



Over the past few years, many pro-choice activists, myself included, have become increasingly frustrated with how the abortion issue is depicted in the mainstream.

Admittedly, the mainstream media does cover the abortion issue, especially during election time. The problem, rather, is with how abortion is talked about. Take, for example, the past presidential race. In each debate, Al Gore expressed his pro-choice position, stating simply: "It's her body, it's her choice." On the one hand, this is certainly true and is the reason why our movement is called "pro-choice." However, on the other hand, abortion is more complex than simply being a matter of choice. For many women there are emotional, physical, spiritual aspects of their experience, which are rarely acknowledged in mainstream discussions of abortion. When public support for abortion rights is limited to simply reciting a bumper sticker slogan, our very cause is being undermined.

Consider, in contrast, the tactics employed by the anti-choice movement: They use their vast economic resources to create a rich (albeit misleading) language opposing choice. They coin clever slogans, run manipulative television commercials, litter roads and highways with anti-choice billboards, and harass women's health clinics, patients and the doctors who provide abortions. They use religion to generate shame in women who are choosing abortion (Abortion is a sin, God will punish you), and they promote negative views about sex (If you're gonna have sex, there's a price to pay). Subsequently, abortion is cloaked in shame, and the millions of women who have made this choice remain silent.

Furthermore, while the anti-choice movement has silenced women, ironically, they have chosen to co-opt feminist discourse, saying such things as: "Abortion is violence against women" and "abortion kills girls." Several years ago when I was walking into a clinic where I worked, a protestor mistakenly took me for a patient and said, "You might be aborting a girl." She certainly had a warped interpretation of feminism.

The anti-choice movement has also used feminist educational campaigns about breast cancer prevention and post traumatic stress syndrome to perpetuate untruths about abortion, such as: abortion causes breast cancer and women will suffer from post traumatic stress syndrome, which they have cleverly renamed "post abortion stress syndrome."

To be sure, the success of their movement has driven the abortion discussion farther to the right, and forced pro-choice activists to act from a defensive position, rather than a pro-active one. Subsequently, in attempt to keep our head above water, we overwhelmingly focus our efforts on keeping abortion legal. It is certainly a noble cause, but it's one we are losing because abortion is becoming more inaccessible, especially for adolescents, low-income women, and rural women. Even with the majority of Americans identifying as pro-choice, the anti-choice movement has created a climate that is hostile to abortion rights. A direct result of this hostility is that many of us pro-choice activists don't want to talk publicly about women's experiences that don't fit neatly into the "my body, my choice" slogan. In order to protect reproductive freedom, we want to say, "Let's not talk about that because we might compromise our right to choose."

But, it is true that there are women who are not necessarily making a "free" choice. They may be confined by various circumstances, such as financial or relationship issues. Regardless, these women experience a complex milieu of feelings, which are rarely acknowledged in mainstream discussions of abortion. They may even feel marginalized within the pro-choice movement itself.

For example, a woman I know, who had an abortion because her welfare benefits were terminated, said to me, "I didn't know that it was okay to feel regret about my abortion, even though I am pro-choice, I didn't think my feelings were politically correct." Sadly, she had been looking to the mainstream media as her source of information about what it means to be pro-choice, rather than to individuals within the pro-choice movement.

While there are women who don't feel like their decision to have an abortion was truly a choice, there are many more women who derive empowerment and strength from their abortion experience. Since abortion is an existential experience, it can provide an opportunity for women to examine every facet of their lives. Many women view their choice as loving and compassionate, not selfish. I've seen women make important changes in their lives - from ending an abusive relationship to fulfilling personal and professional goals to reconnecting with a lost faith - they use their abortion experience to reclaim their bodies and their lives.

As a movement and as a society, we need to cultivate a radical language of choice that reflects the continuum of the abortion experience. This honesty will strengthen our movement, and provide much needed support and validation to the women who make this choice.

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