

## Expand the Pro-Choice Dialogue

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**DURHAM, N.C.** - President Bush's Supreme Court nomination of conservative Samuel Alito has reignited discussions over whether a woman's legal right to choose an abortion is under a serious threat.

The pro-choice movement continues to face the challenges of rallying reproductive rights supporters and defining and defending the term "choice." But has it really stopped to consider how "choice" applies to the options and resources available to low-income and minority women?

The pro-choice movement has long established its cause as defending a woman's right to choose. Yet for many women, that choice is nonexistent. The cost of raising a child in the United States today is nearly \$200,000. With an egregious lack of affordable healthcare, housing, and educational opportunities, many poor women of color may simply opt out of bringing a child into the world.

The numbers bear this out: Minority women are more likely to live in poverty than other women in their states and in the nation as a whole, according to 2001 US Census figures. Further, women having abortions have become increasingly likely to be poor, nonwhite, and unmarried, and already have one or more children; two-thirds say they cannot afford to have a child, half say they do not want to be a single parent, according to a 2005 Alan Guttmacher Institute report.

As a feminist of color, I am often frustrated by feminists and pro-choice activists who consistently engage in a two-sided reproductive rights dialogue void of discussions of race and class. Where are the reactions to the fact that although blacks constitute only 13 percent of the US population, they account for nearly 36 percent of abortions, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001 figures?

It is time the national pro-choice movement - which aligns itself with women's empowerment and autonomy - widens the conversation to include and advocate the numerous issues faced by women whose daily needs and concerns remain largely neglected and marginalized.

It is easy to become engrossed in today's divisive reproductive rights jargon without realizing the fuller historic context of women of color and the American pro-choice movement.

For example, consider the opinions of Margaret Sanger, a white 1920s birth-control advocate and the founder of the American Birth Control League (later to become Planned Parenthood).

In her 1920 publication "Women and the New Race," Sanger claimed "every jail, hospital for the insane, reformatory and institution for the feeble-minded cries out against the evils of too prolific breeding among wage-workers." Sanger's advocacy of birth control extended to support eugenics - a movement that promoted selective breeding and genetic engineering to advance the human race, later criticized as a form of scientific racism.

This approach of "managing" poor minority populations extended well into the modern era. A 1975 report published by the Health Research Group revealed how sterilization had been abused by clinicians seeking to prevent poor, disabled, or minority women from bearing children or having repeat abortions. And often limited income meant poor women who did seek abortions were forced to endure unsanitary, sometimes fatal, "back alley" procedures, according to a 1977 report by the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse.



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Another view held by Sanger that I do firmly support says, “[N]o woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.” But providing little in the way of access to affordable healthcare, prenatal care, housing, and education is hardly creating an environment of choice. The lives and freedom of American women depend on all of those things, but also on upholding *Roe v. Wade* and expanding affordable access to safe abortions.

A revitalized pro-choice movement must remain vigilant against the subtlest drift toward imposed birth control, abortion, and the reduction of fertility among “socially undesirable” women. At the same time, our generation must revamp the discourse of reproductive freedom to address the varied experiences of women.

Pro-choice advocates can begin by acknowledging and working to eliminate resource and access disparities in all areas of women’s lives throughout the nation. But that is only a preliminary step. Women of color need to become fully embraced by and engaged in the pro-choice movement. We must demand a new framework for understanding “choice” and more comprehensive solutions for women’s empowerment and reproductive liberty. Only then will the pro-choice mission ultimately benefit from expanding to include the often muffled “different” voices that extend beyond shared gender.

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