

Letting Our Foremothers Speak

By Linda Naranjo-Huebl

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As we celebrate Women's History Month, we would do well to consider the observation of feminist scholar Dale Spender, who points out that women's ideas have been subject to a cycle of "lost and found, only to be lost and found again -- and again" because in each era, those who have considered their ideas dangerous have sought to silence them ("Feminist Theorists").

Early U.S. feminists' views of abortion apparently fall into this category for those who are not comfortable with their consistent life philosophies.

While it might surprise some people to learn that America's early feminists opposed abortion, historians have ample evidence that early Western feminists found abortion not a means toward women's liberation nor a right to be achieved but rather a tragic symptom of women's inequality and continued oppression.

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her "Vindication of the Rights of Woman," argued, "Nature in everything demands respect and those who violate her laws seldom do so without impunity." Since Wollstonecraft experienced the social stigma of bearing a so-called "illegitimate" child, it was no abstraction when she wrote that to "destroy the embryo in the womb" was the "barbarism of antiquity." She viewed abortion as the tragic result of unequal sexual relationships, characteristic of women's oppression.

Her pro-woman views were contrasted by her opponents, such as the Marquis deSade, a contemporary of Wollstonecraft and the first modern Westerner to condone abortion, a logical extension of his advocacy of sexual violence against women. His legacy, including the term "sadism," is certainly not one feminists celebrate.

Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophies provided a theoretical foundation for future suffrage leaders like Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony. In Susan B. Anthony's era and subculture, abortion was contextually labeled "Restellism," referring to Madame Restell, a New York City abortionist. The totality of suffrage literature is redolent with condemnation of Restell.

The Revolution, published and managed by Anthony, regularly condemned Restellism and refused ads for abortionists and known abortifacients. The policy itself was reprinted or explained almost two dozen times in The Revolution, opposing "immoral" medicines for "child murder before birth." To suggest that this stated editorial policy did not reflect Anthony's personal views seems illogical indeed.

Some may argue that these medicines were considered immoral because they were unsafe, but this explanation is unlikely. Most medicinals of the time were untested, and many were advertised in The Revolution without editorial explanation.

If Anthony and other women's-rights activists viewed abortion as necessary to women's full equality and as morally acceptable, this was the time to push for it. Birth control was not widely available and

often illegal. Pregnant unmarried women faced societal contempt. Women generally had little independence outside, or even inside, marriage. Most institutions of higher education were closed to women, and women's already inadequate employment opportunities certainly did not accommodate childcare. If abortion were considered a viable moral option, certainly women's-rights activists of the era would have lobbied for it.

Nineteenth-century women's rights activists were very concerned about women's health issues, and their terminology for abortion clearly reflects their moral perspective. Their writings refer to abortion as "foeticide," "infanticide" and "child murder" and reveal their regard for the subjectivity of the unborn child. This sensitivity seems natural in the context of other social injustices: It was legal for human beings to be the property of other persons, whether slaves by slave owners or women by their husbands. Ignoring the personhood of the fetus would clearly have undermined their own arguments for equal rights.

As a scholar of 19th-century women's writing, I find it interesting that some question these early feminist views, including Susan B. Anthony's, on abortion, particularly in light of her consistent, holistic position against all forms of violence.

Pro-choice historian Carl Degler, whose research on women's reproductive history has been highly regarded by feminist historians, notes of the period, "the expansion of the definition of life to include the whole career of the fetus is quite consistent. It was in line with the reduction of the death penalty, the peace movement, the abolition of whipping. The prohibition of abortion was but the most recent effort in that larger concern" ("At Odds," Oxford UP, 1980, 243).

Women's History Month allows us the opportunity to reflect on our foremothers' values and how they may inform our own. Many contemporary feminists recognize both historic feminist anti-abortion positions and contemporary pro-choice positions with thoughtfulness and without defensiveness.

Instead of accusing others of unethically revising history, one should go to the source and read our early foremothers in their full context. Students of history may find that some of them were shortsighted in certain areas (such as race and class issues) and impressively insightful in others (the nature of women's oppression). Their writings comprise an impressive social analysis that can inform and enrich today's feminism.

Linda Naranjo-Huebl, Ph.D., is assistant professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., where she teaches women's literature and American ethnic literature. She is co-editor, with Mary Krane Derr and Rachel MacNair, of the anthology "Pro-life Feminism: Yesterday and Today."