The “Big Pink Elephant in the Room”

written by Marian Jones | January 28, 2022

The passing of SB8, dubbed the Texas bill, and the Alabama ban before it, are significant because the anti-abortion movement has gotten increasingly aggressive—and successful. This latest attack on reproductive health care is nothing new. Since 2010, several hardline Republicans in red-state legislatures have pushed strong “pro-life” legislation in hopes of overturning or amending *Roe v. Wade*. “Heartbeat” acts have been passed in Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio. A second-trimester ban has been passed in Utah and Arkansas.[1] *The Hill* predicts that the Supreme Court will overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022.[2]

In the face of such a horrific bill, reproductive rights organizations failed to mount an effective counteroffensive. In my opinion, the shortcomings of the reproductive rights movement are related to racism within the major reproductive rights groups, which resulted in critical problems, such as allowing the repeal of the Hyde Amendment to fall by the wayside, the nonprofit-industrial complex—which negatively impacts independent clinics that perform almost all abortions, and the siloing of small independent clinics. These missteps are reversible, but whether or not the political will exists is debatable. For the pro-choice movement to endure and become bigger and more powerful, we must reevaluate and work outside the system. Change is going to have to come from the grassroots.

According to abortion organizer Jenny Brown, low-wage, jobless, and uninsured people have more abortions than those with wealth or good health insurance.[3] Because birth control is expensive and requires regular clinic or doctor visits, low-income persons who cannot afford it or cannot take time off work are more likely to have unintended births. Brown claims that Black women had double the rate of abortion as white women. Since Black women encounter discrimination at work, they are less likely to have adequate medical coverage, making it even more difficult for them to get reliable contraceptives.

Yet, to its own detriment, the reproductive rights movement is not being led by these, the most oppressed in the movement. Women of color in the movement face marginalization, hostility, and tokenism. Workers of color at key reproductive rights groups have spoken out against racism, in interviews, internal meetings, and social media, reports *Buzzfeed News*.[4] These are progressive organizations that espouse diversity yet inwardly marginalize Black personnel. While reproductive rights are a key concern for people of color, the movement’s leaders are primarily white. *Buzzfeed News* cites significant turnover rates among personnel of color and alleges they are routinely subjected to microaggressions such as tokenization and other types of discrimination. Workers at four Planned Parenthood affiliates alleged discrimination in the form of being disciplined and dismissed by their bosses whereas their non-Black peers were not.

White supremacy also manifests in the battle over the Hyde Amendment. Since 1976, the Hyde Amendment has prohibited the use of federal funds to pay for abortion procedures for anyone on Medicaid, Medicare, or the Children’s Health Insurance Program. It hampers reproductive services

for many working-class and poor women, and it disproportionately harms women of color. Because the abortion rights movement failed to battle and defeat Hyde, the discriminatory effects of his legislation continue to damage women.[5]

According to Amy Littlefield writing for *Lux Magazine*, Planned Parenthood, like many other large nonprofits, has begun to resemble the business sector.[6] Littlefield writes, "Nonprofits of any stripe are beholden to wealthy donors who want to fund marquee projects with trackable outcomes rather than invest in unglamorous line items … that build sustainable organizations."

The abortion movement's NGOization and white leadership have made major nonprofits moderate and corporatist. This is because funders and foundations have links to the centrist Democratic Party. Both Obama and Biden had a majority in both chambers but failed or refused to enact legislation enshrining the legal right to abortion. Moreover, Nancy Pelosi said Democrats don't have to be pro-choice,[7] and Biden reiterated his support for the Hyde Amendment during a presidential debate.[8] Democrats blame the undemocratic filibuster, as well as West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin and Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema. Yet, they choose not to protect abortion rights even though they can, since it would enrage the ruling class. (In *Birth Strike*, Jenny Brown argues that the elite opposes both abortion and birth control since their power is dependent on high birth rates, surplus labor, and keeping wages down.[9])

The movement for reproductive justice, on the other hand, is smaller and less well-funded. Reproductive justice is an interdisciplinary concept and practice pioneered in 1994 by women of color who have suffered from reproductive injustice. They founded the group SisterSong, which says reproductive justice is the ability to choose whether to have a child as well as the freedom to raise that child in a safe environment.[10] Reproductive justice includes comprehensive sex education in schools, prevention of domestic violence, affordable and reliable contraception, fertility treatments, accessible child care options, safe pregnancies and postpartum care, and other support services for low-income families.[11] Reproductive justice organizations are already working relentlessly to solve these and other challenges, doing the critical work we need to have real reproductive justice in this country, but they are hampered by a lack of the high-powered donors that major reproductive rights groups have. The focus put on organizations like Planned Parenthood results in public money and donations getting diverted from independent clinics or reproductive rights groups with less influence.

Consider the grassroots organization Jane's Due Process in Texas, which assists teens seeking safe abortions. Apparently, you can still get an abortion in Texas, but you have to go to a judge and acquire court authorization. Jane's guides patients through the process, provides a free attorney, covers any abortion-related costs, and offers emotional support.[12]

When Alabama adopted a nearly total abortion ban in the summer of 2019, celebrities and liberal donors poured money into Planned Parenthood, even though independent clinics perform the vast majority of abortions. Planned Parenthood did not provide abortions in Alabama at the time. (They stopped performing abortions in Alabama in March 2017. Planned Parenthood regional affiliate president Staci Fox told the *New York Times* that the organization planned to resume services late last year, which they did.[13]) Autonomous clinics are mainly inconspicuous and unable to garner funds like Planned Parenthood.

Only about 4 percent of all abortions are conducted in hospitals, and 1 percent, in doctors' offices; the majority of abortions are performed in private clinics. Furthermore, clinics unaffiliated with Planned Parenthood perform about 60 percent of all abortions in the United States, according to groups who track the figures.[14] Such clinics have no political influence or lobbying abilities.

According to Pamela Merritt, co-founder of Reproaction, a reproductive rights group, Planned Parenthood's judicial priorities are similar to those of a lobby for a for-profit corporation such as McDonald's, which is concentrated on maintaining the company's own survival.[15] She went on to say that activists refer to the group as "the big pink elephant in the room" because of its unchecked influence and its fundraising ability.

In her book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, Melinda Cooper details why feminists had to open their own abortion clinics.[16] In the late 1960s, militants with the Chicago Women's Liberation Union learned how to perform abortions, and by the time of the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, they were purportedly doing up to fifty procedures each week. Deinstitutionalization was strongly pushed among feminist groups that questioned the epistemic power of professional medical elites to pathologize non-normative behavior. So, feminists began creating their own self-governed institutions outside of the medical establishment.

However, this isolation has now led to a weakening of abortion clinics. As argued by Anne Rumberger in *Jacobin*,[17] there were several compelling reasons for the independent clinic model in the years that followed *Roe*, including "the massive increase in demand that hospitals were not incentivized to meet." But this puts those clinics at risk of physical and financial harm while also perpetuating prejudices associated with this common procedure.

The issues are complicated, and no one knows how to answer the question, "How do we start winning again?" The elimination of the Hyde Amendment should be a central demand. This issue emphasizes the difference between liberal feminism and socialist-feminist abortion policy. The former stresses the rule of law and individual liberty, which are vital but insufficient. After initially focusing on free abortion on demand, the latter expanded to include child care, jobs that pay a living wage, an end to sterilization abuse, health care, and other necessities that allow women to make an informed and uncoerced decision about whether or not to have a child and raise them.

We can no longer wait for organizations such as Planned Parenthood to acknowledge the impact of white supremacy in their organizations, the importance of private clinics, and the faults of the nonprofit-industrial complex and to embrace a larger vision of what reproductive rights and justice entail. Instead, we must continue building our own radical movements and radical organizations armed with the correct analysis of what went wrong.

Notes

1. Anne Rumberger, "The Fight for Abortion Must Be Part of the Fight for Medicare for All," *Jacobin*, Jan. 22, 2020, (accessed 11/1021).

2. The Hill, "Republicans may regret restricting reproductive rights," Sept. 12, 2021, (accessed 11/11/21).

3. Jenny Brown, *Without Apology: The Abortion Struggle Now* (Verso Books), (accessed 11/11/21).

4. Ema O'Connor, "Reproductive Rights Groups Face Reckoning on Racism," Buzzfeed News, Aug. 21, 2020, (accessed 11/10/21).

5. KFF, "The Hyde Amendment and Coverage for Abortion Services," March 5, 2021 (accessed 11/20/21).

6. Amy Littlefield, "The Struggle to Unionize Planned Parenthood in Texas," *Lux Magazine* (accessed 11/12/21).

7. “Pelosi: Don’t kick out anti-abortion Dems from party,” *CNN Politics*, May 3, 2017 (accessed 11/20/21).

8. Felicia Sonmez, “Abortion rights advocates criticize Biden over support for Hyde Amendment,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2019 (accessed 11/20/21).

9. Jenny Brown, *Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight over Women’s Work* (PM Press) (accessed 11/20/21).

10. SisterSong, “Reproductive Justice – Sister Song” (accessed 11/12/21).

11. Loretta J. Ross, “The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice” (accessed 11/09/21).

12. Hannah Matthews, “Jane’s Due Process Continues to Help Teens in Texas Access Abortion,” *Teen Vogue*, Oct. 1, 2021 (accessed 11/20/21).

13. Elizabeth Dias and Lisa Lerer, “How a Divided Left Is Losing the Battle on Abortion” *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 2019 (accessed 11/10/21).

14. Dias and Lerer.

15. Dias and Lerer.

16. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Princeton University Press) (accessed 11/1121).

17. Rumberger.