



SPRING/SUMMER 2007

# RAISE YOUR VOICE!

*Pro-Choice Public Education Project Newsletter*

## TO BLEED OR NOT TO BLEED

*By Lisa Schuller*

Most women have absolutely nothing kind to say about their periods. It's – insidious drum roll, please – “that time of the month” when everyone runs and hides from us, since we're either complaining about our bloating and cramps or we just bite anyone's head off who can't be sympathetic. Well, who can really blame us? Not only are we physically uncomfortable, but simple activities like swimming and good ol' sex are now at risk of being erased from our agendas for the next week. If given the opportunity, most women would gladly kick Aunt Flow out the door forever and without a kiss goodbye.

And, who'd have thought this would actually be a legitimate possibility? Many of you have heard or seen the ads for Seasonale®, the new birth control pill that lets you have only four periods a year instead of the usual 12-

*If given the opportunity, most women would gladly kick Aunt Flow out the door forever... and without a kiss goodbye.*

13. A new pill awaiting approval from the FDA, Lybrel®, has been shown to eliminate monthly periods completely.

The traditional pill pack consists of 21 active pills taken everyday, and seven placebo pills that signal the week of menstruation. With Seasonale, instead of 21 active pills there are 84 plus seven placebo pills, giving the woman a period at the end of each four-month regimen. Lybrel pills are taken 365 days a year and have no placebos.

Now that we've roughly covered the basics of oral contraceptives, there's an important fact most women aren't aware of – and this is the argument behind eliminating periods. The

bleeding that occurs after each cycle of active birth control pills is not a real period. It's not caused by ovulation, when the uterus sheds its lining, but it's actually a response to the active hormone pills – the body is withdrawing from the progesterone. This is referred to as “withdrawal bleeding.”

When The Pill first came on the scene in 1960, its creators included “withdrawal bleeding” to make the whole process feel more natural and to also have a method for users to detect pregnancy. Now, doctors and health advocates are questioning the need for this WB. “The bleeding on the birth control pill can cause the same discomfort as a regular period,” says Dr. Leslie Miller, an associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Washington in Seattle and the creator of the website NoPeriod.com. “Withdrawal bleeding is not needed, so why have it?”

Suppressing periods is not a new fad, by any means. It's been common practice among women who are physicians with easy access to oral contraceptive pills. But since this method has not been officially approved by the FDA, it was not widely known. Women have been doing it with traditional pill packs for years – all you'd need to do is skip the week of placebos and start a new pack of active pills immediately. (FYI: If you are considering this method for an impending vaca-



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## BREAKING THE SILENCE AROUND ABORTION

*By Aimee Thorne-Thomsen*

I want to talk about abortion. Or more specifically, I want to talk about how we talk about abortion. Two recent developments around abortion have generated lots of buzz in our community. Reproductive Health Technologies Project (RHTP) released the findings of a research project which presents new messages for how activists can talk about abortion, as well as how we can build greater support for abortion. Exhale launched a series of electronic cards to support women who have had abortions. Both RHTP and Exhale are providing the movement with new tools that broaden the dialogue around abortion and address the stigma surrounding it. Now obviously, any tool is only as good as our ability to use it to connect with people meaningfully and to galvanize them to take some action. And yet, I think that Exhale and RHTP present us with interesting opportunities to re-examine how we think about, and ultimately talk about abortion.

RHTP's new messaging strategy highlights what many of us would prefer not to acknowledge—that many people feel ambivalent about abortion. Some of my colleagues fear that this frames abortion negatively and further stigmatizes women who have had abortions. I would argue that in recognizing someone's complicated feelings about abortion we have an opportunity to extend the conversation. The truth is people hold a variety of feelings, values and beliefs about abortion. And until we acknowledge this fact, we will continue to be seen as irrelevant and out of touch with the public. Acknowledging and meeting people where they are establishes our credibility and opens up the conversation, instead of shutting it down.

Exhale stirred up controversy by introducing a series of electronic cards that offer sympathy, encouragement and support for women who have had abortions. One card reads, "I think you are strong, smart, thoughtful and caring. I believe in you and your ability to make the right decision. I think you did the right thing." Some activists feel that these e-cards stigmatize abortion further by treating it differently than other medical procedures. Others want to know why there is no card congratulating a woman on her abortion. And yet, what has emerged in the discussions surrounding the cards is not so much the messages of the cards or their appropriateness, but rather that some women want support after an abortion. And they deserve to get it. Sending an e-card is just one more way to do that.

I understand that some believe that by adopting these strategies and tools we somehow concede that abortion is wrong and give the Right more ammunition to restrict abortion. I challenge that orthodoxy. For too long our approach has silenced those who have complicated feelings about abortion and pushed them away from us. And we know that those people are often people of color and young women. Our silencing has the added effect of enforcing a kind of ideological purity test around abortion that even some of us who work in the movement would not pass. If we are going to keep abortion legal and accessible, and support the women who have abortions, we cannot continue to use the same tactics. I think that RHTP and Exhale have taken important steps toward meeting people where they are on abortion and opening up the conversation. These tools may not work for everyone, but they do provide new ways of engaging people around abortion for whom previous efforts have not resonated. And they come not a moment too soon. **RYV**

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tion or special occasion, it's always best to talk to your doctor first.)

Women who suffer from endometriosis are also advocates for fewer or no periods. This condition occurs when the uterine lining grows outside of the uterus, causing painful internal bleeding during every menstrual cycle. Many doctors advocate suppressing menstruation as a treatment for endometriosis.

While there is much support behind disowning Aunt Flow, there are just as many who'd rather she stay.

Dr. Susan Rako is a psychiatrist based in Boston and the author of *No More Periods?: The Risks of Menstrual Suppression and Other Cutting-Edge Issues About Hormones and Women's Health*. She says, "Manipulating women's reproductive hormonal chemistry for the purpose of menstrual suppression would be the largest uncontrolled experiment in the history of medical science."

Rako is concerned with the long-term health affects of this behavior, for there are no in-depth studies that can give us any ample insight. She says a normal hormonal cycle includes two weeks of significantly reduced blood pressure – this contributes to the reason women of reproductive age have fewer heart attacks and strokes. Menstrual

*Each side of the argument makes some pretty valid points – both addressing risks and benefits of menstruation and suppression. Which side makes more sense to you?*

bleeding also rids the body of excess iron, which is another risk factor for cardiovascular disease. "Taking the birth control pill non-stop throws a monkey wrench in the workings of every organ and system in the body, not just reproduction," Rako says.

In her practice, Dr. Leslie Miller checks the iron levels of women who have been suppressing their periods for years, to make sure they do not have any problems with iron storage in the body. She recommends regular blood donation to be on the safe side, but she has not found any patient with excess iron in her system.

Each side of the argument makes some pretty valid points – both addressing risks and benefits of menstruation and suppression. Which side makes more sense to you? Check out our Further Reading section below for more information.

It's a great conversation starter: "Hey, do you think periods will be passé?"

### Notes/Further Reading

1. Ginty, Molly. "New Pills Launch Debate Over Menstruation." Women's E-News.

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2. The Kaiser Family Foundation Weekly Women's Health Policy Report, 29 June 2006. <<http://www.kaisernetwork.org>>.

3. The Kaiser Family Foundation Weekly Women's Health Policy Report, 20 April 2007. <<http://www.kaisernetwork.org>>.

4. Kelley, Tina. "New Pill Fuels Debate Over Benefits of Fewer Periods." The New York Times. 14 October 2003. <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

5. Museum of Menstruation and Women's Health. <<http://www.mum.org>>.

6. No Period. <<http://www.noperiod.com/>>. 

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# WHO IS A WORKER?

## A QUESTION FOR THE IMMIGRANTS RIGHTS MOVEMENT

By Lani Blechman

The word “worker” is not gender-neutral. Specifically within the immigration debate, many immigrant rights activists, and opponents, assume a specific stereotype about undocumented workers, namely that they are male.

Anti-immigration sentiment has been reborn, largely due to the attitudes of conservatives in the United States. In an effort to create a nationalist us against them attitude against immigrants, with conservatives as the us and immigrants the them, the anti-immigration movement has contributed to an increasing dissemination of negative stereotypes about immigrants in the US. Part of me is really surprised an “immigration debate” exists at all; anti-immigrant proponents resemble snarling beasts the way that they describe illegal border-crossers as the cause of declining wages in the U.S. (Are they really talking about human beings?!)

However, the scariest thing about the controversy is how bits of these dehumanizing sentiments weasel their way into the consciousness of conscientious people. Even those who realize that that the elite employers and CEOs are the cause of declining wages, and that immigrants are hard-working individuals, that these are people with dignity, are sometimes sucked into the rhetoric. These slips take the form of an accidental use of the words “illegal immigrant” or “alien”. I am guilty of this too, even though I resolutely believe that no one is illegal, no one is criminal, simply because of their location.

### CALL TO ACTION

I began seriously thinking about language and the “immigration debate” this summer while interning at the organization Class Action and doing research on the intersections between Class and Immigration. I insisted that part of the month’s Call to

Action challenge readers to be conscious of calling immigrants—calling people—“illegal” or “alien”. I began traveling and studying in Mexico three months ago, and I learned that many radical and liberal folks and activists have adopted the use of “undocumented worker” instead of the dehumanizing language of the Right. But I also realized that last summer’s Call to Action was actually a personal challenge for me: if the term “undocumented worker” leaves room for dignity and humanity, does it really represent all of the histories that it seeks to describe?

Three months later, I’m still in Mexico, and I’ve been able to participate in many conversations about immigration with fellow students, professors, friends, activists, and people who have experienced immigration to the United States. I’ve decided, no: “undocumented worker” does not represent all of the people that it seeks to describe. And women and children are the ones whose histories most erased and least valued.

### PASSING THE ERASER

In the world of academia and immigration research and theory, there are very few representatives of the leftist point of view. But in 2002, Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone published a book called *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of*

Economic Integration that opened the doors to this field. This was one of the first hoity-toity academically respected publications to comprehensively analyze Mexican immigration in the United States. The authors use things like statistics and line graphs that link policies and politics on the one hand to immigration trends on the other, often even illustrating how economic and national security initiatives like the anti-immigration movement actually accelerate the things that they seek to stop. Yet while this work and others have done well to dispel many of the myths that litter racist and anti-immigrant arguments, a lot of the academic studies focuses on the “worker”—presumably the male worker.

In the chapter “Breakdown: Failure in the Post-1986 U.S. Immigration System” which deals heavily with mapping out migration trends and immigrant employment, there is one short section, “The Shift Toward Dependency”, dedicated to the “new feminization of migration”. This section equates increased unemployment with a greater presence of female immigrants.

For three weeks, I stayed in Toluca de Guadalupe, a rural community in the state of Tlaxcala. Almost every family that I met while I was there had a son, husband, or father

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currently or very recently working undocumented in the United States. In the family that I lived with, two sons were working in Virginia, the father had worked all across the southern United States, and so had the daughter. Julietta brought her son to Kent, Washington to live with her husband, Javier's father. She hired a coyote for herself and Javier, and had to entrust her son to two strangers that drove him across the border while she walked through the desert with a group of people. They ran out of water and the only other woman trying to cross with them couldn't make it across. something else horrible? When Julietta and Javier finally made it to Washington, they lived in a two bedroom apartment with her husband and fifteen other men. And for one year and three months, Julietta worked to take care of them before returning to her community.

The work that Julietta did when she was an undocumented immigrant woman in the United States did not earn wages. Karl Marx tells us that value is never in the thing itself, i.e. value is not in the work that you do, it is represented in the wages that you get. If Julietta did not receive a wage then her work is not of value. She was not a wage laborer, she is not represented in labor statistics, and therefore she is not considered a worker. Julietta's experience as an immigrant in the United States without papers is not represented by the phrase "undocumented worker". By using this term we are not only excluding her history but also saying that she is not valuable.

Who else is being excluded? Many undocumented immigrant women receive wages for their domestic work in the homes of others. They are nannies and babysitters and house cleaners. Are they included in "undocumented workers"?

Even within the activist immigrants rights community, the answer is often "no". In the United States there are many activists working to improve the living conditions of un-

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documented workers, and raise their concerns in local and state governments. In many cases, this takes the form of working within communities to organize worker centers that are amazing examples of the power of community mobilization. They provide resources for those seeking out work; resources that include things like connections with construction sites or farms that won't deny wages to undocumented workers, education about worker's rights, English classes among other important support services. But because the focus is on the worker, especially a certain kind of masculine stereotype who most often works in construction or agriculture, the realities and struggles of women are not addressed. While there are many women who also work in these fields, and there are many women who work in other sectors of society, this "worker" excludes those that do not fit and perpetuates a limited definition of "worker" even within the progressive movement.

IT'S NOT ALL BAD NEWS.

There are many women who are working and who are working to be included the word "worker". In California, a movement of domestic worker collectives is growing: Women's Action to Gain Economic Security (WAGES). WAGES is a collective of women organizing themselves into worker-owned democratic businesses that are able to control their working conditions, declaring their position as workers. La Mujer

Obrera (The Woman Worker), an organization in El Paso, Texas, has a food cooperative (La Cooperativa), a free workers clinic (La Clinica), and a people's school (Escuela Popular). They are factory workers and organizers who educate themselves on issues of politics and economics and English and more because as La Mujer Obrera Director María Antonia Flores says, "Women are not the only ones who come for help, but yes, the working woman is the one who is in the worst need."

Frivolous use of the words undocumented worker, however, does not always take this work into account. If we want to represent the experiences of undocumented immigrants, we must realize who is being described and who is not being described when we hear "undocumented workers". I believe that it is possible to combat the hateful anti-immigrant movement without excluding some. I think I'm going to start saying 'undocumented citizen'. I bet the California Prop 187 authors will love that! 

# LISTEN UP!

## HOW TO CONNECT WITH YOUNG WOMEN

*By Mary Mahoney*

Now, I don't want to say this too loudly to a movement that already has so much on its plate, but the reproductive health and rights of young women must become a greater priority for a movement whose viability depends on the activism of youth to survive.

We have recently experienced some landmark developments in our field, such as the FDA approval of the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine, Gardasil® and prescription-free Emergency Contraception for people over 18. But until we can assure reproductive autonomy for all young people, we have little time to pat ourselves on the back.

Historically, adults, even progressive women in the reproductive rights movement, have acted as if they know best what young women need – and have

typically only listened to young women with one ear. So what can we do as a movement to support young women in the fight against reproductive oppression and in the struggle for reproductive justice?

There are many ways to create and support spaces for young women's voices within this movement and to connect with them by focusing on their needs rather than our own agendas.

First, young people are growing up in a culture that exploits teen sexuality and at the same time denies it outright. No matter how resilient young people may be, they can't help being affected by images from *Girls Gone Wild* commercials and *Laguna Beach*. The media also harm youth by ignoring their public health needs: in the top 200 films of the past 20 years, condom use was only suggested

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### THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

#### *Reproductive rights*

Reproductive rights refers to an individual woman's legal right to determine her own reproductive destiny, including the right to terminate a pregnancy, the right to contraception, as well as the right to bear healthy children. A key component of the "rights" model is the issue of access: that women should have the right to be provided with the necessary health technologies and services that contribute to her reproductive life. Another key aspect of this framework is the right to be free from discrimination because of sex, race, class or geography.

#### *Reproductive health*

Reproductive health advocates want to protect the medical well-being of a woman and her ability to bear healthy children at a time when she is ready to do so. Key components of this framework include access to culturally sensitive healthcare providers, health insurance coverage and sexuality education, as well as an emphasis on HIV/AIDS prevention and counseling, sexually transmitted disease prevention and counseling, and cancer prevention and treatment. The lack of access to reproductive health services for women, especially low-income women and women of color, greatly affects their overall physical and mental security.

#### *Reproductive justice*

The concept of reproductive justice links issues of reproductive health and rights with the broader spectrum of social justice issues including economic and political discrimination, racial injustice and the hierarchies of race and class that exist in the US and abroad. Reproductive justice activism encourages a holistic view of reproductive health and rights and attempts to build relationships between the reproductive rights movement and other movements including LGBTQ rights, educational justice, youth empowerment, environmental justice and globalization. A key component of this model is the idea that women's ability to exercise reproductive self-determination is determined by her place in society.

# N THROUGH REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

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once! Is unsafe sex still considered sexy? With so many innovative and entertaining advancements in technology and medicine, like musical condoms and chewable birth control, you would think Hollywood could do a better job of creating a safe, realistic space for youth to contemplate sexual activity.

Government policies directly harm young people. Between 1996 and 2005, Congress committed over \$1.1 billion through both federal and state matching funds to “abstinence-only” programs. Virtually no money went to comprehensive sex education. Today the only sex education for more than a third of all students is “abstinence only,” even though this curriculum teaches falsehoods about condom effectiveness rates and other matters. LGBTQ youth are completely disregarded as sexual beings under this curriculum. Young women are being asked to take total responsibility for their bodies without access to education that would teach them how to make safe choices.

“Abstinence-only” programs respond to young people’s reproductive and sexual health as a moral issue, not a public health issue. This, even while the number of new cases of STDs among 15-24 year olds is 9.1 million or roughly fifty percent of all new cases in the U.S, including 15,000 HIV/AIDS and 4.6 million HPV cases. Government and market-driven policies that block young people from healthy sexual choices also include parental notification laws for abortion access and regulations governing emergency contraception (EC) which mandate prescriptions for girls younger than 18, even though this makes it difficult for young women to obtain EC within the 72-hour window, and even though this restriction assumes that all young women have health insurance or money to visit their doctor and also assumes that they have doctors they trust.

Today young people want to address reproductive issues in their own, contemporary terms, focusing on prevention

and families and healthy futures. We who advocate for and promote the activism of young women in the reproductive rights and health movement can support this activism with a reproductive justice framework. This framework looks at the whole woman and her entire set of life circumstances, from age to class to race to religion and sexual orientation, recognizing that these interconnected issues affect how she – and others – control her reproductive health and rights. In other words, it is important that we do not isolate abortion from the totality of women’s health and lives and do not alienate potential activists by focusing only on this one issue.

Young women completely understand this holistic approach to reproductive health and rights. They, along with women of color led groups, are transforming the movement to include access to health care, LGBTQ liberation, racial and economic justice, comprehensive sex education, maternal dignity and HIV/AIDS work. Young women are mobilizing their peers and constituencies by creating messages that connect with young people and working across movements to build the progressive and social justice movements from the ground up. Because what we choose to do today not only affects the lives of youths at present, but also their future health and ability to make smart choices for themselves throughout their lives, becoming involved in this area of the movement is an important step for any activist or organization. To support young women in this movement, we must follow their lead and meet them where they are on their road to reproductive autonomy. 

*Today young people want to address reproductive issues in their own, contemporary terms, focusing on prevention and families and healthy futures. We who advocate for and promote the activism of young women in the reproductive rights and health movement can support this activism with a reproductive justice framework.*

# GONZALES V. CARHART:

what the decision really means for women

By Meredith Esser

The *Gonzales v. Carhart* Supreme Court decision that was released on April 18, 2007, and which banned the controversial Intact D&E abortion procedure contains many new challenges to the reproductive justice movement. There are certainly new legal challenges, as this decision has reversed decades of legal precedent on a number of key issues. Most importantly in my mind, however, this decision takes a very negative view of women.

At first, it was difficult for me to get a clear picture of the implications of *Gonzales*. On the one hand, the decision restricts only one form of abortion that accounts for only a small percentage of total abortions performed in the United States each year. On the other hand, the decision includes restrictions on doctors and women's decision-making abilities about the procedure that are unprecedented—the procedure is banned even if it is deemed to be the healthiest for the mother.

However, whether or not you believe in abortion, and whether or not you believe that the decision was just, the words and attitude of the court are still alarming. The *Gonzales* decision “saves no fetus” as Justice Ginsburg pointed out in her dis-

sent. In individual cases women who previously might have undergone the abortion procedure in question, the Intact D&E, still have another, albeit potentially less safe option. Additionally, as many doctors and women's rights advocates point out, this decision does nothing to reduce the number of abortions overall that women in the United States may seek. Rather, Justice Kennedy's majority opinion lays out a worldview in which government is allowed to promote a moral vision of “life” above the beliefs and value systems of individual Americans. It seeks to protect women from themselves, and cites the fact that “some women come to regret their decision to abort” as a justification for prohibiting this procedure. In short, the language of the Court is insulting to women, and hearkens back to the pre-Roe days—even, perhaps, the pre-vote days.

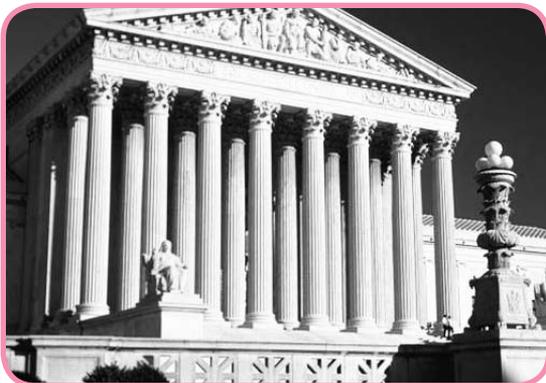
As Lynn Paltrow, executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women pointed out in an interview with Laura Flanders on Air America shortly after the decision was announced, this attitude is not restricted only to women who are seeking abortions, but extends into other areas as well. Paltrow cites numerous examples of women who

have been forced to have cesarean sections against their will. Further, she discusses the numerous ways in which, through legislation such as the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, women's rights, and specifically pregnant women's rights are being replaced by fetal rights. The

## THE FACTS:

1. This is a **federal, nationwide ban**, which means that it overrides laws in other states that have greater protections for women than the Constitution (this is unusual for reproductive rights-related cases which are generally under the jurisdiction of state legislatures)
2. There is **no exception** to the ban when a woman's **health** is at risk
3. The ban carries a **criminal penalty of up to two years** for doctors who perform the procedure
4. The opinion lays out an argument for “**fetal personhood**,” and promotes a “moral vision of life” above the life of the pregnant woman

For more information, visit [www.federalabortionban.org](http://www.federalabortionban.org).



entire decision reflects this shifting value system.

In the wake of this decision, progressives, and especially those in the abortion-rights movement, must look beyond abortion. Clearly, what is at stake in this decision is not the fate of abortion, per se, but is a larger issue—the issue of how the Court and Congress treat women, youth and their families. **TV**

# news and views from the field: parental consent laws



Dear “Raise Your Voice” readers,

*I want to talk about an issue that has been on my mind recently: parental consent laws. I am one of the fortunate ones. My family has always been supportive of the rights of women. My mother has always done her best to make me feel comfortable coming to her with any problems or questions I might have. But even with her behind me, I still didn’t turn to her for advice. And that’s because sometimes there are topics that are just too uncomfortable to speak about with your parents, especially during your teen years. Young women have difficulty even seeking out information regarding means of birth control. Simply put, teens in most cases do not look to their parents for guidance in leading a healthy sexual life.*

*Parental notification and/or consent laws are currently in effect in 34 states. While I can see the logic behind the laws, in real life situations, sometimes they are just not feasible. Yes, there are many young women who would be able to get the permission necessary in order to have an abortion, however there are many who are not in such a situation. Some girls are physically abused at home and fear the possible consequences of admitting they are sexually active. Others may have become pregnant because of sexual or have even been abused by men in their own homes or friends of their parents. The point is that a young woman should be able to make decisions about her own body.*



*Those that agree with parental consent laws argue that exceptions within the laws, and the possibility of obtaining a “judicial bypass” will take care of the girls I have just spoken of. A teen that discovers she is pregnant is dealing with so many different thoughts and feelings. To make a decision that she wants to terminate a pregnancy is a very difficult. Once she has made this decision, should she have to turn to a strange adult who doesn’t know her at all and ask for their permission? Moreover, this “exception” requires time, which she does not have, and money, which she probably doesn’t have either.*

*Why is it that in this society we believe that a young girl is mature enough to bring a human being into this world, but not mature enough to decide when she is ready?*



Sincerely,

Raise Your Voice

### *About the Pro-Choice Public Education Project*

The Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP) is dedicated to engaging young women on their terms around the critical issues of reproductive health and rights. Historically, the reproductive rights movement has marginalized young women, women of color, and low-income women, among other groups. PEP works to bridge the gap between organizations and diverse young women by both listening to young women's stories and by working with organizations to help them meet young women where they are.

### *About the Young Women's Leadership Council*

The mission of the Young Women's Leadership Council (YWLC) is to be the voice and raise the voices of diverse groups of young women in the sexual and reproductive health and rights movement.

## *Donate to PEP!*

Thank you for picking up *Raise Your Voice*.

If you like what you have read, we encourage you to become part of the PEP family. Please visit our website at

[www.protectchoice.org](http://www.protectchoice.org). You can join our email list, donate online, and learn much more about the work that we do for young women.



You can also send a donation via mail to:

***The Pro-Choice Public Education Project***

PO Box 3952  
New York, NY 10163

or call **1-800-253-CHOICE** for more information.

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