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Women

# The Anti-Abortion Vanguard

- Features -

Publication date: Tuesday 27 October 2015

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### **Abortion opponents are at the forefront of a wider effort to punish poor women and attack social services.**

What do abortion opponents really oppose?

Hint: it's not just abortion. The same people who are trying, with considerable success, to make abortion unavailable also want to limit women's ability to avoid pregnancy in the first place. They also pay only lip service, if that, to ameliorating the struggles of low-income mothers and children, even as they claim poverty drives women to have abortions they don't want.

Let's look more closely at these two issues.

## **Birth Control and Sex Education**

According to the Guttmacher Institute, in 2010 publicly funded family planning services prevented 2.2 million unintended pregnancies, which would have otherwise led to 760,000 abortions. (That's added on to the countless pregnancies prevented by birth control the woman pays for privately or through insurance.) Increased use of better contraception, not restrictions on abortion access, led to a 13 percent drop in abortions between 2008 and 2011.

Modern contraception works pretty well: the two-thirds of women who use it consistently account for only 5 percent of abortions. And yet, not one major anti-abortion organization supports making birth control more available, much less educating young people in its use: not [Feminists for Life](#), [National Right to Life](#), or the [Susan B. Anthony List](#); not [American Life League](#), [Americans for Life](#), or [Pro-Life Action League](#), to say nothing of the [US Council of Catholic Bishops](#), [Priests for Life](#), and [Sisters for Life](#).

Anti-abortion organizations either openly oppose contraception, or are silent about it. Even [Democrats for Life of America](#) avoids the subject.

It is hard to find a public-health expert who will deny that the most effective way to prevent abortion is reliable contraception, but anti-abortion hardliners find ways to dispute this no-brainer. They argue that the Pill and emergency contraception are "abortifacients," "baby pesticide," and "killer pills" which prevent the implantation of fertilized eggs, no matter how many studies [show](#) that these drugs do not work this way. (By their math, the actual number of abortions is practically infinite — the millions of women on the Pill could be having "abortions" every month.)

They argue that birth control is ineffective (so it doesn't kill babies after all?), but they also argue that the root problem is "the contraceptive mentality," the contemporary norm of sex for pleasure and intimacy without fear of pregnancy.

When anti-abortion Republicans do come out for contraception, their proposals are unrealistic, if not disingenuous. "We pro-life advocates need to lead the [Title X](#) charge," [urged](#) Republican lobbyist Juleanna Glover in a rather desperate-sounding 2012 New York Times op-ed. Her suggestion — beef up Title X, but bar funds from "any group

that performs abortions” (that is, Planned Parenthood) “may sound like a reasonable compromise, but it’s a fantasy.

In the first place, there is no organized politically powerful anti-abortion force that is keen on birth control. The GOP of contraception enthusiasts like Nelson Rockefeller, Bob Packwood, the Richard Nixon who signed Title X, and the George H. W. Bush who was so keen on birth control as a congressman that he was nicknamed “Rubbers”? That party is gone, supplanted by one in thrall to the religious right and other ideological extremists, who consolidated their power in Tea Party election victories beginning in 2010.

In the second place, there is no alternate network of actually existing clinics to replace those of Planned Parenthood. When Texas cut roughly forty Planned Parenthood clinics from its new Texas Woman’s Health Program in 2011, reimbursement claims for birth control dropped by 38 percent for low-income women, while claims for wellness exams dropped by 23 percent.

By 2013, the Austin Chronicle reported, Republican lawmakers had cut two-thirds of the state’s family-planning budget, and seventy-six family planning clinics (including non-Planned Parenthood ones) had closed. The number of women served was 77 percent fewer than in 2011. It’s hard to believe that conservatives proffering an olive branch to pro-choicers over contraception are making a genuine attempt at compromise rather than a cynical rhetorical gesture.

The same pattern holds for sex education. Abortion opponents promote abstinence-only education despite strong evidence that it has no long-term positive effects. It may delay sex for younger teens, but not by much, and when those kids do have sex they are less likely to use condoms or contraception. Texas has the nation’s third highest rate of teen pregnancy, but in 2011 anti-abortion stalwart Governor Rick Perry prevented the health department from applying for millions of dollars in federal funds aimed at preventing teen pregnancy through birth control alongside abstinence education.

In 2013, however, Texas spent \$1.2 million of federal money on a [website-<http://www.ourtown4teens.org/>] to promote abstinence before marriage. (Yes, the federal government is still funding abstinence-only education, despite President Obama’s stated opposition to sex education that doesn’t include information about contraception.)

For the organized anti-choice movement, contraception and realistic sex education are not solutions to the problem of abortion. All three are aspects of the same moral and social disaster. As Susan B. Anthony List leader Marjorie Dannenfelser [put it](#), “The bottom line is that to lose the connection between sex and having children leads to problems.”

And the biggest of these problems? Women having lots and lots of sex. In 2011, Planned Parenthood had to stop providing birth control to low-income New Hampshire women when the state’s all-male executive council [rejected](#) around \$1.8 million in state and federal funds. “I am opposed to abortion,” said council member Raymond Wieczorek. “I am opposed to providing condoms to someone. If you want to have a party, have a party but don’t ask me to pay for it.”

The benefits of birth control to women’s health, the economic costs of unwanted pregnancies, childbirth, and children, even the suffering of women who need the Pill to control disease “these sensible policy concerns were nothing compared to the chance to give the finger to women: have sex on your own dime, tramps.

# Poverty

Logically, abortion opponents should care about poverty. The less punitive among them make much of the fact that almost three-quarters of women seeking abortion cite economic reasons for their decision. I'm not so sure this statistic means that if they had more money, those same women would have those babies.

Respondents to the question of why they were having an abortion were allowed to give multiple reasons, and poverty was rarely the only one cited. About the same percentage gave as their reason "having a baby would dramatically change my life" by interfering with education, work, or caregiving responsibilities. Almost half said they didn't want to be single mothers. It would be more accurate to say that poor women have more unplanned and ill-timed pregnancies. They have more abortions, but they also have more children.

So what are abortion opponents doing to make it possible for those low-income women to continue their pregnancies and raise those babies? Precious little. Indeed, there is an inverse relationship between support for abortion restrictions and support for programs that help low-income pregnant women, babies, and children.

In the midst of the Republican-engineered government shutdown in the fall of 2013, the Women Infants and Children feeding program (WIC), which serves 8.9 million mothers and children under five, found itself in turmoil. As its reserve funds ran out, some states refused new applicants or refused to print more vouchers. (Anti-abortion conservative pundit and Republican Party adviser Bill Kristol [commented](#), "I don't think it's the end of the world.")

Contrast that with the special care shown during the shutdown to the Pentagon's civilian workers, most of whom were quickly called back from the furlough, or to the House gym, which stayed open.

Whether it's hunger, housing, social services, or education, if it benefits poor families, the anti-abortion party wants to cut it. Raise the minimum wage? That would hurt profits. Extend unemployment benefits? What, and let lazy people kick back in the safety net Paul Ryan claims is becoming a "hammock"?

Anti-abortion Republicans have been trying to get rid of the Affordable Care Act since the minute it was passed. As of early 2014, twenty-four states were refusing to expand their Medicaid rolls to cover those who make just a bit too much to qualify under the state's own rules ("too much" can be practically nothing — \$11 a day in some states).

Here was a big opportunity to make life a bit less precarious for millions of people, and cheaply, too: the expansion would be completely paid for by the federal government for three years, after which the state would have to foot only 10 percent of the bill at most.

Two-thirds of the nation's uninsured single mothers and African Americans, and 60 percent of the uninsured working poor, live in these states — a perfect storm of race, class, and gender. In every case, it was Republican governors and/or legislatures who rejected the expansion. So here's another thing more important than fetuses and babies and mothers: giving President Obama a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.

Anti-abortion conservatives cannot admit out loud that they have basically abandoned mothers and children. Churches and charities, they claim, will get them on their feet, with no red tape and no burden on the taxpayer. Meanwhile, let's close those clinics! But philanthropy cannot solve low-income women's fundamental problem — having a low income — any more than they can solve homelessness or hunger or drug addiction. Nor can the anti-abortion movement.

[The Nurturing Network](#), founded in 1985 by corporate executive turned homeschooling mother and anti-abortion activist Mary Cunningham Agee, claims that its network of tens of thousands of volunteers have helped 24,000 pregnant women in twenty-nine years, “in all fifty states and in thirty foreign countries,” mostly middle-class college and working women. That’s less than a thousand women a year, and the Nurturing Network is one of the bigger efforts of its kind.

To provide pregnant women and new mothers in need with real support and quality medical care would require considerable effort from the only entity with enough power and resources to do the job — state and federal government.

[Jacobin](#)