

The Feminist Case Against Abortion

Serrin M. Foster
President
Feminists for Life of America

First Wave Feminists

All feminists do not support abortion.

Properly defined, feminism is a philosophy that embraces basic rights for all human beings *without* exception—without regard to race, religion, sex, size, age, location, disability, or parentage.

Feminism rejects the use of force to dominate, control, or destroy anyone.

Feminists for Life continues a tradition begun by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792. Decrying the sexual exploitation of women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft also condemned those who would “either destroy the embryo in the womb or cast it off when born,” saying: “Nature in everything deserves respect, and those who violate her laws seldom violate them with impunity.”

Wollstonecraft died from complications following the birth of her second baby girl, who was named Mary in her honor. Like her mother, the younger Mary would become a great writer, producing one of the greatest novels ever to address the dangers of violating nature. -- *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley.

Fifty years after Mary Wollstonecraft's book was published, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton travelled to England to fight for the abolition of slavery. Barred from speaking at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention simply because they were women, Mott and Stanton determined to hold a convention advancing the rights of women.

At that time, American women could not vote or hold property. They could not control their own money, sit on a jury, or even testify on their own behalf. Women's rights to assemble, speak freely, attend college, or maintain child custody after divorce or spousal death, were severely limited. Marital rape went unacknowledged.

The early feminists—facing conditions similar to those in developing countries today—were strongly opposed to abortion; despite their own struggles, they believed in the worth of all human lives.

As feminists we are sons and daughters of abolitionists.

The same women who fought for the rights of slaves to be free and women to vote also fought for the unborn to be born.

Abortion was common in the 1800s. Sarah Norton, who with Susan B. Anthony successfully argued for women's admission to Cornell University, wrote in 1870:

Child murderers practice their profession without let or hindrance, and open infant butcheries unquestioned.... Is there no remedy for this ante-natal murder?... Perhaps there will come a day when... an unmarried mother will not be despised because of her motherhood... and when the right of the unborn to be born will not

be denied or interfered with.

In 1868, novelist turned activist Eleanor Kirk linked the need for women's rights with the need to protect the unborn. When a woman told her that suffrage was unnecessary because she and her husband were "one," Kirk asked what would become of her babies if her husband ceased to provide for them:

Why doesn't somebody ask—what *has* become of the babies? Ask [Madame] Restelle [sic] and thousands of physicians, male and female, who have been engaged in their work of destruction for years. Physicians who have graduated from our first medical colleges, physicians with high sounding diplomas, whose elegant equipages stand in front of Fifth Avenue mansions, who pocket a big fee and a little bundle of flesh at the same time, and nobody's the wiser! not even the *husband* in hosts of circumstances.

What will become of the babies—did you ask—and you? Can you not see that the idea is to educate women that they may be self-reliant, self-sustaining, self-respected? The wheel is a big one, and needs a strong push, and a push all together, giving to it an impulse that will keep it constantly revolving, and the first revolution must be Female Suffrage....

God speed the time, for the sake of the babies. Little ones will then be welcome...

Without known exception, the early feminists condemned abortion in no uncertain terms.

In the radical feminist newspaper, *The Revolution*, founder Susan B. Anthony and editor Elizabeth Cady Stanton refused to publish advertisements for "Foeticides and Infanticides." Abortion was consistently referred to as "child murder."

Stanton, who in 1848 organized the first women's convention in Seneca Falls, New York, classified abortion as a form of "infanticide" and, referring to the "murder of children, either before or after birth," said, "We believe the cause of all these abuses lies in the degradation of women."

Early feminists argued that women who had abortions *were* responsible for their actions, but that they resorted to abortion primarily because, within families and throughout society, they lacked autonomy, financial resources, and emotional support.

A passage in Susan B. Anthony's newspaper states:

Guilty? Yes, no matter what the motive, love of ease, or a desire to save from suffering the unborn innocent, the woman is awfully guilty who commits the deed. It will burden her conscience in life, it will burden her soul in death; but oh, thrice guilty is he who drove her to the desperation which impelled her to the crime!

Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president, concurred. In her own newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, Woodhull wrote: "The rights of children, then, as individuals, begin while they yet remain the foetus."

Woodhull and her sister Tennessee Claflin declared that "Pregnancy is not a disease, but a beautiful office of nature."

Clearly, we have a wealth of evidence contradicting the lie that feminists must support abortion.

Some who begrudgingly admit the early American feminists were anti-abortion have suggested that their stance arose from Victorian attitudes about sex. That's not true either.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton shocked Victorian society by parading around in public visibly pregnant. She raised a flag to celebrate the birth of her son. Stanton celebrated womanhood. She was *in your face* about her ability to have children.

But like today's pro-life feminists, our feminist foremothers also recognized that all women need not bear children to share in the celebration of womanhood.

Susan B. Anthony was once complimented by a man who said that she "ought to have been a wife and mother." Anthony replied,

"Sweeter even than to have had the joy of caring for children of my own has it been to me to help bring about a better state of things for mothers generally, so their unborn little ones could not be willed away from them."

In her later years, Anthony passed on the responsibility for women's rights to a new generation, just as we must prepare to do. At the turn of the century, one young woman, Alice Paul, assumed leadership. Paul fought tirelessly for passage of the 19th amendment, which, in 1920, finally guaranteed American women's right to vote.

The '70s Women's Movement and the Betrayal of Women

Much later in life Alice Paul was asked by a friend what she thought of linking abortion to women's rights. The author of the original ERA called abortion "the ultimate in the exploitation of women."

What earlier feminists called a "disgusting and degrading crime" was, in the 70's, lauded as the most fundamental right without which all other rights are meaningless.

So how did the second wave feminist movement come to embrace abortion?

Two of the male founders of NARAL—the National Association to Repeal Abortion Laws—were among the first to portray abortion as a "right" rather than an act of violence.

Larry Lader promoted abortion as population control. His NARAL cofounder Dr. Bernard Nathanson saw a woman who had a botched abortion in Chicago and reasoned that by making abortion legal it would be safer for women. Nathanson later became pro-life. But in the early 70's, the men traveled the country advocating the repeal of what they believed to be antiquated abortion laws. After failing to convince legislators that anti-abortion laws were "archaic," Lader saw an opportunity.

According to Nathanson, Lader approached leaders of the women's movement. He reasoned that if a woman wanted to be educated like a man, hired like a man, and promoted like a man, women shouldn't expect their employers to accommodate pregnancy.

Forty-five years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, many within the pro-life movement focus on the undeniable humanity of each unborn child, clearly visible through the millions of sonograms obtained by proud parents each year.

But it's also a good time to evaluate the impact that *Roe v. Wade* attorney Sarah Weddington's

argument in support of abortion have had on women.

In her oral argument before the court in 1971, Weddington exposed the discrimination and other injustices faced by pregnant women who are poor, or in the workplace or school. But she did not demand that these injustices be remedied. Instead, she demanded for women the "right" to submit to these injustices by destroying their pregnancies.

Weddington repeatedly said that women need "relief" from pregnancy, instead of arguing that women need relief from these injustices.

What if Weddington had used her legal acumen to challenge the system and address women's needs? Women aren't suddenly stupid when they become pregnant. Women can still read, write and think!

But by accepting pregnancy discrimination in school and in the workplace, by accepting the widespread lack of support for pregnant women and parents—especially among the poor—Weddington and the Supreme Court betrayed women and undermined the support women need and deserve.

The Failing Report Card

Planned Parenthood is the largest provider of abortions in America. According to the Guttmacher Institute, their former research arm:

- 75% of the women having abortions are the poor and working poor (including those in college who have little or no income),
- 66% are pursuing post-secondary degrees
- 61% are women of color
- 59% are already mothers (including those who had children in high school and during college).
- Half of all abortions are repeat abortions

All too often, the root causes underlying these statistics are shame and fear—generated by the attitudes of parents, friends, and the fathers of children, about pregnancy.

Fatherhood has been diminished. Children are disconnected from their fathers who have rights as well as responsibilities. Women are impoverished because of the billions owed to mothers for child support.

Since then, millions of women have paid the price, struggling in school and the workplace without societal support. After all, when "it's her body, it's her choice," it's *her problem*.

For all these reasons and more, more than a million times a year in America, a woman lays her body down or swallows a bitter pill called "choice"—driven to abortion because of a *lack* of resources and support.

Abortion solves nothing.

More than four decades after *Roe*, we mourn the loss of nearly 60 million American children that we will never meet.

We will never know what they might have contributed to this world.

But we must also remember the *hundreds* of women and teens who have lost their lives to legal but lethal abortion because they didn't want to inconvenience us with their pregnancies.

We mourn with the parents of Holly Patterson who died from sepsis after she took RU-486, and with the parents of Dawn Ravenell, the 13 year-old African-American who never came home after she had an abortion without her parent's knowledge. We grieve with the husband of Karnamaya Mongar, a poor immigrant who died as a result of her abortion at the hands of convicted murderer Kermit Gosnell. And we weep for the son of Cree Erwin. She died on his first birthday after undergoing an abortion at a Planned Parenthood in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Where is the outrage from women's advocates?

Hard Cases. Exceptional Choices.

When we talk about abortion, we bring out raw emotions. Nothing is more divisive than when we talk about pregnancy and rape.

Nothing challenges our pro-life beliefs more than this heated issue. Just as we have challenged thinking about special needs babies and their parents, we must help women who have conceived during rape and welcome children conceived in violence.

We must help people have the courage to look into the face of a child conceived during rape, and say, you didn't deserve the death penalty.

The circumstances of one's conception do not determine a person's worth.

These children should not be regarded as "exceptions." But their mothers should be recognized as "exceptional."

And as advocates of life, peace, and justice, *we will never trade one form of violence for another.*

Abortion Represents Failure

Today we stand in solidarity with women coerced into abortion because *they felt they had no choice*. We stand with women who were vulnerable because they were young, or poor, or in schools or workplaces that would not accommodate their needs as mothers.

We stand in solidarity with women who have been betrayed by those they count on the most, with women who have underestimated their own strength, with women who have experienced abortion and are silent no more, with young men and women who mourn their missing siblings. We mourn with men who weren't given a choice or who contributed to an abortion that they now regret.

In all its forms, abortion has *masked*—rather than solved—the problems women face.

Abortion is a failed experiment on women. Why celebrate failure?

Address the Root Causes that Drive Women to Abortion

For decades, abortion advocates have asked, “What about the woman?” And pro-lifers have answered, “What about the baby?” This does nothing to address the needs of women who are pregnant.

We must *free women from abortion*.

We should start by addressing the *needs of women*—for family housing, childcare, maternity coverage, for the ability to telecommute to school or work, to job-share, to make a living wage, and to find practical resources.

As pro-life employers and educators, we must examine our own policies and practices in our own communities, workplaces, colleges and universities. With woman-centered problem-solving, we can set the example for the nation and the world.

We must ramp up efforts to systematically address the unmet needs of struggling parents, birthparents, and victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

As we advocate unconditional support to women who lovingly place their babies into the arms of adoptive couples, we applaud birthmothers like former FFL board chair Jessica O’Connor-Petts who tells us that “adoption can be an *empowering* option for women.”

Because six out of ten abortions are performed on mothers who already have dependents, and three out of four are economically challenged. Feminists for Life is determined to help those facing tough economic times and raise women out of poverty towards a better life through education, workplace solutions, and paternal support. WomenDeserveBetter.com is our new resource to provide help for women as they “work, live, learn, and love.”

Future Leaders at Risk Today

We must focus our efforts on collegians who have never known a day without legal abortion. Forty-two percent of all abortions are performed on college-age women, women who will become our future leaders and educators in every field. For these reasons, Feminists for Life’s flagship effort is our College Outreach Program.

In addition to teaching the rich pro-life feminist history that we have uncovered, we have been moderating FFL Pregnancy Resource ForumsSM at campuses across the country. The first such panel discussion was at Georgetown University in 1997. Administrators, community leaders, and students came together in a non-confrontational setting to identify available resources on and off campus, and to set priorities for new policies, resources, and ways to communicate non-violent options.

Within two years, Georgetown’s Board of Trustees set aside endowed housing for parenting students. The Hoya Kids Learning Center was established. Pregnant and parenting students had access to Health Services and user-friendly information on the school’s website. Students created volunteer babysitting services. A “safety net” team of university administrators organized to ensure that no pregnant women, parents, or birthmothers fall through the cracks. And every year, Georgetown hosts a Pregnancy Resource Forum to take another look at ways they can improve.

The first Georgetown Forum started with the story of a woman who had an abortion because she didn’t know where to go for help. At the 14th annual Forum, babies played on the floor. Beaming mothers told us they have “everything [they] need.”

This past fall I moderated the 22nd annual Forum at Georgetown University. Because of our early efforts at Georgetown, Villanova, and Notre Dame, this is the first year that babies born with the support of administrators are now likely entering college themselves.

Other colleges have also expanded their support for student parents.

Pepperdine University created a task force to support pregnant women, adjusting policies to better suit student parents' needs and building family housing. A donor recently stepped forward to fund a housing scholarship.

Abbot Placid Solari and the monks of Belmont Abbey donated land adjacent to Belmont Abbey for "A Room at the Inn," now called *MiraVia*, so that women won't feel pressured to terminate their pregnancies or their educations. Pregnant women and new mothers can now have their babies and continue with school.

Pro-life and pro-choice students united at Wellesley College to hold a rummage sale benefitting a pregnant student who lost her financial aid for housing. The young woman graduated and had her baby.

A University of Virginia student started a babysitting club. Berkeley Students for Life held bake sales to pay for diaper decks. Students for Life at St. Louis University started a scholarship fund for child care. There are many other examples like this as the ideas of Feminists for Life members and supporters go viral.

In 2010, FFL Pregnancy Resource ForumsSM findings became the inspiration for federal grants to states through the Department of Health and Human Services' Pregnancy Assistance Fund.

Clarion University held an FFL Forum in 2016, and in just two hours identified comprehensive resources for pregnant and parenting students and developed a communication plan.

After the first ten years of FFL's College Outreach Program, Planned Parenthood reported a 30% drop in abortions among college-educated women.

Women Deserve Better

Abortion betrays the basic feminist principles of nonviolence, nondiscrimination, and justice for all.

Abortion is a reflection that we have not met the needs of women—and that women have settled for less. Women deserve better.

More than a century ago, the same women who fought for women's rights and for the rights of slaves to be free also fought to protect women and children from abortion. We continue their fight in the spirit of Mattie Brinkerhoff, who wrote in 1869 in *The Revolution*:

When a man steals to satisfy hunger, we can safely assume that there is something wrong in society—so when a woman destroys the life of her unborn child, it is an evidence that either by education or circumstances she has been greatly wronged.

Feminism was born of abolition. All people are equal. All choices are not.

We envision a better day, a day when womanhood is celebrated, mothers are supported, fatherhood is honored, and every child is cherished.

If you refuse to choose between women and children, if you work to systematically eliminate the root causes that drive women to abortion, then you already follow in the footsteps of Susan B. Anthony and our other feminist foremothers, whether you call yourself a feminist or not.

©2017 Serrin M. Foster All rights reserved.