

# WE REMEMBER

## AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ARE FOR REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

**C**HOICE is the essence of freedom. It's what we African-Americans have struggled for all these years. The right to choose where we would sit on a bus. The right to vote. The right for each of us to select our own paths, to dream and reach for our dreams. The right to choose how we would or would not live our lives. This freedom—to choose and to exercise our choices—is what we've fought and died for. Brought here in chains, worked like mules, bred like beasts, whipped one day, sold the next—for 244 years we were held in bondage. Somebody said that we were less than human and not fit for freedom. Somebody said we were like children and could not be trusted to think for ourselves.

Somebody owned our flesh, and decided if and when and with whom and how our bodies were to be used. Somebody said that Black women could be raped, held in concubinage, forced to bear children year in and year out, but often not raise them. Oh yes, we have known how painful it is to be without choice in this land. Those of us who remember the bad old days when Jim Crow ruled and segregation was the way of things,

know the hardships and indignities we faced. We were free, but few or none were our choices. Somebody said where we could live and couldn't, where we could work, what schools we could go to, where we could eat, how we could travel. Somebody prevented us from voting. Somebody said we could be paid less than other workers. Somebody burned crosses, harassed and terrorized us in order to keep us down.

**O**NCE again somebody is trying to say that we can't handle the freedom of choice. Only this time they're saying African-American women can't think for themselves, and therefore can't be allowed to make serious decisions. Somebody's saying that we should not have the freedom to take charge of our personal lives and protect our health, that we only have limited rights over our bodies.

Somebody's once again forcing women to acts of desperation, because somebody's saying that if women have unintended pregnancies, it's too bad, but they must pay the price. Somebody's saying that we must have babies whether we choose to or not. Doesn't matter what we say, doesn't matter how we feel. Some say that abortion under any circumstance is wrong, others that rape and incest and danger to the life of the woman are the only exceptions. Doesn't matter that nobody's saying who decides if it was rape or incest; if a woman's word is good enough; if she must go into court and prove it. Doesn't matter that she may not be able to take care of a baby; that the problem also affects girls barely out of adolescence; that our children are having children. Doesn't matter if you're poor and pregnant—go on welfare, or walk away. What does matter is that we know abortions will still be done, legal or not.

We know the consequences when women are forced to make choices without protection—the coat hangers and knitting needles that punctured the wombs of women forced to seek back-alley abortions on kitchen tables at the hands of butchers. The women who died screaming in agony, awash in their own blood. The women who were made sterile. All the women who endured the pain of makeshift surgery with no anesthetics, risked fatal infection.

### REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM MEANS:

- Access to comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sexuality and reproduction.
- Freedom to choose to have a child.
- Good, affordable health care to assure a safe pregnancy and delivery.
- Access to health services to help the infertile achieve pregnancy.
- Freedom to choose not to have a child.
- Access to the full range of contraceptive services and appropriate information about reproduction.
- Freedom to end an unwanted pregnancy.
- Access to safe, legal, affordable abortion services.
- Freedom to make informed choices.
- Easily accessible health care that is proven to be safe and effective.
- Reproductive health and freedom to make our own reproductive choices.

We understand why African-American women risked their lives then, and why they seek safe legal abortion now. It's been a matter of survival. Hunger and homelessness. Inadequate housing and income to properly provide for themselves and their children. Family instability. Rape. Incest. Abuse. Too young, too old, too sick, too tired. Emotional, physical, mental, economic, social—the reasons for not carrying a pregnancy to term are endless and varied, personal, urgent, and private. And for all these pressing reasons, African-American women once again will be among the first forced to risk their lives if abortion is made illegal.

There have always been those who have stood in the way of our exercising our rights, who tried to restrict our choices. There probably always will be. But we who have been oppressed should not be swayed in our opposition to tyranny, of any kind, especially attempts to take away our reproductive freedom. You may believe abortion is wrong. We respect your belief and we will do all in our power to protect that choice for you. You may decide that abortion is not an option you would choose. Reproductive freedom guarantees your right not to. All that we ask is that no one deny another human being the right to make her own choice. That no one condemn her to exercising her choices in ways that endanger her health, her life. And that no one prevent others from creating safe, affordable, legal conditions to accommodate women, whatever the choices they make. Reproductive freedom gives each of us the right to make our own choices, and guarantees us a safe, legal affordable support system. It's the right to choose.

**W** **WE ARE** still an embattled people beset with life-and-death issues. Black America is under siege. Drugs, the scourge of our community, are wiping out one, two, three generations. We are killing ourselves and each other. Rape and other unspeakable acts of violence are becoming sickeningly commonplace. Babies linger on death's door, at risk at birth: born addicted to crack and cocaine; born underweight and undernourished; born AIDS-infected. An ever-growing number of our children are being abandoned, being mentally, physically, spiritually abused. Homelessness, hunger, unemployment run rife. Poverty grows. Our people cry out in desperation, anger, and need.

Meanwhile those somebodies who claim they're "pro-life" aren't moved to help the living. They're not out there fighting to break the stranglehold of drugs and violence in our communities, trying to save our children, or moving to provide infant and maternal nutrition and health programs. Eradicating our poverty isn't on their agenda. No—somebody's too busy picketing,

vandalizing and sometimes bombing family planning clinics, harassing women, and denying funds to poor women seeking abortions.

So when somebody denouncing abortions claims that they're "pro-life," remind them of an old saying that our grandmothers often used: "It's not important what people say, it's what they do." And remember who we are, remember our history, our continuing struggle for freedom. Remember to tell them that **WE REMEMBER!**

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*The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice is 38 national main-line Christian, Jewish and other religious organizations. We work to create a public opinion climate that is conducive to pro-choice policy making, and that affirms women as moral decision-makers. For more information about the Women of Color Partnership or other programs of the Religious Coalition, call or write us: Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, 1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1130, Washington, DC 20005. Phone: 202/628.7700 Fax: 202/628.7716*

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OF COLOR  
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