

the ♀'s supplement

Pro-life feminism

A contradiction in terms?

by Marie Paturel

"Pro-life feminism — it does exist" reads a graffiti message on a bathroom wall. I have come to the conclusion that as a valid aspect of the feminist movement, it does not.

When I first started hearing and seeing the literature on "pro-life feminism" I really wasn't interested; I was tired of reading anti-choice literature, and another version of an old tune did not appeal to me. Eventually, I became curious to see why these "feminists" felt the need to separate themselves from the fundamental pro-choice stance and history of the feminist

not that clear to me. My interpretation is that they tend to rely on "pro-life" interpretations of the pro-choice position. There was no upfront analysis of the pro-choice position or any attempt to say how it has "failed" them. It is not clear why they abandoned a feminist pro-choice perspective and embraced the opposing stance. There is no attempt whatsoever to separate themselves from other "pro-life" groups, their tactics (which range from verbal and physical harassment of women entering abortion clinics to kidnappings and bombings), or their political standpoints on such things as the rights of lesbian mothers.

There is one aspect of their position that

throughout the "pro-life feminist" rhetoric there is:

— no recognition of the experiences of thousands of women who have died or have been and still being physically injured from back-street abortions, because the option of having medically safe and supportive abortion services is or was denied them.

— no acknowledgement that women make, have made, and always will make the choice to abort even when it puts their health and very life in danger. Nor is there consideration of their life conditions under which these decisions are made.

— no recognition of the sacrifices of hundreds if not thousands of women (many of whom are feminists) who have risked legal, social and economic sanctions to assist women to obtain abortions and who have worked on the decriminalization of abortion.

— no attempt to deal with the effects on women's lives if abortion is recriminalized. The reality of women going to jail, being injured, scarred, even killed from botched abortions is a reality "pro-life feminists" either do not address or dismiss as "necessary" injustices.

Some people would consider this an argument that attempts to silence women who are "pro-life" from calling themselves feminist. Not at all. These women can call themselves anything they want. This is a so-called free country, and even members of R.E.A.L. Women, a conservative women's

group, have called themselves "feminists."

But what I do object to and will fight are attempts by groups or individuals to alter or manipulate the aims and policies of the feminist movement in a way that silences, represses, or invalidates the history, voice,



and reality of women's experiences. Unfortunately, this is the threat from "pro-life" women who attempt to take on a feminist label.



photo: Rochelle Owen

The Morgentaler clinic — scene of a crime?

movement. I was also curious as to how these women dealt with adopting a position and a slogan that has been associated with anti-feminist/anti-woman organizations. After reading some articles on the subject (mainly by one Sidney Callahan), I have to say that my curiosity is still not satisfied. Their attempts to distinguish their position from that of pro-choice are

disturbs me most. As I read the literature, it becomes more and more apparent that women's voices and experiences in regard to the difficult and painful decisions on abortion are silenced or not even acknowledged. Is not one of the fundamental aims of feminist theory and activity to give voice to, acknowledge, and validate women's history, experiences, reality and voices? Yet

Feminism defined

by J. Shyngera

Feminism. Some see it as a bond, others think it's divisive. The definitions associated with the word are so diverse that it's difficult to use without the great risk of being misunderstood. Is feminism a division of women against men? Are women's groups that do not allow men necessarily prejudiced against men? Is feminism a division among women? In short, what defines "feminism"?

Is feminism anti-male? Even though we live in a patriarchal society, and men as a

group are responsible for this, no individual male wishes to be prejudged as domineering or responsible for all of the injustices resulting from patriarchy. No one likes to be prejudged, female or male, black or white. "Feminism" is not meant to be a divisive force, pitting the frustrations of one gender against another. It is based on a vision for the future that hopes to overcome the injustices of patriarchy. This vision cannot be exclusive; it must have the participation of all people, female and male, to be realized.

Thus, is it not prejudiced to have a woman's group that does not allow male representation? People need to belong to groups to strengthen a common bond with others. A group should be able to assert their identity, not out of a spirit of intolerance to other groups, but in an effort to reinforce a common bond. This rule applies to all groups worldwide. In Canada, different cultural groups may organize exclusively, not out of intolerance to other cultures, but to strengthen that which they have in common. Likewise, women's groups must be able to assemble without being thought of as anti-male, or as intolerant of other women's groups.

Moreover, feminism is not defined by women's organizations. Feminism is a far-reaching movement based on elevating the status of women to equality. Women's organizations are only a part of this greater whole. Unfortunately, feminism is currently misunderstood; it needs the understanding of everyone to overcome the injustices of patriarchy.

A pro-life feminist writes

I am a pro-life feminist. You can ignore me if you want. You can try to force me into a conservative, religious mold but I frustrate your efforts because I simply do not fit. I am more radical than you because I demand that society make room for its most vulnerable members, the unborn. I know that to eliminate poverty, one does not suggest the elimination of the poor. I know that women often betray their own past when we say the fetus is not human. They once said we were not human either. It is you who "play by the rules" and use the language of the oppressors. You disguise the unborn as objects to be discarded in a throw

away society. You care more about the future of the garbage bags than what they may be holding. You speak of a goddess who reveals women as birthers, the givers of life, yet you struggle to become life takers whenever you wish. I know it is not easy to do that. I have seen women struggle over the decision to have an abortion. No, it is not easy. The agony proves that there must be a better way, a life giving way. You never let the women who regret their abortions vent their rage at a society that says abortion is okay. Why not? You abhor discrimination yet you discriminate against an entire class of humans because they are very

young and depend upon our wombs for nourishment. You resent the lie that women are owned by their male partners yet scream that the unborn are owned by us. The truth is suspected but the truth is painful. You get very upset when someone says unborn baby. You cry, "no, it's not an unborn baby, it's a fetus." "this isn't death, this is abortion." It is you who have become the oppressors. It is you who must confront the awful truth. It is you who must open your minds.

Thank you.
Name withheld by request