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Which Side Are We On in the Struggle for Women's Rights

By **Steven Conn**

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For the last several years, the United States has depicted the battle against terrorism as a contest pitting free societies against those who would impose Islamic rule on the world. But across the globe right now the epochal struggle is not between Islam and the West, but between those societies in which women are free and those in which they are repressed.

Women's lives are controlled in those nations observing some form of Islamic law. The Taliban first came to the world's horrified attention with reports of the beatings, stonings and summary executions of women who were held to have violated Islamic law. Throughout the Islamic world women are not permitted to move freely in public, are denied full access to educational and economic life and are barred from voting. In Saudi Arabia -- our ally in the fight against terrorism -- women are even forbidden to drive cars.

Social and political control over women's bodies, however, extends well beyond the Islamic world. In many African societies women are forced to have their genitals mutilated. Rape has routinely been used as an instrument of war from Bosnia to Darfur. The trafficking of women in sexual slavery is now endemic across much of Eastern Europe and Asia, but has generated only a tepid response from governments in those regions.

In the developing world, it has been a truism for a generation that the surest indicators of a country's social and economic progress are the educational levels of its women and women's ability to limit their pregnancies. Put crudely, as education for women goes up and family size goes down, societies prosper. In the Catholic third world, women are denied access to birth control as a matter of law. In El Salvador, women and doctors are jailed for having illegal abortions. No coincidence that many of these places have stagnating economies.

During the 20th century, the control of women's reproductive lives marked the most despicable regimes. Among the first things the Nazis did upon seizing power in 1933 was to outlaw abortion. Family planning centers were closed, access to contraception made increasingly difficult and abortion criminalized. By 1943 the Nazis made abortion a capital offense punishable by the death penalty. Stalin too outlawed abortion in 1936, and both dictators clearly saw control of women's reproduction as a part of the larger apparatus of state control and repression.

States that are repressive enough to control women's contraceptive options are just as likely to control other aspects of childbearing. The Romanian despot Nicolae Ceausescu made contraception illegal in 1966 for any woman who had fewer than five children. Not satisfied with that, 20 years later, in 1986, he created a monitoring system for all pregnant women, and miscarriages became subject to a criminal investigation. These acts forced women to have children whether they wanted to or not, and 200,000 of those children wound up in those infamous orphanages. Just as tyrannically, China, which limits family size by law, has long been accused of coercing women to have abortions and be sterilized.

So as Ohio and Louisiana rush to join South Dakota in attempting to criminalize abortion, we should ask: which side are we on? Are we among those societies that permit women the full measure of their freedom or with those that control women's bodies in the service of a larger state agenda?

Remember that for many, especially on the religious right, abortion and contraception are no different. What they really want is to control the reproductive choices we all make in accordance with their particular ideas. Those of us who want the right to plan our own families are already being held hostage by these zealots. They have kept the early-abortion pill RU-486 off the market, pressured pharmacies not to sell birth control, and limited the availability of reproductive education in schools.

The lesson of the 20th century is clear, at least to the rest of the world. Free societies allow their citizens to make their own reproductive decisions; repressive ones restrict them. Which side are we on when this administration votes with countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia to block funding for family planning initiatives in the United Nations?

For their part, the Romanians deeply understood the intrinsic connection between freedom and reproductive choice. On December 26, 1989, the day after the evil Ceausescu had been toppled, the National Salvation Front issued two decrees: it lifted the ban on the private ownership of typewriters, and it repealed the laws that policed pregnant women.

No society can be called a free society until and unless women are free to make their own decisions about family planning, and this includes the United States. So are we going to join those nations where women enjoy their freedom or are we going to follow places such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and El Salvador, which treat their women as less than free? Which side are we going to be on?

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