplating a medical decision in the care and counsel of their personal physician. Instead, most women receive little or no pre-op counseling about the nature of, risks of, and alternatives to the procedure. They meet the abortionist just minutes before he operates on them and are unlikely ever to see him again.

### **Abortion's Second Victim**

It's no wonder that 81 percent of women surveyed in a 1992 study reported in the *Journal of Social Issues* said they felt victimized by the abortion process, and that they were either coerced into the abortion or that information about alternatives or the actual procedure had been withheld.

Though informed consent requirements are constitutional under *Roe*, Women's Right to Know laws that provide women with information regarding the nature, risks, and alternatives to abortion are in effect in only 22 states (with six other states' laws held up in litigation). According to the U.S. Supreme Court in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "In attempting to ensure that a woman apprehends the full consequences of her decision, the State furthers the legitimate purpose of reducing the risk that a woman may elect an abortion, only to discover later, with devastating psychological consequences, that her decision was not fully informed." Not surprisingly, abortion advocates view neither the *Casey* decision nor the passage of

informed consent laws as a step toward a more informed choice; instead, they're characterized, in court battle after court battle, as an encroachment upon the rights secured in Roe.

While some men lament the choices of their wives or girlfriends (husbands and boyfriends, after all, have no legal rights in the abortion decision), other men serve as the catalysts behind such choices. Nearly 40 percent of post-abortive women in one study reported that partners pressured them into having the abortions. Indeed, in her study of the data, Emory University professor Elizabeth Fox-Genovese reports that "the most enthusiastic fans of abortion have been men—at least until they have children of their own."

So while "pro-choice" feminists hail abortion as the symbol of women's sexual freedom and equality, the ordinary young woman may find no such liberation when she has sex with her date, thinking, as women are prone to do, that sex will bind the two emotionally. Instead, when he doesn't share the depth of her feelings and then hands her \$400 for the abortion when she becomes pregnant, it's not only her heart that's broken. She alone has to live with the possible short-term and long-term medical consequences of the abortion for the rest of her life. For many women, "reproductive freedom" has meant that women continue to negotiate all that comes with reproduction while men enjoy the freedom of sex without consequences.

The victimization felt by such a large majority of women who undergo abortions, though not appreciated or even recognized by today's "pro-choice" feminist, was acutely foreseen by an earlier generation of feminists. America's pioneering feminists, who fought for the right to vote and fair treatment in the workplace, were uniformly against abortion because they recognized it as an attack on women as women—those uniquely endowed with the ability to bear children. While these pioneering feminists endured the painstaking fight to change male-dominated political and economic institutions, the "pro-choice" feminists of the 1970s and today instead sought to change the very nature of women, convincing many of them that, if they're to be equal to men, they must simply become like men.

### **Relying on Abortion**

The importance American culture has placed on abortion as an equalizer of the sexes was the central reasoning the Supreme Court used to uphold Roe in its 1992 Casey decision: "For two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail." The Court went on to say that "the capacity of women to act in society" was based largely on the availability of abortion.

In other words, we've gotten used to not having to change much in our market-driven society to allow women to enter our colleges and workplaces on an equal footing with men. We're not interested in ensuring women the capacity to act in society—to have a place in society—if they aren't aping men. We can't afford to do the much more difficult work of creating environments that welcome women who have children—which, of course, is the great majority of women. Instead, we'll just continue to tell women what Roe told them a generation before. You choose: your baby or yourself, your baby or your future, your baby or your success; this is a man's world, and you better become like a man—that is, not pregnant—if you want to succeed.

It's no surprise that more than 30 years after the second wave—the abortion wave—of the women's movement, studies show that women are still perplexed about how to combine career and family. Abortion usurped a pioneering feminism that sought to influence society to recognize the distinct dignity of women. In so doing, it forestalled solutions to the question of

how women could fulfill their unique role as mothers while participating in the wider society. Increasingly, young women are addressing the problem in their own countercultural way: Highly educated women are passing up the career track during child-bearing and child-raising years while leaving their options open to reenter the professional world later in life.

Today, more women are challenging the pro-abortion feminist idea that their children are a burden to success and equality. Ordinary women want to be honored as women—not to have to sacrifice their children for equality with men. Women are beginning to realize that they'd been sold on the idea that a mother is of far less value than a fully engaged professional person. During an era in which motherhood was revered much more than it is today, President Theodore Roosevelt said: "[The mother] is the most indispensable component part of society." The work of men, he said, is not "as hard or as responsible as the work of a woman who is bringing up a family of small children.... I think the duty of the woman the more important, the more difficult, and the more honorable of the two."

In the professional world, a woman often feels expendable—that many other people could perform her job just as well—but no one can equal a mother in the care and education she provides to her children. Sadly, a feminism that puts the fight for abortion at the center of its crusade has convinced many women that their social status and power are more valuable than the very lives of their children and the influence they have in the world through their work as mothers.

Some social scientists have argued that such a feminism, having driven unprecedented numbers of mothers with small children into the work force full-time over the last few decades, is largely to blame for the difficulty most single mothers today have at making ends meet. After all, the financial power of the dual-income family—the norm today—has driven up the price of life's necessities. While two-parent families with a single income struggle and sacrifice to allow one parent to remain at home with young children, single mothers—responsible for both bread-winning and child-rearing—are faced with an almost insurmountable financial obstacle.

What is the abortion lobby's answer to the "feminization of poverty" they themselves have helped create? Ready access to government-funded abortion. And "pro-choice" feminists don't limit their claim to represent poor women to our shores; they believe that all of the world's poverty-stricken women deserve ready access to free abortions.

It was precisely this elitist element of the abortion movement that first jolted me to rethink the "pro-choice" position I held in my early college years. I'd been studying in Washington, D.C., during a semester of my junior year and interning with a small think tank that helped state legislatures in their efforts to reform welfare. As I became immersed in the problems of the poor—especially poor women—I grew disgusted with the argument put forth by abortion advocates that the availability of abortion would lift women out of poverty. The thought that we, as a wealthy nation, would claim to solve the problems of the poor by helping them rid themselves of their own children haunted me.

Many who hold the "pro-choice" position do so because they think abortion provides a means to manage the burden the poor place on the rest of the society. Justice Blackmun, author of the Supreme Court's opinion in *Roe*, epitomized this tragic view in a later case in which he dissented from the majority's refusal to require taxpayers to fund abortions (*Beal v. Doe*). Blackmun said that the cost of elective abortion "is far less than the cost of maternity care and delivery" as well as "the welfare costs that will burden the state for the new indigents and their support in the long, long years ahead...." And so, he went on to say, without taxpayer funding of abortion for the poor, "the cancer of poverty will grow."

## The Road Ahead

America's reliance on abortion has relieved our culture of the costs associated with creating environments truly hospitable to women and their children. If a nation as rich as ours were truly committed to women's well-being and equality, we would look for real solutions to the underlying causes of abortion—including the serious challenge women face of balancing work or school and family, the disrespect for motherhood, the feminization of poverty, and society's eugenic distaste for the imperfection and vulnerability of the disabled.

This moment in history marks a time of great political and cultural opportunity when, 32 years after the passage of *Roe v. Wade*, the administration, Congress, and much of the nation seem to be ready to find another way. While the mainstream media persist in confusing the public about its own views on abortion, polls show the tide is turning. A good 75 percent to 80 percent of Americans disagree with the reasons that underlie 95 percent of all abortions. Only about a fifth of Americans believe that the status quo should be maintained, that abortion should be permitted at any time during the pregnancy, for any reason.

Women can rise to the challenge of an unintentional or even abnormal pregnancy—if they have the emotional, financial, and professional support they need. Carrying and giving birth to an unplanned child will take self-sacrifice. There's no denying that. But women who have aborted—and those who have merely lived during this long era of abortion—have sacrificed far more.

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