



Can Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Activists Recognize the Socioeconomic Realities of Abortion?

Hannah Phillips, University of Oxford

The American abortion debate features “pro-life” activists wielding pictures of fetuses and “pro-choice” advocates telling horror stories about women forced to travel for hundreds of miles to access safe abortions. The struggle seems an irresolvable moral conflict – and both sides claim to be “pro-women.” Pro-choice organizations advocate that abortion be kept legal and made increasingly accessible because women have the right to privacy in matters of reproduction. Pro-life groups argue that the acceptance of abortion unjustly pits women against their children.

My research takes stock of activists on both sides – and identifies those that focus not just on the moral aspects but also on the socioeconomic context of abortion. In fact, abortion is mainly an issue for less privileged women, and if more pro-life and pro-choice groups recognized the economic realities, there would be possibilities for compromise.

An Overview of Mainstream Activist Groups

A forest of advocacy groups drives fierce, highly moralistic abortion debates in American politics. The most important **pro-life organizations** fit into the following categories:

- **Broad pro-life advocates** such as the National Right to Life Committee and Americans United for Life lobby and mount public campaigns to defend human life from conception to natural death; beyond fighting abortion, these groups seek to outlaw euthanasia and stem cell research.
- **Christian conservative advocates** such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America oppose abortion as part of a mission to preserve Christian values. For these groups, abortion destroys a life and prevents a woman from fulfilling her role as a mother.
- **Legal activist groups** such as the American Center for Law and Justice lobby governments and courts to define abortion as one of many human rights violations.
- **African American pro-lifers** such as the National Black Pro-Life Union and TooManyAborted.com argue that legal terminations predominantly abort Black children.
- **Crisis pregnancy centers** work to aid women facing unintended pregnancies while discouraging them from choosing abortions.

The major **pro-choice organizations** fall into the following types:

- **Reproductive rights groups** such as the National Abortion Rights Action League (usually called NARAL-Pro-Choice America) lobby for access to abortion, contraception, and sex education.
- **Reproductive health groups** such as the Planned Parenthood Federation of America mobilize and work with healthcare providers to offer abortion as one of a range of sexual health services, including contraception, pre-natal care, and treatment for sexually transmitted infections.
- **Feminist women’s organizations** such as the National Organization for Women publically campaign and lobby for abortion access as one of many vital rights to ensure female equality with men.
- **Legal advocates** such as the American Civil Liberties Union lobby government and pursue cases on the premise that access to legal abortion is one of many basic human rights.

- **Abortion funds** such as the National Network of Abortion Funds pursue the narrow purpose of providing financial support to women who need it to obtain abortions.

Alternative Activist Groups Focused on Socioeconomic Realities

While most mainstream activists stress clashing moral values, many women seek abortions for socioeconomic reasons. Contraception may be unaffordable or good sex education unavailable (though many studies show it reduces unintended pregnancies). After conception, some women realize that having a baby (or another baby) would interfere with work or school or their ability to care for existing dependents. In fact, 61% of those who obtain abortions already have children. Yet only a few pro-life and pro-choice advocates focus on these socioeconomic realities, such as:

- **Feminists for Life**, which maintains that abortion is anti-feminist and would not need to exist if women were truly equal to men. This group offers parenting resources to women and lobbies governments to improve laws that reduce the burden of motherhood.
- **SisterSong Collective**, a “reproductive justice” group that treats abortion as one of many reproductive issues facing women of color. In the reproductive justice framework, the right not to bear children and the right to raise children safely are equally important.

If such alternative socioeconomically focused narratives became more important to mainstream abortion activism, the pro-life and pro-choice sides might find more room for agreement. Differences would not disappear, but advocates could work towards reducing unwanted pregnancies with sex education and contraception. And they could unite to make motherhood a more viable option for women who need economic support, maternity leave, and child care.

Although some pro-choice groups have recognized that reproductive empowerment is linked to economic justice, pro-life activists have so far been reluctant to broaden their focus from preserving unborn life to include attention to issues often identified with liberals. Some pro-life groups also oppose sex education and contraception, and even the group Feminists for Life considers these issues outside its mission.

Clearly, the two sides in abortion fights will never agree morally as long as one side sees only “murder” where the other sees only “female equality and freedom.” Yet if even a few pro-choice and pro-life advocates more fully addressed the socioeconomic realities surrounding most abortions, they could occasionally work together on behalf of reforms that are truly “pro-women.”

Read more in Hannah Phillips, “Pro-Women? Abortion Activism in a Socioeconomic Context,” Bachelor of Arts Thesis, Harvard College, March 2015.