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Gender Roles are the Worst Kind of Bread

Throughout centuries, there has always been a double standard in place that dictates that men are rewarded for sexual encounters, while women are degraded and shunned for having sexual freedom. Although this standard has been around for what seems like ages, this standard is still marked as true in today's society. If a man talks about his various sexual encounters with his friends, he is considered a stud and gets high-fives from all the boys. If a girl, on the other hand, were to openly talk about her sexual deviancy, her reputation would be ruined and she'd be labeled words like "slut" and "whore" immediately. Regardless of all of the work that various women have put in to pioneer the right for women's sexual and reproductive health rights, the world just seems to not want to take the same leap of faith that the female population has been ready to take for years.

The two main arguments that shape the women's reproductive health movement are abortion and birth control. Within the past few decades, both topics have been under heavy scrutiny by both religious and political figures around the world, as well as in the United States. Most of each topic's opposition seems to stem from religious beliefs and the morality behind these acts. Although birth control is starting to take center stage due to the political climate in America, the topic of abortion has always seemed to be a hotbed for debate.

For years, due to the tenth amendment in the constitution, states were able to create laws surrounding abortion because this right was not at the time delegated to the national government, and all of the states in America believed that abortion should be kept illegal (Meese). Although abortion was illegal in America, that does not mean that abortion rates were low or nonexistent. Rather than going to a real, certified doctor that knew how to safely conduct abortions, women were forced to go to disheveled, secret offices with imposter doctors that would often botch the abortions and put the mothers life at extreme risk. Many women that were desperate to undergo an abortion had to deal with coat-hanger abortions, where a piece of a coat-hanger was inserted into the woman's vagina until the mother began to abort, ingesting detergent and other chemicals in order to self-abort, and throwing themselves down stairs onto their pregnant stomachs in an attempt to end the pregnancy (Grimes). A study conducted between 1965 and 1967 showed that eight in ten low-income women that lived in New York City had attempted a self-induced procedure in order to terminate their pregnancy ("Roe v. Wade").

In 1973, with the Supreme Court ruling on the court case *Roe v. Wade*, the fight against illegal abortion ended. This landmark court case for abortion rights started in 1970 when Norma McCorvey, whose anonymity is protected with the name "Jane Roe", sued the district attorney of Dallas County, Texas, Henry Wade, because in the state of Texas a woman could only terminate her pregnancy if her life was at risk. The main question within the case was whether or not the constitution embraces the right of a woman to obtain an abortion, thereby nullifying Texas's probation on such an act (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). On January 22, 1973 the Supreme Court ruled in a seven to two decision that the constitutional right to privacy extends to a woman's right to make her

own medical decisions, including the decision to have an abortion (“*Roe v. Wade*”). Along with dictating that abortion cannot be limited by the state for any reason, the courts also set up guidelines as to when the woman’s right to abortion and the state’s right to protect life are valid. Within the first trimester of pregnancy, the woman’s right to privacy is valid and the state cannot regulate abortion in any way. In the second trimester of pregnancy, the state may regulate abortion to protect the health of the woman. In the final trimester of pregnancy, the state is able to regulate abortion in order to protect the potential life of the fetus, unless delivering the fetus is harmful to the mother’s health (“*Summary of Roe v. Wade and Other Key Abortion Cases*”).

Although *Roe v. Wade* is the most talked about court case when it comes to abortion laws, there is a companion court case, *Doe v. Bolton*, which helped solidify the verdict on abortion. The verdict for the *Doe v. Bolton* case was also decided in 1973, and this case created another clause stating that a woman’s right to abortion cannot be compromised if the reason for the abortion is due to maternal health. The court defined maternal health as “all factors—physical, emotional, psychological, familial, and the woman’s age – relevant to the well-being of the patient”. This new clause to the abortion law allows the right to abortion to expand for health exceptions for all three trimesters of pregnancy (“*Summary of Roe v. Wade and Other Key Abortion Cases*”).

Courts have upheld the abortion laws that sprouted from these two court cases for over forty years, but this does not stop certain pro-life activists from trying to get the ruling overturned. Many pro-life advocates, otherwise known as advocates against abortion, believe that life starts at conception, so unborn babies are considered human with a right to life. Since these unborn children are then considered humans, and the killing of a human is

wrong, abortion is then considered murder. At least thirty-eight states have passed fetal homicide laws, and pro-life activists interpret these laws in a way that says that unborn babies are considered human being by the government. Underneath these fetal homicide laws, “anybody intentionally killing or attempting to kill an unborn child should ‘be punished’”, thereby making the argument that any person who performs abortion should be punished (“Should Abortion Be Legal?”).

A large amount of anti-abortion activists are religious groups, more prominently the Catholic Church in the United States, because most religions believe that life is sacred and undeniable. In The Bible, unborn children are referred to as small, young children. In one of the earliest Christian writings, the Didache, it states, “you shall not kill the child in the womb or murder a new-born infant”. Orthodox Churches still actively forbid abortion and publicly condemn the act in various speeches and forms of literature within the church. Besides the Catholic faith, various other religions have taken opposing stances on the subject. In the religion of Hinduism, people who commit or have abortions are considered the greatest sinners, while in Islam abortion is declared wrong because God declared the unborn baby’s life to be sacred. Even those who do not believe in a God, such as atheists, hold pro-life opinions because they simply believe that abortion is a violation of the unborn child’s human right (“Religious Views on Abortion”).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are enormous amount of pro-choice supporters who are fighting on the front lines to keep *Roe v. Wade* an active law in the United States. One of the main arguments for the pro-choice movement is that a woman’s decision to have an abortion should be her own decision, not the decision of the government or a medical professional. The ability for a woman to have control of her body

is critical to women's rights, and by having a law that prevents a woman from being able to control her own pregnancies completely violates this right. Another argument within this movement is the idea that human life does not in fact start at conception, but rather human life starts when the fetus can be viable outside of the womb. Many abortion procedures occur during the first trimester of pregnancy, and during this span of time, the fetus would not be able to survive on its own outside of the womb. Since the fetus would not be able to survive, one cannot say that at this point in time in the pregnancy, the mother and the baby can be identified as separate entities, therefore the fetus should not have its own set of rights (Lowen).

The most obvious argument that the pro-choice community uses to defend its argument is the fact that no child should be an unwanted child. If a mother knows that she will be unable to financially provide for a child, and therefore the child will not live a nurtured, educated life, a mother should not be forced to take on the responsibility of caring for a child. If a woman is a victim of rape or incest and becomes pregnant, she should not be forced into carrying the unborn child of someone who ruined her life, and then once the child is born, have to be constantly reminded of the worst time of her life. If a couple finds out that their child will be born with a crippling disease or malformation that will cause it to live a painful, short life, the couple should have the ability to terminate the pregnancy in the best interest of the unborn fetus's life. If a child will live a life of pain and suffering, it would be considered cruel to force that child into the world (Lowen).

The current political climate in America is causing the pro-choice community to worry about the state of women's reproductive rights in the United States. Underneath our current president, Donald Trump, women could be stripped of their reproductive freedom.

In the past, Trump has said that “women should be punished for choosing abortion”, and Trump has filled his cabinet with anti-abortion politicians. While President, Trump has nominated Neil Gorsuch to become a justice in the Supreme Court, and Gorsuch has been known to rule against reproductive freedom. Besides the presidency, both the House of Representatives and the Senate are ruled by pro-life politicians who are looking to limit women’s reproductive freedom (“Federal Government”). If abortion were to become illegal again in the United States, many people believe that this would lower abortion rates across the country, but unfortunately this fact could not be more false. Rather than the government providing safe, regulated abortion practices to women, women will again be forced into finding underground abortionists that could potentially be practicing dangerous, harmful procedures. Doctors who practiced during the time of illegal abortion say that people do not realize how terrible these times were for women, and politicians are not mindful of the increase in death rates that will occur if abortion becomes illegal again (Culp-Ressler).

Another important women’s reproductive health rights issue is the availability of birth control and contraception. This health right began to take center stage with the help of Margaret Sanger, a women’s rights activist who pushed for legislation of birth control for over five decades (“The Fight for Reproductive Rights”). An activist all her life, Sanger immersed herself in the world of radical liberal politics right after marriage and soon found her niche in the area of sex education. In the 1910’s, Sanger worked as a nurse in a hospital in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and frequently saw the effects of women receiving back-alley abortions or women trying to self-terminate their pregnancies. After watching the suffering of these women in her care, Sanger became passionate about educating

women about contraceptives and birth control information. At the time, circulating information about “obscene and immoral material” was against the Comstock Act of 1873, so Sanger was forced to flee the country in 1914 and move to England where she would have more freedom to research different types of birth control techniques (“Margaret Sanger”).

Sanger returned to the United States in 1915 and opened the first birth control clinic. Nine days after opening this clinic, the police raided the building and Sanger spent thirty days in jail for again breaking the Comstock Act. During Sangers time in jail, the women’s reproductive health rights movement scored a huge legal win when the courts ruled that doctors could prescribe women birth control for medical reasons and this would not be a violation of the Comstock Act. After this legal victory, Sanger was able to open the first legal birth control clinic in the country in 1923. Shortly after the opening of the this legal clinic, the movement saw another landmark court victory in 1926 when the courts said that birth control devices could be imported from other countries into the United States. Throughout her work in the women’s reproductive health field, Sanger was able to reach out to the female population to help educate them on how to prevent unwanted pregnancies because she believed that “every child should be a wanted child”(“Margaret Sanger”).

Although Sanger chose to “retire” from activism for a few years, the movement for reproductive rights did not stop there. In an unprecedented court decision in the 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* case, the Supreme Court ruled that laws that prohibited the sale of contraceptives to married couples were unconstitutional. This ruling showed the public that there is a fundamental right to privacy between the lines of the constitution, and by

states prohibiting contraceptive choice, the states are violating a woman's right to privacy. In the 1972 case *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, the law was upheld for unmarried couples as well. In 1974, additions to this law were complete when a judge allowed for birth control to be purchased for unmarried minors ("The Fight for Reproductive Rights").

Even though birth control has been widely used since the creation of oral contraception in 1960, various groups have openly shown contempt for birth control and other contraceptives. One of the main reasons that people are anti-birth control is because people believe that birth control is almost on the same level as abortion. When a woman takes birth control in the form of an IUD, the birth control does not stop an egg from being released into the woman's uterus, but rather forces the uterus to turn into a hostile environment for the egg to implant. Since the woman is purposely making it difficult for the egg to implant into the uterus, many anti-birth control activists feel that birth control has "abortifacient" effects. If a woman were to not take birth control, the egg would easily be able to implant onto the uterus and spawn life ("Is Birth Control Morally Right?").

Another argument that goes against the use of birth control is the idea that birth control allows sex and procreation to be separate acts. In many religions, sex is meant to only be used in order to procreate rather than to be used for self-pleasure. With the introduction of birth control and contraceptives, couples were able to use intimacy and sex for a reason other than procreation, and these contraceptives were interfering with a couple's natural ability to conceive. To many religions, birth control is allowing couples to follow the norm of society, rather than following what God would want ("Is Birth Control Morally Right?"). Given this reasoning, some anti-birth control communities would go so

far as to say that birth control could be considered anti-life since the woman is preventing life from coming into the world (“Moral Case Against Contraception”).

There are many men and women, on the other hand, which find birth control to be an important part of women’s health rights and believe that birth control is a crucial part of every aging girls life. Birth control has many advantages, some of which include preventing pregnancy, reducing acne, regulating menstrual cycles, and easing menstrual cramps (“What are the Benefits & Advantages of Birth Control Pills?”). The birth control pill, which is the most popular form of birth control, is easily accessible for women of all income levels and can help women control their bodily and sexual rights. To many, birth control rights do not seem controversial because so many women consider birth control availability to be a necessity for women everywhere (“No Controversy: 5 Fantastic Arguments for Better Birth Control Access”).

The government has recently been openly speaking about its opposition towards birth control, and in October, President Trump began to roll back the birth control mandate that was put in place by previous President Barack Obama. The contraceptive coverage mandate that was put in place by Obama under the Affordable Care Act removed the cost barrier to birth control, therefore making birth control widely available to all women. On October 6, 2017, Trump rolled back this mandate in order to “expand the rights of employers to deny women insurance coverage for contraception”, therefore allowing companies to no longer include birth control coverage in their health insurance plans (Pear). Under this new law, women will be forced to pay for birth control full-price out of pocket.

When the news of this rollback came out, a large twitter movement called “#HandsOffMyBC” erupted, and many women were speaking out about how this new ruling could horribly effect the availability of birth control. NARAL Pro-Choice America, an activist group dedicated to supporting the sexual and reproductive health rights of women, tweeted “nowhere else in our healthcare system do we allow employers to make health decisions for their employees... why should a woman have to ask her boss for her birth control” (@NARAL). Besides NARAL and various other organizations committed to the cause, there was an outpouring of support from women around the country discussing the various uses of birth control and what losing birth control rights would mean to them.

Conversely, there were mountains of tweets that were agreeing with Trump’s rollback and criticizing women for expecting the government to pay for their birth control. On many of the tweets supporting the rollback, users talk of “not wanting to pay for other people’s birth control” or having women “not expect to have their birth control paid for by the government”. What many of these rollback-supporters do not realize is that the government is not currently paying for a woman’s birth control, but rather every woman is paying for it within their insurance plan. By no longer including birth control in a company’s insurance plan, every woman is paying for their insurance plan plus birth control on the side that was previously covered by the insurance plan. When birth control was covered by insurance, every woman was paying for the medication within the plan. The government was not freely providing contraceptives to women.

I understand the side of the anti-abortion argument, but many of the anti-abortion arguments do not correlate with the medical knowledge that is available today. Many pro-life advocates spread information about how fetus’s feel pain during abortions, but the

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says that fetus's cannot feel pain until the third trimester, which starts at twenty-seven weeks. Therefore, during the first trimester where abortions are the most common, the fetus will not feel the pain of being aborted (Miller). Another piece of the anti-abortion argument that I cannot comprehend is the idea that a human life starts at conception. Human life starts when the fetus would be able to survive outside of the mother's womb.

In order to better comprehend this argument, think of it in a situational sense. You're in a fertility clinic and a fire breaks out. You're running towards the exit but right before you leave the building, you hear a child crying out for help. You go into the room where the child is, and in one corner you see the screaming child and in the other is a container of 1,000 viable human embryos. You only have the time to save one or the other before you die of smoke inhalation. Which one do you chose? Everyone would say the screaming child because instinctively, every person knows that that is the right thing to do. A human child is more important than any amount of human embryos because in our minds, a human child and a human embryo are not considered the same thing at all. If you do not consider them the same thing, then your argument about how human life starts at conception is flawed. No one actually believes that an embryo is equivalent to a human child. If someone truly believed that, they would let one child die in order to save 1,000 children. But no one would ever actually do that (Brown).

Even though I would consider myself tolerant to other people's opinions, it dumbfounds me that people can truly believe that banning both abortion and contraceptives would improve the country as a whole. The entire argument of being against both abortion and birth control does not make sense to me, nor does it make sense

to a vast majority of the population, because banning contraception will only lead to more abortions because women will not be able to control their bodily rights. Without contraception being readily available to couples, couples will be experiencing more unwanted pregnancy, thus leading to a mass influx of abortions. Rather than believing that birth control is on the same playing field as abortion, people need to understand that contraception is a necessary part of society because sex is a much more widely accepted value than ever before. Rather than trying to get people to stop having sex for self-pleasure reasons, which will never happen given sex's influence on media and values, religious institutions should try and educate their followers on the advantages of practicing safe sex and family planning.

Anti-abortion and anti-birth control activists need to realize that by overturning *Roe v. Wade*, women's rights would be taking steps backwards rather than continuing to inspire women to fight for equality. Women in general should be angry that the government is trying to take away their right to privacy and their right over their own body, since the government is still actively funding men's sexual and bodily rights. For example, Viagra, an erectile dysfunction medication, is government funded and provided to multitudes of active-duty and retired military personnel because the pill would be expensive for them to buy since most insurances do not cover Viagra (Vankin). This situation sounds pretty similar to the rollback on women's oral contraception, except the government is now forcing women to pay ridiculous prices for their birth control that they otherwise wouldn't have to. Sexism runs deep in America.

Overall, women everywhere should be fighting to maintain their rights over their body and their reproductive decisions. If court decisions like *Roe v. Wade* were to get

overturned, women will be stripped of a right to privacy that they are deserving of, and the after effects of overturning such a law could cause large increases in maternal deaths from botched abortions. In order to prevent abortions in modern day, rather than outlawing abortion and making contraceptives unavailable to the public, the government and religious institutions should push sex education and birth control information to the youth. By educating the upcoming generation on safe, protected sex, the government and religious institutions could play a large role in minimizing abortion rates, teen pregnancy rates, and the number of babies put up for adoption each year. Condemning abortion and birth control methods will only force women into isolation and dangerous situations in order to terminate their pregnancy. Rather than isolating and shunning women for their reproductive decisions, educate and inspire women to improve themselves and take care of their reproductive health.

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