



≡ Menu

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# Adoption Is A Feminist Issue, But Not For The Reasons You Think



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# Adoption is a complex billion-dollar business that often increases inequality.

In their efforts to cure what they see as a moral crisis infecting our nation, the anti-choice movement has historically thrown their power, money, and influence behind their two favorite antidotes to abortion: abstinence-only education and adoption. In any era when reproductive rights are being rolled back, as they are now, feminists need to get stronger and clearer about where we stand and what we're fighting for. We all know, both from data and from common sense, that abstinence education is not only a failure but wildly detrimental to the health and safety of young people. But there doesn't yet seem to be a broader understanding, even in the mainstream feminist and pro-choice movements, that promoting adoption has its problems too.

Mainstream feminism — feminism by and for middle and upper-middle-class white women — has historically gotten behind adoption. Feminists have supported the rights of single people and same-gendered families to adopt, the rights of adoptive families in contested adoptions, and policies intended to get children into adoptive homes faster. What's missing from mainstream feminism is any explicit support for families of origin: the parents who have to lose their children, the families that must be dismantled in order for adoptive families to be built.

When I was growing up, my parents always told me how brave and smart my birth mother was. How she loved me so much that she made the selfless choice to give me up because she wanted me to have a better life — because as an unwed 17-year-old, a high school senior, she knew she couldn't be a good parent to me. She had

made this choice, they said, selflessly and graciously, with the support of everyone around her, so that I could have the life I truly deserved. My parents did not invent this language, of course; it was given to them by adoption professionals, adoption books, and support groups, and they repeated it, lovingly, insistently, until we all believed it was true. Like so many adoptees, however, the truths of my beginnings are infinitely more complicated, more painful, and have nothing whatsoever to do with choice.

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After finding my family of origin in my early twenties, I was able to piece together a more accurate, nuanced story of my beginnings. A story of a white, working-class girl who benefitted from racial privilege, but lacked any real financial resources or power of her own. A terrified girl. A girl who was pressured, demonized, and ostracized, by her own family and community. A girl who was told by loved ones and professionals that she was unfit to be a mother because she was young and unmarried, because she wouldn't be able to give me the things I needed, like food or love or a moral compass. Though she wanted to keep me, her parents sent her away to one of those homes where they hid pregnant girls and shamed them into compliance — the kind of place people say didn't exist after *Roe v. Wade*. Except this was 1978, half a decade after people who could get pregnant had theoretically won the ability to make more uninhibited choices about whether or not to become parents. My mother, in reality, did not have the ability to make a

real, authentic choice. And many pregnant people still do not have this ability. Because a choice made in the absence of other choices has nothing to do with choice.

The fact is, most people who relinquish their children for adoption or have their children taken away from them, both in the U.S. and internationally, do so as a result of economic and racial injustice. In a recent study published by The Donaldson Adoption Institute, only a third of first mothers (often the preferred term instead of “birth mothers”) who were interviewed reported that the decision to relinquish their parental rights was largely based on their own wishes. The number one reason first mothers relinquish their parental rights, according to the DAI report, is lack of financial resources (82%), followed by the absence of social support, and isolation. In addition, most cases of children removed from their families by state intervention and adopted through foster care are reported as cases of neglect, which are typically a result of poverty and the classist and racist biases embedded in the fabric of the child welfare system that deem poor, mostly Black and brown parents as immoral and unfit.

In the case of an unwanted pregnancy, a pregnant person seeking options counseling is ideally given thorough, unbiased, non-judgmental information about their three options: abortion, adoption, and parenting. If a person is even considering adoption, they are typically referred to a local adoption agency by their health-care provider, or they find one on their own. Unfortunately, according to the National Pro-Choice Adoption Collaborative, over 95% of adoption agencies in this country are religiously affiliated. You likely won’t be surprised to hear that adoption professionals are often not giving thorough information about abortion as an option in their counseling practices — 40% of the mothers in the DAI study said it was never mentioned. But they’re also not presenting parenthood as a viable option, either.


According to the DAI study, most first mothers interviewed reported little to no access to information about parenting from adoption professionals. And yet, the vast majority — 87% of first mothers in the study — said their preferred option was in fact to parent their child. It's just that no one ever told them they had a right to do so, or offered resources to help. Many first mothers report they were already considered “birth mothers” the minute they walked through the agency doors, instead of pregnant people contemplating their options, and that the professionals they worked with unequivocally considered a positive outcome to be a signed and sealed adoption. And these are just some of your standard, run-of-the-mill American adoption agencies; we haven't even talked about the often criminally coercive crisis pregnancy centers which routinely pressure vulnerable people into relinquishing their children. Or the fact that many private adoptions are facilitated through lawyers as solely financial and legal transactions with zero social services attached to help anyone through this life-altering experience.

As reproductive rights are rolled back, timelines in which people can legally get abortions, should they have the resources and power to access them, are shrinking. This means more people could be left to decide between adoption and parenting as their only viable options. If already abysmal social services are also being rolled back, parenting becomes less of an option. And if adoption is being promoted by the very people who are rolling back our rights, what kind of promotion, what kind of agencies, and what kinds of counseling do we really think will be at the forefront of these efforts?

Here's a truth that can be hard to hear: Adoption is a trauma. The separation of parents and children, the dismantling of families, even at birth, is very often traumatic and can result in enormous amounts of suffering and lifelong

consequences for first parents and adoptees, as well as the families and communities to which they belong. The majority of first parents surveyed say they were never truthfully informed about the potential for trauma, to themselves or their children. They are often told they might feel a little sad for a while and then they'll get over it — but many don't. And many parents say they regret their decision, even if they feel like it was probably the right one to make at the time.

Here's an even harder truth: The adoption industry is a business. It generates billions of dollars each year and *requires* other people's children in order to stay profitable.

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Here's the toughest truth yet: Those children are almost always the children of poor and working class people, people of color, native and indigenous people, and young people. The people who adopt them, who directly benefit from the economic and racial oppression of these groups, are most often middle and upper-middle-class people and are primarily white.

The mainstream feminist movement has been, by and large, pro-adoption and has resisted an explicitly intersectional position on the inequities and injustices that typically bring adoptive families together. There are many reasons for this, but here are the two I think about the most:

1. Mainstream feminism has historically assumed that the decision to relinquish a child for adoption is a choice that people make freely, and that the people who choose it do so because they don't believe in abortion.
2. Mainstream white feminists are part of the primary demographic that stands to benefit the most from adoption.

There will likely always be children who need to be adopted into loving families and held tightly by those families, their communities, and high quality support services across a lifetime. But if, as feminists, we believe that all people should have the ability to make informed and supported choices about becoming parents or not, then we should work to make these instances rare. That means, of course, there will be fewer adoptable children, but we must understand that families are not interchangeable and that the desire to become a parent through adoption does not make anyone entitled to someone else's child. As it stands in this country, market forces in adoption, coupled with racist and classist state interventions and a reductive societal narrative that sees adoption as a fairy-tale ending where everybody wins, mean that people who have class and race privilege will continue to build their own families through the constrained choices, coercion, and loss of those who do not. This is a feminist issue.

The Reproductive Justice movement, pioneered and led by Black feminists and women of color, teaches us that all people should have “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.” If we think about adoption through this lens, and in particular, the right to parent the children we have, we see that we must ask something very different of mainstream feminism. Committing ourselves to reproductive justice, to human rights, demands that we fight for the economic and racial justice to ensure all pregnant people are able to

make informed, authentic decisions for themselves, and that families who want to stay together have the autonomy and support necessary to do so.

Committing ourselves to reproductive justice demands that we fight for families who want to stay together to have the autonomy and support necessary to do so. 🐦

I want to challenge feminist organizations and activists to incorporate an intersectional understanding of and position on adoption as part of their reproductive platforms. Read adoptee and first parent experiences. Listen to adoptee scholars, writers, activists, and artists. Listen to families who have been disrupted or broken through state intervention. Have the hard conversations. From the Women's March to Planned Parenthood to local grassroots organizing, there is much room for complexity, nuance, and growth around this issue. Feminists have a responsibility to take this on.

