

Abortion isn't the only way

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I'm young. I'm female. I'm single. And as a legal philosopher, I'd like to think my ethical views are based on reason. With all the stereotypes being thrown around, however, you'd never pick me as someone concerned about abortion. And yet I am.

The abortion issue was debated and decided before my generation was born. Many older women, including Germaine Greer, consider their experiences with abortion during the past 30 years to have been largely negative, while those of my age group haven't had the opportunity to publicly discuss the kinds of policies and approaches we would like to see implemented. It seems unlikely that we will have this chance.

Newspapers have been dominated by a small group of vocal women telling politicians to back off. We have been told that the 90,000 or so abortions a year are nothing to be concerned about. Abortion, they tell us, doesn't hurt women. The occasional nasty side effects? Well, they've just been blown out of proportion.

Unfortunately, their rhetoric has been largely successful in silencing debate. This is a shame. Pretending that the high level of abortion in Australia is fine doesn't do women any favours. When faced with an unplanned pregnancy, many women feel that because of financial hardship, societal expectations or pressure from family and friends, they have no choice but to abort.

Other women fear that they will be shut out of opportunities if they have children. They fear, not unreasonably, that it will be harder for them to go to university, participate in the workforce or pursue a career. Women now spend years at university. They work hard to get their degrees and incur considerable costs. We shouldn't be shocked that in the end they want to participate in the workforce and might be afraid that having a child will limit this option.

The vast majority of abortions are performed on women older than 20. That is, women of an age likely to be in the workforce. Countries such as Sweden have been successful in increasing their fertility rates by adopting progressive family-oriented workplace policies. Research suggests that employer practices and the ability to work can influence a woman's decision about having a child.

Presumably, therefore, it can also influence a woman's decision about whether she will keep a child.

For this reason, government-backed paid maternity leave would go a long way in helping women. At present, women are entitled to only 12 months of unpaid leave following the birth of a child. This does not include casual workers.

There is also no legislated right to paid maternity leave. An overwhelming majority of women, therefore, miss out.

We need to make it easier for women to work and have children, and for women to stay at home with their children if this is what they want. Greater financial support or schemes that recognise the value of full-time parenting and are supportive of the many women who would love to dedicate themselves to the nurturing and education of their young children would be beneficial.

Another initiative worth examining would be to waive or reduce the Higher Education Contribution Scheme fees for young mothers undertaking tertiary studies and to provide them with free or subsidised child care on university campuses. Alternatively, a scholarship scheme could be established to assist students with children.

Almost as important as policy reform is the need for a change in attitudes. Unfortunately, adoption is out of vogue. As things stand, many women fear it is easier for them to abort than to adopt out. Discrimination against pregnant women in the Australian workplace also continues to exist.

A young migrant loses her job as a hotel maid when she becomes pregnant. Last decade? No, 2003. A senior associate in a large law firm takes time off to have a child. When this happens, a female partner at the firm declares that she is now unwilling to work with female lawyers "because they all leave to have babies". The 1980s? No, late this year.

One of the problems with discouraging debate on abortion is that discussion about obstacles and initiatives such as these is silenced. It also downplays the fact abortion can cause significant physical and emotional suffering, and it prevents a new generation of women from having their say on something that will affect them more than any other group.

In many ways my peers are more moderate than our parents. This is reflected, for example, in the Newspoll survey published today. Those most against abortions and late-term abortions are aged 18 to 34. Compared with people in the 35-49 age bracket, those under 34 are also less likely to agree with abortion on demand.

There needs to be a change in the way we approach the abortion debate. Room should be made for a new voice -- one that reflects my generation's more moderate views and concern for women as well as their unborn children.

No one has a monopoly on feminism and it is ridiculous to argue, as some do, that we need to "normalise" the level of abortion in Australia rather than engage in a sophisticated debate on how we might reduce its incidence through the provision of better support and counselling.

More needs to be done to ensure that women who don't want to abort don't have to. It is time for pro-lifers to be radically pro-woman and for pro-choicers to offer more than just the choice to abort. It is time, once and for all, that we work together because women and their unborn children deserve better.

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