

# Women Deserve Better Than Abortion

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by **Serrin M. Foster**

"Women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy also deserve unplanned joy," notes Patricia Heaton, winner of two Emmy awards and a bestselling author. Ms. Heaton serves as honorary chair for Feminists for Life (FFL), a pro-woman, pro-life organization. FFL continues the tradition of early American feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who opposed abortion and sought to address its root causes.

The sad reality is that the "unplanned joy" Patricia Heaton envisions for women is all too rare. Instead, women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy often end up experiencing the tragic violence of abortion.

## **No "Choice" for Most**

Statistics gathered by abortion supporters reveal that the primary reasons women with unintended pregnancies turn to abortion are lack of financial resources and lack of emotional support. Many women also say they felt abandoned, or even coerced into having an abortion. Despite child support laws, some fathers threaten to withhold support. Domestic violence against single pregnant women at the hands of a boyfriend is being reported with greater frequency. Coercion crosses all socio-economic classes. Jennifer O'Neill — actor, model, author and spokesperson for the "Silent No More" post-abortion campaign — reluctantly had an abortion after being coerced by her powerful and wealthy fiancé. He threatened to take away her baby if she gave birth. The abortion damaged her cervix and she subsequently suffered nine miscarriages.

"Nothing in the world could ever make me opt for that choice again," Jennifer O'Neill told Capitol Hill staff and legislators at a Senate briefing. The briefing was part of a pioneering campaign called "Women Deserve Better," undertaken by pro-woman, pro-life groups Feminists for Life, Life Resources Network, Second Look Project, Solidarity with Women, Silent No More, and Women and Children First.

The women at highest risk of resorting to abortion are those of college age. One out of five abortions occurs in this age group. For many years, Feminists for Life's College Outreach Program has been listening to women on campuses across the country. Women who tested positive for pregnancy at a campus clinic tell us — almost universally — that the next words they heard from clinic staff were "I'm so sorry." Then they were handed a business card for a local abortion clinic.

University counselors and professors echo this message, telling students that they can't possibly continue their education and have a child — as if pregnancy makes women incapable of reading, writing or thinking.

Resources are similarly lopsided. Some colleges offer \$300 loans for an abortion, but no financial aid if the young woman gives birth. Pregnant and parenting students report that housing, maternity coverage, child care and telecommuting options are nonexistent on many campuses, and expensive on others. Women who are visibly pregnant are stared at like exotic animals when they cross the campus.

Forcing a woman to choose between sacrificing her education or career plans and sacrificing her child is not much of a "free choice."

Beyond the campus, support is also lacking for any choice other than abortion. Pregnant and parenting women in the workplace still cannot count on basic benefits such as maternity coverage, job sharing, flex time, telecommuting, or the ability to make a living wage.

Even well-meaning family and friends often fail to give of a "free choice." women what they really need and want — congratulations and unconditional support. Instead of saying "How can I help?" they say "A baby will ruin your life."

In other words, most women "choose" abortion precisely because they believe they have no other choice.

January 2003 marked the thirtieth year since the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. And the pro-choice mantra we hear every January 22 – Our body, Our choice – still means the same thing: Our problem. This is nothing for women to celebrate. Abortion is not a measure of society's success in meeting the needs of women; it's a measure of its failure. Why celebrate failure?

## Abortion Harms Women

The damage that abortion causes to women's bodies can result in infertility, future miscarriages, breast cancer and even death. Many women also carry emotional scars from the experience.

Studies from Finland, Great Britain, Canada and the United States reveal higher rates of suicide, attempted suicide and psychiatric admissions among women who have had an abortion compared to women who have given birth.

Feminists for Life board member Marion Syversen had two abortions as a teenager while living in an extremely abusive home. She supports studies of abortion's impact on women — especially since abortion is the most common surgery in America. Reminded that former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop said it was problematic to study the impact of abortion, because half the women who had them may deny it, Syversen responded, "Well, doesn't that tell you something? If it was such a great thing we'd all be talking about it!"

At a recent "Women Deserve Better" briefing on Capitol Hill, Feminists for Life's honorary co-chair, actor Margaret Colin, recently asked members of Congress to "remember the woman." She challenged them to ask themselves, "Is this the best we can do for her?"

Abortion is a symptom of — never a solution to — the problems faced by women. As Americans, we like to say that "failure is not an option." Yet abortion has completely failed as a social policy designed to aid women. It is a reflection that we have failed women — and that women have had to settle for far less than they need and deserve.

## Real Help for Women

Three decades have passed since Roe v. Wade unleashed on America a new, violent norm. And while the abortion debate often seems to be stalled at the impasse between "women's rights" vs. "the baby," the basic needs of women are often ignored. We have forgotten to ask women the questions, "What do you need? What do you really want?"

As advocates for women and children, we must see the humanity of every person who challenges us. Look at the question from the perspective of a person who embraces "choice." See the pain of the woman who was abandoned by those she counted on the most and as driven to abortion. Understand the well-meaning friend who offers a quick Fix, not realizing that pain cannot be diminished through abortion. Grasp the embarrassment of a parent who wants to protect a daughter from a grandchild that might "ruin her life." Feel the fear of a young man who is suddenly faced with fatherhood, and realizes that he is totally unprepared. Recognize the betrayal behind questions from those under age 30 who have never known a day without legalized abortion.

Acknowledge them while offering unwavering hope that we can work together for better outcomes for women and children. We also should seek a comprehensive review of the reasons that drive women to abortion. Every day that goes by with the needs of some pregnant women unmet is another day marked by thousands of abortions. Although Americans are deeply divided on abortion, there is no disagreement that the number of abortions needs to be reduced. What is missing is a women-centered plan to accomplish this goal.

Many women lack the support of their family or the child's father, they lack the resources that would allow them to combine work and child rearing, or feel forced to choose between their education and their children.

We need to listen, to hear women and create a comprehensive, step-by-step plan to systematically eliminate the root causes that drive so many women to abortion — primarily the lack of financial resources and lack of emotional support.

We need to engage those in higher education, healthcare, technology, corporations, small businesses, the entertainment industry, government and the media to help redirect the debate toward positive outcomes for all concerned. Men should be welcomed to the table. Most importantly, we must listen to women from all walks of life, especially those who have personally experienced the tragedy of abortion, and those facing an unplanned pregnancy.

We must begin by finding solutions for those at highest risk of abortion — college women, young working women and low-income women.

College campuses should reexamine their policies, attitudes and support for pregnant and parenting students and staff. Through programs like Feminists for Life's Pregnancy Resource Forums, those on all sides of the debate within the campus community can put aside their differences to address the needs of pregnant and parenting students. Colleges across the country have followed the example of Georgetown University — where Feminists for Life held its first Pregnancy Resource

Forum — by addressing basic needs such as housing, child care and maternity benefits in student health-care plans.

Family-friendly workplaces that offer child care, flex time and telecommuting solutions can help lessen the pressure on women to choose between their careers and their children. For example, one farsighted employer, Steelcase Corporation of Michigan, sets up offices in the homes of employees who are new parents to help them telecommute.

Pregnancy care centers need funding to assist women to follow through on a life-affirming choice — whether that involves married parenthood, single parenthood, extended family or co-parenting options, or adoption.

More and more Catholic churches are answering the call of the late Cardinal John O'Connor by opening their doors to help any woman in need. A parish-based model of pregnancy support called the Gabriel Project has been expanding rapidly across the country. Other churches, mosques and synagogues can also provide help to any woman in need.

We need to replicate the success achieved in Pennsylvania, where abortions have been greatly reduced through state funding of resource centers that promote life-affirming alternatives. Pennsylvania law also mandates that a woman seeking an abortion be accurately and adequately informed about the procedure, fetal development, and the father's rights and responsibilities so she can make an informed choice. The late Governor Robert Casey knew that women deserved — and could handle — this information. We can work with states to implement the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), whose services include prenatal care for low-income women and their unborn children.

It is also important that we reverse the negative attitudes toward children and parenting that have become so prevalent in our culture. Our society needs once again to cherish motherhood, champion fatherhood, and celebrate the benefits and rewards of parenthood.

In 1869, Mattie Brinkerhoff wrote in *The Revolution*, a radical feminist newspaper published by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "When a man steals to satisfy hunger, we may safely conclude that there is something wrong in society. So when a woman destroys the life of her unborn child, it is evidence that either by education or circumstances she has been greatly wronged." Every woman deserves better, and every child deserves a chance at life.

It is time to reaffirm the strength and dignity of women, the importance of fathers, and the value of every human life. We must raise expectations and focus our efforts on what is best for women, children and families — so that one day soon we will look back at this barbaric practice and wonder why any woman ever felt coerced into suffering through an abortion.

## **Women Deserve Better**

To mark 30 years of legal abortion, the Women Deserve Better Campaign began a long-term public education effort examining the failure of abortion. The campaign aims to refocus the nation on the reasons women feel pressured into abortion and to promote women-centered solutions.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Knights of Columbus provided great impetus to this effort in January 2003 by placing ads in Washington, D.C.-area buses and Metro trains, by distributing thousands of placards at the annual March for Life, and sponsoring ads in national publications.

Increasingly, hard questions are being directed at abortion advocates whose unfulfilled promises have left us with 40 million missing children and 25 million women suffering in silence. May they be silent no more, and may we all be willing to listen to them.

Women must demand better for themselves and for those they love. After thirty years of a failed social experiment, let's force the real question: "Don't women deserve better than abortion?" The only good answer will be a resounding "Yes."

**Serrin M. Foster is President of Washington-based Feminists for Life of America.**

## **Resources**

Information about ways to participate in the Women Deserve Better campaign can be found at [www.womendeservebetter.com](http://www.womendeservebetter.com).

More extensive pro-woman, pro-life resources can be found at [www.feministsforlife.org](http://www.feministsforlife.org).