

Globalizing Radical Agendas

How US Policies Affect Women's Reproductive Rights around the World

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Since the U.S. legalized abortion in the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* court decision, and in particular, over the past decade, the U.S. rightwing has systematically and methodically worked to influence how the American public and policymakers understand reproductive health and rights. They masquerade behind seemingly innocuous language, such as “family,” “life,” “babies,” and “unborn victims.” The religious right and conservatives in the U.S. have joined forces to impose a radically conservative agenda on women domestically as well as around the world. This has resulted in countless policies and programs – often driven by politics instead of public health or human rights– that have curtailed women’s health, rights, well-being and self-determination.

While *Roe* was intended to provide all women with the right to select abortion, many women have never been able to benefit from the “core protections” it offered. Although, technically, they have the right to safe abortion, poor women—who are disproportionately women of color, rural women who live in one of the 87% of counties that don’t have an abortion provider, and young women—have been particularly affected by the conservative agenda. The health disparities across the U.S. are particularly shocking; the unintended pregnancy rate of Latinas and African-Americans are almost three times the rate for White women. Everyday, two to three American women die from pregnancy complications, which are mostly preventable. The maternal mortality rate is almost 2 times higher for Latinas and 4 times higher for African Americans than for White women.

While the conditions are bad in the U.S., globally they are much worse. Close to one quarter of all adult women living in developing countries and countries in transition suffer from some kind of illness or injury related to pregnancy and childbirth. Millions of women lack access to essential obstetric care leading to 515,000 maternal deaths. Each year close to 70,000 women die each year from unsafe abortion. Over 120 million couples actively want to use family planning, but do not have access to modern contraceptive methods. Of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS, approximately one quarter are between the ages of 15-24. Women and young girls are particularly vulnerable—62% of all young people living with HIV/AIDS in 2001 were young women.

It is within these national and global contexts that we must examine the Bush Administration’s euphemistic ideology known as “pro-family,” which was most recently presented in a statement read by Ambassador Ellen Sauerbrey, the U.S. Representative to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, at the World Congress of Families held in Mexico. According to the Bush Administration, family is defined as an entity “created through marriage,” and marriage is “the voluntary union of a man and a woman [that] has been linked to procreation and the rearing of children since the dawn of time.” Sexuality is defined as the “the expression of love between husband and wife that has as its goal the procreation of children under the light of marriage.”ⁱ The U.S. delegate never questioned the fact that these radically conservative views are not held by a majority of Americans. Instead, she discussed U.S. efforts to globalize this ideology and “rally worldwide interest in reviewing and reforming government policies in order to strengthen the family.”

In the U.S., there are currently more non-married families – including single, separated, divorced, widowed, cohabiting, gay and lesbian and extended families – than there are married families.ⁱⁱ Divorce rates are among the highest of any industrialized country, and the South, commonly known as the Bible Belt for its conservative religious views, has the highest divorce rates in the country (except for Nevada). In many developing countries, women head one-fourth to one-third of households. Many feminists and human



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rights activists also indicate that the family is not always the idealized, perfect entity portrayed by the Bush Administration. In fact, it is often both a source of emotional and economic support and a site of struggle. More than three American women die everyday as a result of domestic violence, often at the hands of the men they love, and four-fifths of all women's new HIV infections in certain regions come from their husbands or primary partners.

The Global AIDS Bill, signed by George W. Bush on May 27, 2003, earmarks one third of U.S. HIV/AIDS global prevention funding – potentially one billion dollars – for abstinence-only education.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, researchers at the World Health Organization have found that unprotected sex is the leading cause of HIV/AIDS transmission in most developing countries.^{iv} At the UN level, the U.S. has established unholy alliances with Iraq, the Sudan and the Vatican to prevent a consensus on the importance of quality sexuality education at numerous key UN events, including the UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children. If the U.S. was successful, governments around the world could have discouraged young people under the age of 18 from receiving information about birth control, condoms, and reproductive health services.

While Americans overwhelmingly support the right to decide the number and spacing of one's children, many health insurance companies still don't cover contraception. Millions of women who are uninsured have few choices since the federal government family planning program for low-income individuals does not permit abortion. In addition, the 2004 budget allocation for family planning services is less than half of its amount over 20 years ago. Since 1995, close to 400 barriers to abortion access have been put into place at the state level, including government-mandated waiting periods before a woman can obtain an abortion, and biased counseling rules that force physicians to read to women anti-abortion information. Since 1982, the number of abortion providers in the United States has declined by more than a third, and 35% of women of reproductive age live in an area with no abortion provider.

The recent Unborn Victims of Violence Act creates a separate criminal offense for the injury or death of a "child, who is in utero," at all stages of pregnancy, including the first day of conception. Imagine—if a fetus is given legal rights as a person from the time the sperm meets the ovum, then it is not farfetched to think that this could lead to the outlawing of contraceptive methods, especially those that prevent the fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus.

While the Bush administration says that it supports families, its policies are making it increasingly difficult for low-income women, and women of color, to have information, resources and power to decide to bear children. The welfare reforms of 1996 introduced the notion of "family caps" that deny financial assistance to women who give birth while receiving government assistance. These policies were meant to "make sure our welfare system changes behavior,"⁽¹⁾ and indeed, this policy did change behavior. In New Jersey, for example, there were 14,000 fewer births and nearly 1,500 more abortions among women on public assistance.⁽²⁾

The Bush Administration has withdrawn funds for programs that meet the needs of the world's most vulnerable women. Prior to 2002, the U.S. annually contributed the equivalent of 12% of UNFPA's operating budget. Now, the Bush Administration has withheld this contribution, falsely claiming that UNFPA was using the funds to support coercive abortion and sterilization programs in China. This decision negated the findings of the administration's own fact-finding mission. The \$68 million withheld to date would have prevented over 1.5 million induced abortions, 9,400 maternal deaths and 154,000 infant and children deaths. Moreover, on the first day of his presidency, George W. Bush reinstated the Global Gag Rule, which mandates clinics in developing countries that receive USAID funds cannot discuss abortion even if a woman would die from it. These strategies are not pro-family at all.

Thirty-one years after *Roe vs. Wade*, the struggle for reproductive justice is not over. It continues for American women who lack resources and power to benefit from their constitutional right to privacy, and



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women around the world who are literally dying in attempts to make reproductive choices. The cornerstone of any pro-family policy should be the ability to make informed, voluntary, and safe reproductive decisions. Instead, the Bush Administration is limiting the ability of women in the U.S., as well as around the world, to plan their families and their futures. It is of little consequence to our policymakers that women and girls are over half of the world's population, but every minute of every day, a woman dies while pregnant or giving birth around the world, and African-American women are four times as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes as white women.

As the U.S. conservative ideology is exported around the world, it not only negatively impacts women's reproductive options, but also leads to unnecessary, preventable, and premature deaths among our mothers, our sisters, and our daughters. It is, therefore, imperative that women's health and rights activists no longer focus exclusively on either U.S. abortion politics or access to family planning in the international arena, as if they were two separate areas of concern. Approach them holistically as two intertwined areas that increasingly mirror one another.

1 Saletan, p 268

2 Ibid

i UN and Family Policy. Remarks to the World Congress of Families III. Mexico City, Mexico. March 29, 2004

ii Now Legal Defense Fund. "Why Now Legal Defense Opposed Federal Marriage Promotion in TANF Reauthorization." New York: New York.

iii SIECUS Public Policy Office. Factsheet: Global AIDS Bill 2003: Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Go International. http://www.siecus.org/policy/global_aids.pdf, accessed 16 April 2004.

iv WHO, World AIDS Campaign, 2003 Factsheet. <http://www.emro.who.int/ASD/wac2003-FactSheet-Statistics.htm>, accessed 16 April 2004.