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Commentary

We Must Remember: The Battle Never Ends By Kendra Gaines, Editor-in-Chief

One of my earliest memories is of my mother telling me, “A good husband is a wonderful thing and a good marriage makes life happy. But never forget that sometimes a husband can die, and then, my dear, it’s up to you. Always make sure that you can manage your own life.” As time went by, I began to see the wisdom of her words, and I came to value my independence. Even more, I saw that when a woman controls her own life and her own money, she can function successfully either with a husband or without. Above all, she can make her own decisions about how she wishes to live her own life. It never occurred to me that such independence of mind and action—perhaps especially for a woman—would be endangered.

I grew up in the turbulent 1960s, when birth control became readily available. For the first time in history, biology was no longer necessarily destiny. While many men and people of older generations often deplored those choices, at least choice now existed. A woman could choose whether or not to have children, and if the choice was to have them, she could more readily decide when to do so. The days of women experiencing endless

childbirths—with or without the resources to raise those children to a healthy adulthood—appeared to be over.

And finally, in 1973, *Roe v. Wade* was passed. Those women whose birth control had failed, or who had neglected to use it in the first place, now had the option of a legal abortion. Those whose babies were terminally malformed, or who were pregnant as the result of rape or incest, could take steps to prevent the birth. Most women celebrated. We were not any more enthused about the prospect of an abortion than people who stood against the procedure, but we were profoundly relieved that the option was now legally available. Collectively, we heaved a great sigh of relief, considering the battle for women's rights to be won.

And yet, here we are, fighting it all over again. While much of the world has passed laws making regulated abortion legal, the US has retreated to former times. In Oklahoma and Texas, at least so far, women seeking an abortion can be subject to bounty hunters, their own deeply personal decisions and their own actions closely monitored and criminalized. How could this happen?

All too easily, as my doctoral dissertation research made clear to me. My field was 19th century English literature, and my dissertation focused on what at the time was called the sensation novel. I had planned to write solely about the literature, but the material itself led me into the fraught field of women's rights in Victorian England—which was mirrored in America. What I learned in my extensive research horrified me. But what horrifies me more is that the battle for their own autonomy fought so valiantly by 19th women can no longer be considered won. Indeed, the best I can bring myself to say is that the battle is simply ongoing.

Consider these facts of life for 19th century women. First, they had virtually no societal rights. True, Parliament passed the 1832 Reform Bill that extended the right to vote to men—only men—who owned property worth ten pounds or more in annual rent. And true, the second Reform Bill of 1867 extended that right to certain sections of the working class. But women were simply not allowed to have a say in their own self-governance. Nor were they allowed to attend university, manage their own money, or hold property. If they had inherited property, it was transferred to the man the moment the woman became engaged to that man. Once married, a woman no longer owned that property. Nor did she own the clothes on her back or have any rights to her very own children. If her husband decided to gamble away the family money, or spend it on any of the thousands of prostitutes forced to earn a living in that way, that was his legal right. Conversely, however, if the wife was believed to be unfaithful, her husband could literally throw her out of the house and forbid her access to her clothes, money, or children. That was his legal right. If he really wanted to keep her away, he could obtain testimony from often unscrupulous doctors who would testify that the wife was insane and have her incarcerated without any legal recourse. The husband would then, of course, have free access to anything that had belonged to his wife prior to marriage. In such situations, there was nothing the wife could do.

Combine this legal limbo for women with the intense concentration, so often mocked, on Victorian “respectability”—especially as applied to female behavior—and the result for women was significant depression, lethargy, and all too often, suicidal tendencies. They simply had no control over their own lives, and that knowledge of their own helplessness sometimes led to desperate actions. Thanks in part to a powerful essay

by John Stuart Mill in 1869 called “The Subjection of Women,” Parliament finally in 1870 passed the Married Women’s Property Act which allowed women to retain control of their own property. And university education slowly became more available to select women who wanted to take advantage of it. The right to vote, however, remained elusive.

Much has been written about the struggle of the British suffragettes as they strove to gain the right to vote on matters concerning all citizens of their country. Many of them were arrested, thrown summarily into jail, and force fed through unsanitary tubes when they went on hunger strikes. Many were savagely beaten and reviled, and some died. They were made aware quite violently that their actions were considered a threat against King and Country and that they had no business attempting to insert themselves into political issues. They should most definitely stay home and shut up. Instead, they increased their pressure for change, and finally, in 1918, they were granted the vote. The United States finally followed suit and granted women the vote in 1920. At that time, many women firmly believed the battle for women’s rights had been won.

With World War II, women were able to participate freely in all sorts of previously male-only work activities, including becoming airplane pilots, as my own cousin did. As she testified to me numerous times, flying for the WASPs—the Women Airforce Service Pilots—was the highlight of her life. She felt productive, free to choose her own destiny, strong and proud of it all. But for many women, with the end of the war and the return of the men, this heady freedom was short-lived. The men wanted their women back in the kitchen.

Once again, the battle for women’s freedom raged. Many will recall Betty Friedan’s ground-breaking 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which ignited many

domestic battles and was often blamed for a rise in the divorce rate. By this time, however, the “women’s liberation” forces—later to be called feminists—had allies in the form of powerful, outspoken women such as Gloria Steinem. They also had a new generation of young women who quite liked the idea of choice. And with birth control now available, women discovered that medical and law schools were a definite possibility, that they could pick any occupation they wanted, and that marriage was now simply another choice. Those who wanted marriage were free to marry and have children; but those who wanted a different kind of life were finally able to pursue their own chosen path. I was of this generation, and yes, I thought we had won.

But to return to the beginning of this essay, once again we see government demanding that women have children they may neither want nor can afford, that birth control be eliminated or at least limited, that women may be pursued and jailed for seeking an abortion. Once again, women are getting the message to “stay home and shut up and raise your baby.” And once again, there is no mention of responsibilities to be fulfilled by the men who have caused these pregnancies. We hear nothing of financial contributions from the fathers or sharing of the burden of raising the results of their sexual activities. Those of religious persuasion talk about “sacred life” and how abortion is “murder” under any and all circumstances, but self-righteous talk seems to be all they can manage. The biblical Eve, it seems, deserves what she gets for her sexual activities, while Adam is an innocent bystander.

This return to the ancient battleground of women’s rights is both disheartening and exhausting. It’s old news, and yet once again, women must fight the good fight for their own independence and their own right to control their own destinies. At the

moment, abortion rights are in the headlines, but what's next? Will we see an attack on a woman's right to control her own money, on a woman's right to vote? Will we see a concerted attempt to usurp a woman's right to direct her own medical care?

History has demonstrated for us beyond any doubt that such questions are not excessive. It has also shown us unequivocally that women must never take previous victories for granted, but always be on the alert for renewed attacks on their societal rights. A healthy society, at least in the United States, is one where every individual, regardless of sex and all other defining characteristics, believes that they can and must control their own destinies, make their own choices in life. When our society turns on itself and begins to believe once again that one group must control another—especially in matters as intensely personal as those related to medical care—then our collective health begins to decline.

I am aware that this argument could just as easily be applied to our nationwide and perhaps ongoing fight over questions regarding masking and vaccinating against Covid. I would note, however, that Covid affects literally everyone, and that therefore we must give equal thought to the wellbeing of others as well as our own. Reliable and consistent information in this regard is also much to be desired, and we have not done well in that arena. As Covid will likely be yet another ongoing battle, I will hope that as a nation we can do better in the next round, providing more effective communication, even as we seek more effective vaccines.

In all cases, however, we must remain vigilant against forces that seek to control, to have undue power over others. And we must always remember that the battles we fight now may recur—rather like Covid—when perhaps we least expect them.

Bio

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