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Arguments in favour of abortion

This article sets out the women's rights arguments that, in certain circumstances, favour abortion.

Women's rights arguments in favour of abortion

Here are some of the women's rights arguments in favour of abortion:

- women have a moral **right to decide what to do with their bodies**
- the right to abortion is vital for **gender equality**
- the right to abortion is vital for individual women to achieve their full potential
- banning abortion puts women at risk by forcing them to use illegal abortionists
- the right to abortion should be part of a portfolio of **pregnancy rights** that enables women to make a truly free choice whether to end a pregnancy

This argument reminds us that even in the abortion debate, we should regard the woman as a person and not just as a container for the foetus. We should therefore give great consideration to her rights and needs as well as those of the unborn.

Pro-choice women's rights activists do not take a casual or callous attitude to the foetus; the opposite is usually true, and most of them acknowledge that choosing an abortion is usually a case of choosing the least bad of several bad courses of action.

Abortion affects women disproportionately

Abortion is an important element of women's rights because women are more affected by the abortion debate than men, both individually (if they are considering an abortion) and as a gender.

Pregnancy has an enormous effect on the woman involved. As Sarah Weddington put it to the US Supreme Court in **Roe v Wade**:

A pregnancy to a woman is perhaps one of the most determinative aspects of her life. It disrupts her body. It disrupts her education. It disrupts her employment. And it often disrupts her entire family life.

Sarah Weddington in Roe v Wade

And Mrs Weddington continued:

And we feel that, because of the impact on the woman, this ... is a matter which is of such fundamental and basic concern to the woman involved that she should be allowed to make the choice as to whether to continue or to terminate her pregnancy.

Sarah Weddington in Roe v Wade

And the philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson wrote:

...a great deal turns for women on whether abortion is or is not available.

If abortion rights are denied, then a constraint is imposed on women's freedom to act in a way that is of great importance to them, both for its own sake and for the sake of their achievement of equality;

and if the constraint is imposed on the ground that the foetus has a right to life from the moment of conception, then it is imposed on a ground that neither reason nor the rest of morality requires women to accept, or even to give any weight at all.

Judith Jarvis Thomson

Bodily rights

Many people regard the right to control one's own body as a key moral right. If women are not allowed to abort an unwanted foetus they are deprived of this right.

The simplest form of the women's rights argument in favour of abortion goes like this:

- a woman has the right to decide what she can and can't do with her body
- the foetus exists inside a woman's body
- a woman has the right to decide whether the foetus remains in her body
- therefore a pregnant woman has the right to abort the foetus

The issue brings many ideas about human rights into brutally sharp focus.

- every human being has the right to own their own body
- a foetus is part of a woman's body
- therefore that woman has the right to abort a foetus they are carrying

The important US Supreme Court decision in **Roe v Wade** to some extent supported that view when it ruled that a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy came under the freedom of personal choice in family matters and was protected by the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution.

This leads some people to claim is that it is unethical to ban abortion because doing so denies freedom of choice to women and forces 'the unwilling to bear the unwanted'.

Opponents of this argument usually attack the idea that a foetus is 'part' of a woman's body. They argue that a foetus is not the same sort of thing as a leg or a liver: it is not just a part of a woman's body, but is (to some extent) a separate '**person**' with **its own right to life**.

A second objection to this argument is that people do not have the complete right to control their bodies. All people are subject to various restrictions on what they do with their bodies - and some of these restrictions (laws against suicide or **euthanasia**) are just as invasive.

Childbearing, freedom and equality

The women's liberation movement sees abortion rights as vital for gender equality.

They say that if a woman is not allowed to have an abortion she is not only forced to continue the pregnancy to birth but also expected by society to support and look after the resulting child for many years to come (unless she can get someone else to do so).

They argue that only if women have the right to choose whether or not to have children can they achieve equality with men: men don't get pregnant, and so aren't restricted in the same way.

Furthermore, they say, women's freedom and life choices are limited by bearing children, and the stereotypes, social customs, and oppressive duties that went with it.

They also regard the right to control one's own body as a key moral right, and one that women could only achieve if they had were entitled to abort an unwanted foetus.

No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.

Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood

In summary:

- women need free access to abortion in order to achieve full political, social, and economic equality with men
- women need the right to abortion in order to have the same freedoms as men
- women need the right to abortion to have full rights over their own bodies (including the right to decide whether or not to carry a foetus to birth) - without this right they do not have the same moral status as men

The US Supreme Court decision in **Roe v Wade**, which gave women a right to abortion (under certain conditions) is seen by many as having transformed the status of women in the USA.

This landmark decision... not only protects rights of bodily integrity and autonomy, but has enabled millions of women to participate fully and equally in society.

Kathryn Kolbert (1992)