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Reflections on Feminist Views of Abortion and Motherhood

By Callie Edgington

Feminist theory has attained a prominent place in society as the voice for women's issues that have historically been hidden or suppressed. Advocates of feminism have worked to give women voting rights, recognition for their abilities, knowledge and unique skills, as well as equality in the workplace, and opportunities for education. As women, much of how we live our lives today is due to the work of what were once thought radical feminists. Since the mid 1900s the feminist movement has employed abortion as its focus in extending the liberation of women. However, so much emphasis on the abortion movement left some women devalued for choosing to have children. Therefore, in more recent discussion, the value of motherhood has become an important attribute of feminist theory. This shift makes it necessary to reevaluate the abortion debate in light of the value of motherhood.

Pro-Choice advocates affirm abortion as an important option for all women, though most may never need it. In her article "Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens," Susan Sherwin explains that pregnancy causes many women to get sick, sometimes sick enough that they can't continue with jobs, school, or housework: "Not every woman is able to put her job, career, and studies on hold." "Women who feel "too young, too old, or who are unable to maintain lasting relationships may recognize that they will not be able to care properly for a child at this time" (Sherwin, 1991, p.345). A child may interfere with life plans and this has repercussions for the woman's entire life.

On this view, some women do not have the resources available to care for a child. To have the child would simply add to the "oppressed" state she already finds herself in. Therefore, to force her to bear this responsibility anyway "will exacerbate the social and economic forces already stacked against her by virtue of her sex" and may force her to "become dependent on men," possibly for the rest of her life (Sherwin, 1991, p.345). Dependence on men economically, socially, and sexually, is simply another way women are oppressed due to their gender. In order to be truly independent, women must have freedom from sexual duties as well as from the obligation of bearing children. "We need to reinterpret the idea of nature that underlies such (patriarchal) imperatives" because only then is real love possible. Love requires a relationship that is not "submissive to one gender, (and) not subject to reproduction" (Irigaray, 1993, pp. 418-419). Therefore promoters of this view contend that, in order for a woman to have the full freedom to pursue education, career, control of her own life, and a loving relationship, she must be in charge of her own sexuality and her own reproduction.

Feminism entered the abortion debate in the 60s with the goal of equalizing the roles of men and women in society. However, we now understand that equality does not mean sameness. Women have a unique voice; equal but separate from that of men, simply because of their femininity. This push for equality, without the emphasis on her unique perspective, allowed society to devalue a woman who made the choice to be a mother. She can no longer attend to career and household duties as she once could and therefore was seen as unequal to men. In order to end society's history of the subjugation of women, feminist advocates now understand that motherhood has inherent value equal to that of educational status or career success. Women may have separate

roles as mothers, but those roles are not less important than other roles they may choose. Feminist writers are realizing this and adjusting their theories accordingly.

These authors will point out the significance of motherhood on the development of the female mind. "There is a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion. This unity I will call 'maternal thinking'" (Ruddick, 1980, p.110). Ruddick goes on to say that a mother puts herself in a vulnerable position. She is held responsible for the malfunction of the growth of the child. She therefore seeks to preserve the child as well as allow him or her to grow into a person that is acceptable to society. In response to a seemingly hostile life, a mother develops a metaphysical attitude, "governed by the priority of keeping over acquiring, of conserving the fragile, of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary to the child's life . . . It therefore recognizes humility and resilient cheerfulness as virtues of its practice" (Ruddick, 1980, p.112). Ruddick is emphasizing that the value women have as mothers that may be overlooked, not only by society as a whole, but even by women who are not yet mothers themselves. The virtues of humility and cheerfulness have historically been given subordinate definitions, but this is a result of oppression that has been so evident in the past. Women may not see the true form of motherhood that is worthwhile and attainable, (Ruddick, p.1980). Pure, liberating motherhood involves a "disciplined perseverance in the unnecessarily beautiful artifacts of the culture (mothers have) created" (Ruddick, 1980, p.113).

Perhaps we can now reevaluate the abortion discussion in light of recently promoted views of motherhood. If motherhood has inherent value for the woman that she can not gain anywhere else, perhaps it is depriving a woman of that value when she is forced to abort her child due to economic, educational, or career restraints. Feminism needs to engage culture by helping women raise their children and by encouraging men to be supportive of the child they have created. This support needs to be promoted especially to fathers who would not otherwise have a relationship with the mother and child, but also to husbands, who leave the trials of parenting entirely to the mother. It is not only fair, but moral that men share in childcare: "to prevent or excuse men from maternal practices is to encourage them to separate . . . the privilege of parenthood from its cares" (Ruddick, 1980, p.118). The knowledge that there is a support system ready to help in the raising of her child is crucial for any woman see the value in motherhood. It seems apparent that abortion takes away that very satisfying role, so that she may never understand the full capacity of what makes her unique as a woman. Encouraging society to take a more active role in the lives of both mothers and children allows women to continue with educational and career objectives that are important to them, without depriving them of the ability to be a mother (Luker, 1984). If this can be fully realized, there would be no need for the abortion debate at all. Every child would be a wanted child, not due to being chosen during pregnancy, but by the inherent value such a child will bring to the mother, the father, and society as a whole.

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