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The Right to Safe and Legal Abortion.

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The Right to Safe and Legal Abortion

Thesis: The right to have an abortion is a necessity if women are to participate fully and freely in society.

Summary: Abortion must remain accessible to women. A woman's right to have an abortion is necessary to ensure full and free participation in society. There needs to remain a clear line between the government's authority and a woman's autonomy in choosing to have a child, which the United States Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* ensures. A woman's ability to control her own reproductive activity is a fundamental right that impacts every aspect of her life. The *Roe v. Wade* decision described abortion as part of a woman's constitutionally protected right to privacy. Many pro-choice advocates believe a woman must have the power to control a decision as significant as parenthood. Before abortion was legalized, pregnant women usually waited longer before deciding to seek an abortion, a delay which becomes more dangerous to the woman's health. Anti-abortion laws impact the poor more than any other group, since those with sufficient financial resources can afford to find safe ways to deal with unwanted pregnancies.

[Trends in Abortion Policy](#)

A woman's ability to control her own reproductive activity is a fundamental right that impacts every aspect of her life. Although this right was constitutionally guaranteed by the Supreme Court's 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, the recent conservative shift in the Supreme Court and the White House under George W. Bush has endangered the future of reproductive freedom in the US.

The *Roe v. Wade* decision described abortion as part of a woman's constitutionally protected right to privacy. The landmark ruling was part of a growing trend in Supreme Court decisions that strengthened the rights of couples and individuals to make birth control decisions without interference from the government. At the time of *Roe v. Wade*, several states had passed their own laws broadening the availability of abortion and family planning services in general.

The Supreme Court decision declared that until the fetus is able to survive on its own outside the mother's womb, it cannot be considered an autonomous person, thus affirming that the mother's choice regarding parenthood supersedes the potential rights of the unborn fetus. The decision reflected the prevailing attitude in the U.S at the time.

Abortion was a legal and accepted practice in the United States until it was criminalized in the mid-1800s, resulting in approximately 100 years of increased pregnancy-related complications and fatalities. The negative aspects of the draconian opposition to abortion eventually became clear, and a wave of activism on the part of women, physicians and even religious leaders began pressuring the legal system, at the state and federal level, for change.

[The Right to Choose](#)

Many supporters of the right to choose abortion feel that a woman must have the power to control a decision as significant as parenthood, and that individuals should be able to influence decisions to the same extent that those decisions affect their lives. Since pregnancy affects the mother more than any other interested parties, she should have the most control over this decision. Pregnancy and motherhood affect every aspect of a woman's life -- public and private, emotional and physical -- and *Roe v. Wade* confirmed

that it was an invasion of privacy for the government to step in and make reproductive decisions on a woman's behalf.

Recent research outlines the number of important factors women consider when choosing whether or not to undergo an abortion: financial instability or debt, conflicting career goals, and problems with spouses or boyfriends all affect a woman's decision to become a mother. Access to abortion and other family planning resources have allowed women to maintain control of their lives and make reasoned, realistic decisions about pregnancy and motherhood.

Family planning and abortion rights have allowed women to be more independent and productive in work and school, thus allowing them to better provide for themselves and their families. A number of studies indicate that children in the United States have enjoyed a higher quality of life since the legalization of abortion. Without the burden of unintended or unwanted pregnancy, families are less likely to suffer from poverty, and are more likely to maintain two-parent households without the benefit of welfare.

[Reproductive Health](#)

Before abortion was legalized, pregnant women usually waited longer before deciding to seek an abortion. However, the longer a woman waits before having an abortion, the more dangerous the procedure becomes. Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, there was no regulation of safe practices, and many unqualified people set themselves up as abortion providers, using unsafe methods and unsanitary facilities, based solely on their desire to profit from the outlawed procedure.

In 1965, for example, almost 200 women died from illegal and unsafe abortions -- today, abortion is eleven times safer than giving birth to a child. In just one California hospital, abortion-related infections fell by 75 percent after the procedure was legalized. After *Roe v. Wade*, birthrates among teenagers, unmarried women, and women over the age of 35 plummeted. Prior to 1973, these same groups suffered the greatest negative health and social consequences as a result of unwanted pregnancy or botched abortions.

It has been estimated that in the two decades before *Roe v. Wade*, between 200,000 and one million illegal abortions were performed every year. Half of all pregnancies in the US are unintended, and if abortion were still illegal these women would have few safe or desirable options available. In states that have local laws restricting the availability of abortion, there is a significant impact on the status of women. For example, women in these states tend to have the lowest levels of both income and education, and less money tends to be invested in education and foster care programs, welfare, and adoption services.

[Socioeconomic Factors in the Abortion Debate](#)

Anti-abortion laws impact the poor more than any other group, since those with sufficient financial resources can afford to find safe ways to deal with unwanted pregnancies. For example, prior to the *Roe v. Wade* decision, wealthy women would often travel to other states where abortion laws had been weakened. Soon after abortion was legalized in England, hundreds of American women traveled to that country to obtain the procedure. However, travel was not an option for poor women who were forced into either having an unwanted child or attempting an abortion using the services of a potentially dangerous abortion provider. In 1965, illegal abortion was so dangerous that the unregulated practice accounted for 17 percent of all pregnancy-related deaths.

The poor are in much greater need of safe, legal abortion services because they are more likely to experience unplanned pregnancy, as a result of a lack of health education or access to family planning services, compared to more affluent groups. Since *Roe v. Wade*, the availability and safety of abortion procedures has greatly improved, especially through the efforts of non-profit family planning organizations (such as Planned Parenthood) that focus specifically on lower income populations in urban and rural settings.

[Abortion in the Third World](#)

Abortion is just one option in what should be a range of choices and family planning information available to everyone. Unfortunately, the third world countries that most need these services often have the least access to them. Recent research indicates that at least 80,000 women die every year in developing countries as a result of unsafe abortions. This is due to the fact that over 20 million unsafe/illegal abortions are provided each year in poorer countries. These countries have rapidly increasing populations while suffering from poverty, inadequate health care, malnutrition, high rates of treatable diseases and unemployment.

In many third world countries, abortion is illegal. Women feel less empowered to control their reproductive lives and less able to discuss these issues with their partners. Unwanted pregnancies in the third world are often the result of a lack of information and access to birth control devices. The problem is compounded by the lack of health education, which leads to social stigmas that reduce the probability that a woman will consider an abortion, even if happens to be a legal option. Tens of thousands of deaths can be prevented each year in the third world if abortion is made legal, safe and affordable in these countries.

[Assault on Abortion Rights](#)

With the election of George W. Bush, abortion rights came under a new assault, a significant point being the 2003 ban on the procedure which opponents call "partial-birth abortion." While the constitutionality of this ban has been under challenge since its passing, the decades-old Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* is clearly no longer guaranteed to continue protecting the privacy rights of women. The current justices of the Supreme Court are more conservative than they have been in past decades, and recent court rulings indicate that the balance of power between pro-choice and anti-choice justices can shift, creating new legal precedents endangering *Roe v. Wade*.

Securing a woman's access to abortion as one option in a comprehensive program of family planning and health education has been a hard-fought victory. An individual's right to privacy is constitutionally guaranteed, and must continue to be protected from government interference. However, the old problems of poverty and legal access to reproductive health services still exist for millions in the third world, and new political problems in the US are threatening the progress that has been made in the last several decades.