

Readers' Forum

Right to Abortion

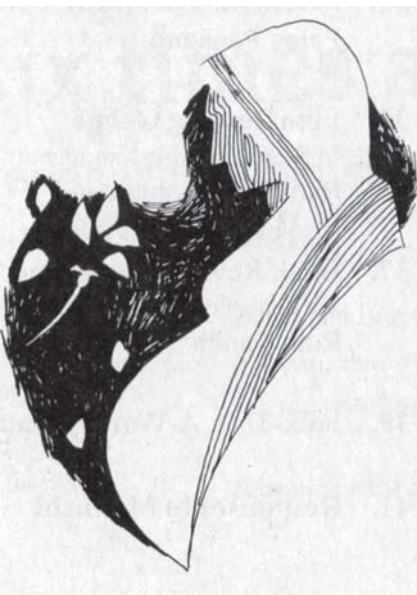
In many countries, abortion is legally defined as a spontaneous or artificial termination of pregnancy before the fetus has reached a viable stage. Because of wide differences in medical technology, this definition results in large variations between different countries in the legal determination of when an abortion has occurred. What an abortion is to an Indian may be a still-birth or even a potential live-birth to someone living where advanced medical technology is widely available. As medicine advances, the stage of gestation at which a fetus can be artificially sustained becomes earlier and earlier. So what is defined as an abortion today may not be so defined ten years from now.

Some obstetricians and epidemiologists seek to define abortion more simply by using the weight attained by the fetus as a single indicator. This leads us to a similar relative definition. Clearly, for a long time to come, abortion will mean different things in rich, industrialised countries on the one hand, and the poorer countries (where tertiary medical care is not yet fully developed), on the other.

This does not detract at all from the fact that millions of pregnancies are terminated each year ending all possibilities of what would have been a viable fetus. I use the inadequate phrase 'viable' instead of 'normal'

because, amongst these terminations are pregnancies resulting in malformed or dead fetuses (though their proportion to normal pregnancies is very small). Nor can I call all such terminations medical, because many are performed without skilled personnel, and without some express medical purpose (like saving the mother's life and sanity), or indeed, even without the voluntary participation of the mother.

The recent debate in Cairo at the International Conference on Population and Development seemed to be conducted on two planes. One, whether a pregnancy should be terminated at all (including the papal objections on contraception) and two, who decides that an abortion should be effected?



The Roman Catholic Church argues that a pregnancy should not be interrupted, since it declares that life begins with pregnancy. In simple terms, the Catholic Church wants population control to be practised only by methods that involve the use of periodic or permanent sexual abstinence. The Catholic Church has strong support in the Islamic world on this issue. Once periodic or permanent abstinence is touted as the only desirable means of birth control, each fertilisation must then necessarily be followed by non-intervention, except such measures that will help the 'welfare' and life of both the mother and the fetus. In effect, such a stand refuses to allow the abortion of children conceived in a rape. Of course, this assumes that a religious establishment has the mandate needed to adjudicate on the question. While some will hold that institutionalised religion has the unfettered right to decide such issues, others will point out that though religion has the moral authority to guide one on the question, religion itself has become a matter of such personal interpretation that religious establishments should be left out of it. Still others will suggest that pregnancy and birth are acts with not just religious, but social, personal, economic, and health connotations and considerations, and therefore religion cannot solely determine the matter.

Among those with the medical skills and credentials that allow them

to perform abortions, you will find those who will not perform an abortion, come what may. Others feel equally vehement that they must honour the wishes of the potential parents, and yet others, perhaps a majority, will aver that abortion is only desirable under certain specified circumstances. But even this majority will not agree on the list of conditions for a pregnancy to be terminated. For example, an obstetrician trained in cardiology may be confident enough to lead a pregnancy to its conclusion when the mother has certain types of heart disease, while for most other physicians the same medical condition in a pregnant woman may result in an 'absolute' decision to end gestation.

A vociferous voice says that not only should abortions be freely available, but the decision to do so be left to the free choice of the parent(s). Now we move on to the second question (no less controversial than the first): Who should decide? The mother? Obviously, say the feminists. Some men say husbands should. Others say both should, a procedure becoming increasingly difficult, and often meaningless, in many conceptions where the couple are not living together. Or should the state control the process? Not all will agree that the state has such a right to decide, though there are states that have appropriated this decision to themselves. Even those who believe in state jurisdiction will not agree on the mechanisms of control. Should the incentives be positive or negative, legal or extra-legal, within or without a democratic framework? Imagine a world where all men and women are injected at birth with a chemical that blocks reproduction and that only the state, after two partners give a specific undertaking not to abort, can unblock the chemical. Imagine also that the state has a bank of anonymous sperms



and eggs from which it can choose combinations and create as many new citizens as it pleases, totally *in vitro*. Who will have the right over these *in vitro* growing fetuses? The technicians? The state? The truth is, when we speak of 'who has the right to abort', the unborn child is made into a kind of copyright item. The mothers want to make this determination, so do some fathers, so do some states, and so do some religions. No hegemonic formula is possible in the face of the diverse arguments at every stage of the reproductive process. Perhaps the current debate is part of an inevitable crisis that a civilisation which has learnt to have some control over the viability of life must face. There can be no easy resolution of this dilemma, not the least because we are no longer just *Homo sapiens*, but also *Homo hierarchicus*, *Homo intellectus*, etc. Part of the debate must be conducted

on a conceptual level. We know only too well that abstractions are capable of endless patterns, and each pattern can claim to truly reflect a universal solution.

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== Mothers and Daughters ==

In the present day when we talk about and fight for women's equality, we generally forget that much harm is done by women to themselves by adopting attitudes of self-neglect, self-devaluation and self-depreciation regarding their capabilities. Unconscious fear of the consequences (e.g. associating equality of rights and privileges with social rejection and being seen as unfeminine), generates in many women a feeling of inferiority that makes them submissive, affiliative, helpless and male-dependent. The mother's role, for this

reason, is of pivotal importance as she consciously or subconsciously impels her girl child to learn stereotypical female behaviour right from the beginning, even at the cost of the girl's intellectual and innovative capabilities.

The percentage of women who are independently achieving, advancing and striving for excellence is very small. A woman's existence in society is often contingent more upon whom she marries and the social status of her husband than it is on her own qualities or achievements. Her sense of her own femininity and others' perception of her as a woman is often jeopardised if she excels in academic or professional fields. If a woman surpasses her husband in a professional field, many men would perceive this as a threat to his masculine superiority, personal satisfaction and interpersonal relations with his wife. Rare would be the case of a man found working in his wife's department as her subordinate while the couple still enjoy a happy married life.

Different behavioural patterns for handling male and female children begin soon after birth. Having little awareness of his/her sex, the first attachment of every infant is with the mother, which is why her role in the upbringing of the child is so crucial. Literature on child development shows that in almost all the cultures across the world, mothers handle and stimulate male children more vigorously than female children. This maternal attentiveness and stimulation facilitates the male child's efforts to emerge with his "differentiated self" earlier than the female child does. He gradually gains confidence and competence to deal effectively with his environment.

The Freudians stress the importance of the first three years of

life when the child learns to be independent and expands his/her abilities through guided participation, encouragement and approval by the parents or other relatives. Many mothers invariably show unambivalent pleasure and pride in their son's activities. Perceiving him to be sturdy, active, independent, competent, and competitive in exploring and striving towards excellence, she feels happy when his behaviour fits in with this image. On the other hand, if a little girl exhibits behaviour like that of her brother, some mothers are likely to disapprove, discourage and condemn it. The female child is induced to realise that her effectiveness lies in developing affiliative ties, and even her safety and well-being in later life are dependent upon affectional relations. The mother's behaviour is usually not conscious differentiation, as her attitude towards male and female children is more or less guided by sex-role stereotypes which she has internalised. These stereotypes tend to be passed on to her growing children through day-to-day interaction. As society sets the norms for acceptable masculine and feminine behaviour, it is clear that femininity is not an objective fact, but rather socially defined conduct and expectations.

Societal traditions dictate popular notions of man's superior position in life, e.g., a man should be taller and older than his wife, and he should surpass her in academic and professional achievements. This accepted norm tends to limit the chances of brilliant women excelling and finding suitable life partners for themselves. It is not uncommon that top class women in any field are considered dangerous, masculine, aggressive, intimidating, and overly intelligent by men. It is noteworthy that few women pursue the fields of

science, technology, administration or management, and achieve eminence. Many of them opt for lower level jobs or even abandon their careers altogether if they find their home life getting rough. It is not uncommon that after marriage, a woman's chances of further intellectual or professional achievements recede due to interpersonal tension in her marriage as a result of her success.

The less we consciously or unconsciously discriminate between sons and daughters, the more we will be providing them a healthy environment to actualise their potential worth. While on the one hand, overprotecting daughters and encouraging their prolonged dependency may affect girls' motivation to achieve, it must be acknowledged that a single-minded motive for excellence is not necessarily a prerequisite for mental health or for a healthy society. The intention here is neither to view the male psyche as an ideal nor to devalue the woman's need for affiliation and nurturance. Rather, the more diffused achievement needs of women may make them more flexible to benefit from opportunities for career advancement as well as enjoying a richer family life. The efforts of some women in blending both the need for achievement and affiliation, and their success in multiple dimensions — marriage, family and career — is really creditable.

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