

On Women's Health and Rights
Lectures, Speeches and Statements
Mahmoud F. Fathalla

Reflections on Abortion and Moral Values

Address
Ipas Board of Directors Reception
Carolina Inn, Chapel Hill, NC
June 10, 2005

Thank you for the very generous introduction. As a speaker, I am always worried about very generous introductions. They tend to raise expectations among the audience which may not be fulfilled.

When I was asked to speak about morals and abortion, I had two problems. The first problem is that I don't consider myself really an authority on moral issues. I am a physician. In our work we follow ethics, but we have been told as physicians never to judge the morals of our patients. We follow the teaching of Jesus, "Judge not, that you not be judged." Not being an expert on the issue, I could have declined the kind invitation. But there was the second problem. The second problem, and I am sure you know it too well, is that it is very difficult for anyone, and particularly for me, to say no to dear Liz Maguire, Ipas president. And so what I did is that I tried to make the title more modest and to be "Reflections on abortion and moral values".

What I plan to share with you this evening are my reflections first as a physician, second as a scientist, and third as a women's health advocate. These three overlapping roles have been the career of my life, or maybe I should qualify it and borrow from Jane Fonda's book title, and say these careers have been my life "so far"

As a physician, in a long professional career, I have seen many women risk their health and life in order to get an abortion in a country where abortion is against the law. But in this long professional career, I have also seen women risk their health and life in order to have a baby. And when I reflect on it, and think about what differences are there between these two types of women, I find they are the same. They are the same women, the same types of women, making different decisions when they are faced with different circumstances in their life. In some cases they have been the same woman, making this decision at one time and the other decision at another time.

Let me share with you another reflection as a physician, I have cared for pregnant women for many years, and I cannot accept or believe that anyone, anyone, can care about the embryo or the fetus the woman is carrying more than the woman herself. I know what pregnancy means to a woman. As a physician also, I had the privilege to practice in a part of our country where people are poor and where women are the poorest of the poor. And I have always been impressed by the ability of these poor women, who are mostly illiterate, to make sound correct decisions about their lives and the lives of their families,

when they are allowed to make those decisions. I have full trust in the ability of these women to decide. They are aware that they have a relatively much narrower safety margin for error in their decisions.

So these were some of my reflections as a physician. I am also a scientist. I have followed one guide in science, in that science should not be used to justify or rationalize moral prejudices. Let me tell you a little story. When I was with the World Health Organization, one day a letter was referred to me to answer. The letter was a short inquiry: "Dear World Health Organization, When does life begin?" I had to answer because it was the practice in the World Health Organization that any inquiry should be answered. My answer was short, in two sentences: Life began millions of years ago. Since that time, life has been a continuity. I'm not sure that this scientific answer pleased the person who asked the question, but it is correct. Life begins from life. If someone wants to draw an arbitrary line, they can do it, but they should not try to put the cloak of science on it.

Another thing which I know from science is that abortion will never be eliminated. Abortion will never be eliminated because there is no power, be it the US Congress, Senate or Supreme Court or any super power, that can control the most efficient pro-choice activist in the world, which is our dear Mother Nature. Nature is the most active terminator of pregnancies. The majority of human conceptions are efficiently aborted by Mother Nature every day. Mother Nature does not give us any reasons for most of them, but keeps on doing it and apparently with no moral misgivings about it.

The need for abortion will also never be eliminated. There is no human community or society in the past or present, throughout human history, where women did not feel the need for abortion, and did not try to get an abortion with whatever means were available to them at that time. Even in the writings of Hippocrates, although the Hippocratic Oath includes an injunction against abortion, there are very clear descriptions of unsafe abortions, and what women go through in order to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

Contraception will decrease the need for abortion, but contraception will never eliminate the need for abortion. Apart from the fact of that there is a major unmet need for contraception, with the current levels of use effectiveness of contraceptive methods, a simple mathematical model will show that every year there will be between 10 and 20 million unwanted pregnancies among contraceptive users. So, the need for abortion will continue whether anybody likes it or not. And the real social choice, is not between abortion and no abortion, but will be, for practical purpose, to have it under the law or against the law, to have it safe or to have it unsafe.

Another reflection about science is a sad regret. Science could have provided a way out of the abortion dilemma, but it was not allowed to do it. One of my dreams as a scientist was to see a pill developed which a woman can use in the privacy of her home if she has made the moral decision to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. We came quite near to that with the development of Mifepristone and the discovery of the action of Misoprostol, two drugs that are currently being used in regimens for medication abortion. But that stops

short of de-medicalizing abortion, to have abortion without the need for medical services. If ideology did not interfere, if public and private sector investment continued, than I am sure we would have had second and third generation of these drugs which would have brought us closer to that objective. In fact, I know for sure that in the chemical libraries of major international pharmaceutical companies there are already a number of compounds which, if circumstances allow, could be tested and further developed.

Now let me come to my role as a woman's health advocate. Early in my professional career I arrived at the conviction that women's health will not be improved by medical services alone. Women's health will not be improved by medical services and scientific developments alone because women's health needs social action that has been overdue. I believe that the prescription which most women need for their health is not a prescription which can be dispensed in a pharmacy, nor can be provided in a hospital. It is a prescription for "power". What women need is power because powerlessness of women is probably the most serious health hazards for women's health.

Women should have the power to decide for themselves, to make their own moral judgments, and should be respected. I have full respect myself for a woman who believes that having an abortion is an immoral act according to her own moral code, but at the same time I believe that when a woman decides to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, she is also making a sound, socially responsible moral decision according to her own moral code. She does not want to bring a child into this world at a time when she is not ready for it. This is also a morally sound decision that should be respected. The moral high ground is not narrow; the moral high ground is wide enough to accommodate both stands.

I also believe that asking the question "is abortion moral or immoral?" is asking the wrong question. The right question is: can women be trusted to make moral judgments on their own or are women morally incompetent to make these decisions and they need big brother to make these decisions for them.

In fact when I selected the profession of obstetrics and gynecology I found out later on, to my dismay, that I have landed myself in the most disputed territory of the human body. The woman can claim that 'this is my hair', 'this is my head,' 'these are my arms,' 'these are my legs,' but a small area of her body, is being disputed by theologians, politicians, lawyers, certain males of the species, who are always putting their claims on how this area can best be utilized. And that happened to be the area which I selected for my professional career.

Let me conclude by a last reflection. I am an optimist. In fact, I consider myself an incurable optimist. I always think things will turn out to be good. But I must express concern when I see that some women, who already have the power to decide for themselves, seem to be willing to give up that power and to be subordinated to the decisions made by others. I am not sure that they have reflected enough on how the future would look like if things went that way. I don't know how many of you have read the famous novel by George Orwell, "Nineteen eighty-four". Orwell wrote that prescient, cautionary novel in 1948-49. He was imagining, in fiction, how the future could be in

1984 in a world under the control of “big brother,” with a tunnel vision, where all people have to think the same, where even the English language was deconstructed into “newspeak” where a number of words have been deleted from the vocabulary in the belief that if you delete the words, then what they refer to would not exist. It is an interesting book to read again and again. I wish there was another George Orwell, or maybe IPAS should commission another George Orwell, to write a new novel about how the future would look like if women gave up their rights and subscribed to the tunnel vision of big brother. It may give a needed wake-up call. It will be a great novel, but I tell you it will not be funny.