Position Paper #81

Terms in the Abortion Debate: Pro-choice vs. Pro-life

Introduction

While medical terminology surrounding abortion is fairly static, social and political terms for how society talks about abortion are constantly evolving. This paper will define and explain the differences between the terms pro-choice, anti-abortion, and pro-life (as well as anti-choice and forced-birth) and the shift from pro-choice to reproductive justice.

Defining Terms

ARCC defines terms as follows:

- **Pro-Choice**: The stance that women and transgender people can choose whether to have an abortion or carry a pregnancy to term, and that other people should not judge that choice. Pro-choice is the broad middle of the spectrum on the abortion issue, it is not an "extreme". (The opposite of pro-choice is forced abortion or forced childbirth.)

- **Pro-Life**: The stance that women should welcome every pregnancy, whether wanted or not. In particular, a personal stance against abortion that the person believes everyone else should follow. Most "pro-life" people are also anti-choice.

- **Anti-Choice**: The stance that abortion should be mostly or totally criminalized, denying everyone the choice to have an abortion if they wish one, and requiring punishment or prosecution for those that have abortions and those that provide them. Anti-choice people often prioritize the life of the fetus over the lives of women.

- **Anti-Abortion**: The stance that abortion is morally wrong and should be prevented as much as possible, but wanting to keep it legal and respecting the right of others to choose a safe, legal abortion.

- **Pro-Abortion**: A term usually used by anti-choice groups to refer to pro-choice people, ignoring that the latter also advocate for sexual education, pre and post-natal care, and equality. However, some pro-choice people call themselves "pro-abortion" because they

see safe, legal, and accessible abortion as a positive ethical good that benefits women by saving their lives and health, and enabling them to take care of themselves and their families and pursue their dreams. (Of course, it does not mean they want or encourage women to get abortions.)

A Short History of Pro-Choice and Pro-Life

How did these terms come about? Surprisingly, Pro-Life started out in the 1960s as a human rights movement dedicated to activities that members found cruel, such as corporal and capital punishment. It morphed into "protecting the unborn" in the early 1970s, attempting to capitalize on the momentum created by the Hippie movement protesting the Vietnam War – their argument being that one could not protest war and believe in abortion. Anti-Choice groups chose the term in an attempt to convey that they were "for life" as opposed to being "against" anything. In conjunction with use of the phrase in *Roe v. Wade*, the term "Pro-Life" grew to be their most common name.

Pro-Choice came about as a response to the term Pro-Life. In the mid-1970s the term began to be used by Pro-Choice groups as a way to show they were not "Anti-Life" but, as the name suggests, arguing that people deserve a choice.

In the early 21st century, these terms are no longer viewed as optimal. Some argue that the term Pro-Choice is too "economical", suggesting that it implies consumption and lifestyle, rather than health and well-being. Others argue that the word "choice" creates a dichotomy between those who make "good" choices versus "bad" choices, taking away from the overall purpose of helping all women.

This is not to say that Pro-Life isn't more problematic. Many "pro-lifers" agree with the death penalty, or want to deny insurance coverage for prenatal and maternity care, or cut social assistance for the poor, and other anti-life actions. Even worse, "pro-life" activists have assassinated abortion providers, bombed abortion clinics and burnt them down, and still regularly harass and threaten abortion providers and women who have abortions. Most importantly, "pro-life" people are usually anti-choice and don't care when women suffer or die from unsafe, illegal abortion. Therefore, Pro-Life is purely a propaganda term that means the opposite in reality.

Reproductive Justice

Reproductive Justice is an important concept that broadens the scope of the Pro-Choice movement to refer not just to the legal right to have an abortion, but to include all aspects of women's health. It was created by women of colour in the United States to be inclusive and intersectional, acknowledging that women (and transgender people) have different issues with reproductive and sexual health depending on their social situation, race or ethnic background, and economic condition.

Reproductive Justice "*is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights*". The movement requires assisting women not only with abortions, but with pregnancy and parenting, freedom from violence and exploitation, and a broad spectrum of equal rights.

For more on how ARCC views Reproductive Justice, see *ARCC Position Paper #100 – Why ARCC Supports Reproductive Justice*: http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/postionpapers/100-reproductive-justice.pdf

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