

Abortion is a human right

— make it a civil right



THE BASIC TENET OF DEMOCRACY is that citizens participate in the decision making process. People are the force behind the law, they are the reason for it. Their participation in the decisions which affect them differentiate a democratic society from an authoritarian one.

Yet there are many groups in our society who find themselves up against democracy. The poor, Blacks, women, all find themselves trapped in laws which they have had no hand in making, which work to keep them in a position where they cannot fully participate in the forces which determine their lives.

THE LAW WHICH MAKES abortion a criminal offense, except in certain specifically defined circumstances, is one instance in which women find themselves unable to make a decision which, in effect, defines their lives.

Doctors, moralists and politicians have taken it upon themselves to decide if a woman can have an abortion. They deny her the choice, yet leave her afterwards to bring up a child in a society which does not take the responsibility for it.

THE DECISION OF whether a woman may have an abortion reaches far beyond the momentary effect. The morality of the question is complex. In a society where there are inadequate day care centres for working women, where women are relegated to low paying, low status jobs, an abortion board decides much more than whether a woman will have a child. It is deciding how she, and her child, will spend their lives.

In liberalizing the abortion law in early 1970, Canada's politicians decided that abortions could be granted, if pregnancy would be damaging to the health (mental or physical) of the mother. This expanded the grounds from merely that of saving the life of the mother. In reality, however, the 'new' law changed very little, for it still leaves the decision of whether a woman may get an abortion in the hands of someone other than that woman.

TO OBTAIN AN ABORTION, a woman must be referred by a doctor and/or a psychiatrist, to a hospital abortion board. She, or her doctor, must prove that having a baby would be damaging to her physical or mental health. The interpretation of health is left up to the individual hospital board, but all too often it means a humiliating and degrading experience for the woman involved.

She must, in effect, prove that she is mentally unstable or crazy. The implicit assumption is, of course, that any woman in her right mind would want a child, for that is what we are taught is the basic function of women.

A demand for an abortion on the grounds that a woman does not want a child, because it may deprive her of a career, or from more effectively caring for the children she already has, or for any other reason she may have, is not sufficient under the law as it is now interpreted by most hospital boards. The freedom of women to develop as they wish is not a priority of our society.

THE ARGUMENT OF MORALITY cannot be used on the issue of abortion — except as support for free abortion on demand.

Those who oppose abortion on moral

grounds claim that abortion is murder, that the potential child has a right to live. But they say nothing about the quality of this life.

A woman who is pregnant must decide whether or not she wants a child. If she decides, for whatever reason, that she does not, then that alternative must be open to her. If it is not, then chances are good that both the child and the mother will suffer.

Every night and every morn
Some to misery are born.
Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight.
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to endless night.
William Blake

Studies of women who were denied abortions and kept their children show that one-third of these women felt deep resentment towards them, and the children grew up with higher rates of psychiatric problems than other children.

A morality which was in keeping with the principles of democracy would realize that a child has a right not only to live, but to live in a situation where he or she has the best chance of growing up as a strong and happy individual.

MANY WOMEN HAVE TAKEN it upon themselves to enact the decision they have made. They have been forced to go outside the law, and outside accepted morality to obtain an abortion.

Approximately 100,000 Canadian women obtain abortions each year; 2,000 of them die at the hands of quack doctors. These women, and the similar number of men who were responsible for their pregnancies, form a powerful mandate for the legalization of abortion. Yet politicians and doctors continue to rule on the matter.

THE PERMISSIBLE LEVEL OF freedom in a democracy has often been defined as any action which does not infringe upon the rights of others.

In this case the abortion law would seem to be a more direct infringement of this principle than the right to abortion.

Politicians frame the laws; in this case, doctors interpret them. Both these groups form an elite in the society. Both are almost entirely male, drawn from the middle and upper classes.

Women have not had a chance to take part in the decision-making. They have been socialized from an early age through the school and the media, from the books they read and the toys they play with to believe that their role is that of wife and mother, rather than as an active participant in the outside

world. And the facts of life in that world have forced them into this role even when they did not want to accept it.

QUOTAS FOR WOMEN in law and medical schools, and scholarships which will not invest money in women 'who are just going to get married anyway' severely limit chances for any woman who tries to enter the decision-making process at an influential level.

Women, and the majority of men, have been kept out of the decision-making process, because their interests are in direct conflict with those of the people who now rule for us.

The church, the governing and business elite have all lived comfortably in the present system. They have been able to control their own lives, since they have been the ones to make the decisions.

But giving up part of this decision-making to peoples whose choices might not conform with the established ones challenges their status.

THE FREEDOM OF WOMEN to begin to control their own lives, by assuming the responsibility to control their own bodies, is a basic threat to the existing society.

If a woman grows weary and
at last dies from childbearing,
it matters not.
Let her only die from bearing,
she is there to do it.
Martin Luther

North American society casts both men and women into rigid roles which are necessary for the perpetuation of the status quo. Man is the provider and protector, woman is the homebody, the mother, the lover. This is only one step in the hierarchy which serves to keep every member of society in his or her place.

A woman in the home provides security for a man. Regardless of what happens to him at his job, he knows that there is a place to which he can return, where he is master. Whereas his work is his battlefield, his home is his castle, where he is safe from the humiliation and degradation of his work.

In the same way, the roles allocated to other groups help to keep them in their respective places, competing with each other, rather than uniting as individuals to define their own meaningful alternatives.

THE FIGHT FOR FREE ABORTION on demand is a necessary part of this struggle. On Saturday, February 13, women will demonstrate in Halifax for the removal of abortion from the criminal code, in coordination with similar demonstrations across Canada.

This fight is part of a greater fight. We cannot liberate ourselves without the help of other groups and will not be free until other people are also freed.

by Leslie MacDonald