

The Anti-Choice Position

Understanding the arguments made by anti-choice groups that advocate for greater control of women's sexuality through the criminalisation of abortion makes it easier to effectively counter their messaging. The following is a brief description of key anti-choice arguments, the groups that promote these beliefs, and the tactics they use.

Anti-Choice Arguments

The pro-choice movement believes that decision-making about sexuality belongs to women who, when given accurate information and quality services, will make choices that benefit themselves, their families and their communities. In contrast, anti-choice groups believe that women need strong guidelines such as laws to guide their behaviour. They believe that sexual and reproductive services legitimise what they believe is immoral sexual behaviour, such as having multiple sexual partners. Religious views or "traditional" family values may be part of these beliefs.

Whether animated by religious beliefs or not, anti-choice groups often attack abortion as a highly symbolic issue. They argue that life begins at conception, which is a philosophical question, rather than one which is scientifically determinable. They believe their moral code should inform federal criminal law and the choices of women. They often support "fetal rights," the view that fetuses and embryos are the same as human beings, despite being inside and fully reliant on another individual. Anti-choice groups generally disregard the implications of criminalising abortion for women, such as complete loss of control over their bodies and lives, as well as possible illness or death resulting from unsafe abortions.

Anti-choice groups promote their views by stigmatising and isolating issues of sexual and reproductive rights. Stigmatising is framing accepted and established sexual and reproductive rights as outside the mainstream, which is often done by spreading misinformation. Typical examples include the notion that condoms do not statistically reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS, and that sex education promotes promiscuity and irresponsibility. Central to this process is the deliberate use of incorrect and misleading language, such as

referring to a fetus or embryo as a "baby" or using the term "baby pesticide" to describe oral contraceptives. The second strategy often used is to isolate a particular issue to appear distinct from non-controversial issues. For example, abortion is often framed as a separate issue from sexual and reproductive rights.

Countering this Position

Essential to countering this messaging is to frame the protection of sexual and reproductive rights in a positive light, and to assert that these rights are mainstream and supported by a majority of students and Canadians. Counter myths, such as the false notion that all religious people are anti-choice, with facts and evidence. Reject language used by anti-choice groups to describe pro-choice activism such as "abortionists," "anti-family" and "anti-life" by emphasizing that choice is not about promoting abortion or any option in particular. Rather, it is about having access to a full range of options and promoting the safety and "life" of women, many of whom risk injury and death to obtain unsafe and illegal abortions. Asking for statements of support and working in coalitions is a good way to demonstrate this support and counter anti-choice strategies and groups who are frequently well-funded and supported by anti-choice organisations.

Anti-Choice Violence and Harassment

Anti-choice groups and individuals have resorted to coercive means, and occasionally violence, to promote their agenda. This includes picketing abortion clinics to intimidate women and staff, an act that is against the law and a violation of privacy. Anti-choice individuals have also used direct violence. There have been over 10 murders and 20 attempted murders of abortion providers and clinic staff, as well as many bombings and arsons of clinics in North America since the early 1990s.¹ Anti-choice groups have also used litigation, and the threat of litigation, to coerce pro-choice activists, particularly college and university students, into halting their organising on campus.

For example, University of British Columbia Students' Union Okanagan (UBCSUO) denied club status to an anti-choice student group called Students for Life when they disobeyed the board's guidelines, including not displaying the Genocide Awareness Project (GAP) in public places on campus. A member of Students for

Life brought UBCSUO to the BC Human Rights Tribunal saying their political freedom had been violated, but the judge refused to hear the case citing a lack of evidence. Two other members of Students for Life then attempted to argue that their religious freedom had been violated, but this case was also denied a hearing due to lack of merit. Students for Life appealed to the BC Supreme Court, which found in the students' union's favour, ruling that no one can be compelled to support the promotion of another person religious views through their union.

It is important to note that the goal of anti-choice groups is not to win such cases based on their merits but to diminish the resources and morale of students' unions until they are forced to grant them status. Indeed, UBCSUO was left with a legal bill of \$45,000, while the source of funding for Students for Life was never identified, but was suspected to be private donors. Recognising this strategy, UBCSUO early on considered that all interactions could likely end up in court. Critically, they did not deny club status outright, but only after the club violated the guidelines set out by their board. This was a major strength of their case. Capilano Students' Union, in contrast, denied status to a similar club outright and, under financial strain of being sued, had to settle out of court.

The Genocide Awareness Project

The GAP has been a controversial presence on campuses across Canada. It is a traveling anti-choice image display featuring huge graphic signs. It is run by the California-based Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform (CBR) and the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform, which are funded by private donors.

The GAP argues that abortion is the same as historically-specific, highly organised and hate-motivated crimes such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and racist lynching in the United States. Exploiting images of people who have been victimized by racial, ethnic and religious hatred is both racist and anti-Semitic. Complex histories are simplified in these shocking images that are traumatising for students with links to the genocides portrayed and those who have had abortions.

These materials also reflect the sexist view that women's bodies and reproductive choices should be controlled. Women are depicted as weak and unable to make difficult decisions or as selfish for not wanting to have children.

In some instances, confrontation with pro-choice and anti-racist activists has led to threats of litigation by the GAP. The threat of legal action is commonly used to coerce students' unions who oppose the GAP, and polarize debate. The GAP argues that their exclusion from campuses constitutes a violation of free speech. This is despite the fact that their primary strategy of promoting "debate" traumatises students, rather than engaging in discussion.

Given this propensity to use litigation as a political strategy, it is best to avoid confrontation and restrain from physical contact when dealing with them. Use caution when attempting civil disobedience (such as covering the display with a large cloth), and be sure to do this in large groups. Effective strategies include: petitioning against the GAP being allowed on campus, and holding counter-rallies and counter-leafleting.

Other Anti-Choice Groups

The Campaign Life Coalition
www.campaignlifecoalition.com

This is a political lobbying group which promotes direct and indirect legislative measures to criminalise abortion and reproductive technologies.

Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform
www.unmaskingchoice.ca

Advocates for the criminalisation of abortion using confrontational tactics such as GAP and is supported by wealthy private donors.

The National Campus Life Network
www.ncln.ca

Targets post-secondary students, providing resources to facilitate the creation of a growing anti-choice presence on campuses. Their website provides a listing of campus groups across Canada.

LifeCanada
www.lifecanada.org

A national association of anti-choice groups who focus on educational initiatives with the purpose of facilitating the coordination of the anti-choice agenda.

REAL Women of Canada
www.realwomenca.com

REAL (Realistic, Equal, Active, for Life) Women is an anti-feminist group that supports "traditional" family values such as stay-at-home mothering and opposes universal daycare and homosexuality.