

Restellism/Abortion

What advertisements did *The Revolution* refuse to run?

In the inaugural edition of Anthony's newspaper, *The Revolution*, it stated a policy to refuse 'quack or immoral' advertisements, i.e., ads for abortion or medicines that caused abortion. Anthony's signed statement condemned secular and religious publications for running these ads.

The verbiage for abortifacient advertisement was thinly-veiled and disguised. One recent Smithsonian scholar wrote, "Victorian-era women experiencing 'female trouble' could pick up a daily newspaper, scan the advertisements and translate the euphemisms.... euphemisms such as 'cathartic pills' and 'women's tonic' meant to 'remove a lady's obstructions' and cure 'private ailments.'"

Did other suffrage publications condemn abortion too?

Yes. *The Union Signal*, the official publication of the National Women's Christian Temperance Union, *The Woman's Medical Journal*, and *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, written by free-love advocate Victoria Woodhull, opposed abortion. The biography of Sylvia Pankhurst, the radical socialist and leader of Great Britain's suffrage movement spoke about her opposition to abortion.

No other publication spoke about it as frequently and as directly as the editorials, letters, and articles in *The Revolution*. This is likely for the following reasons:

1. The NYC abortionist Madame Restell was in and out of court during the same 2-year period that *The Revolution* was printed. Besides internally driven, many of the articles published were reprinted from other newspapers across the country;
2. *The Revolution* prided itself on demanding that women be educated about pregnancy and sex, subjects forbidden by mainstream, and even many other suffrage newspapers;
3. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the most radical and outspoken suffragist leaders of the time, was editor of *The Revolution*.

Stanton's views were more progressive than Anthony's. She was critical of religious leaders, causing her to write *The Woman's Bible*. But like many other suffragists, she valued the role of motherhood. "We are as a sex infinitely superior to men and if we were free and developed...our motherhood would be our glory. That function gives women such wisdom and power as no man can possess (Diary and Reminiscences)."

***The Revolution* ran many anti-abortion articles and opinion pieces written by editors and suffrage leaders other than Anthony. How then can we know that Anthony herself opposed abortion?**

Except for her Social Purity speech and two diary entries condemning abortion, Anthony herself wrote little about abortion. However, because of the sheer number of articles condemning the practice, and not found to that extent in any other publication of the day, it can be said that Anthony's newspaper, *The Revolution*, was a virtual national mouthpiece against 'the evil practice.' The paper, that was owned and managed by Anthony, ran over 100 articles, letters, and editorials condemning the practice. It boldly served as a platform to air suffrage condemnation on the subject. No other feminist paper of the day spoke as frequently and vehemently about abortion as *The Revolution*.

She attributed financial failure of *The Revolution* to this policy, a policy she refused to abandon. *The Revolution's* policy forbidding advertising for lucrative abortifacients was her own. She was personally congratulated for this policy by other publications.

The Revolution was created to be an expression of suffrage opinion, an opinion often suppressed in other papers. It was not created to give voice to opinions suffrage leaders did not support. The paper had the practice of reprinting opinions from other papers and letters that took a counter position from their own so that they could expressly refute an argument with their own rebuttal.

Was abortion opposed because it was unhealthy, even fatal to women?

In *The Revolution*, little or no expression of concern about abortion's negative health effects on women have been found. Unlike the medical profession and other newspapers, suffragists in *The Revolution* made little to no reference to health and safety to women because of abortion. 'Matricide' or 'femicide' are words not used, but rather 'feticide', 'child-murder', 'infanticide' are terms used and are directed to the well-being or health of 'the unborn life.'

Reference to the unhealthy effects of abortion are also rare in other suffrage publications. The few that are found in other suffrage writings speak about health of the mother but do so in relation to the "unborn human being":

Isabella Beecher Hooker referenced the physical pain/danger side of abortion as a side bar: "That some women have...been led into deadly sin and into the fearful suffering which inevitably follows the serious transgression of even physical law is true, perhaps even to the extent you have stated," she wrote in response to Rev. John Todd's widely circulated "Fashionable Murder" article, which was about abortion.

Sarah F. Norton, in the suffrage paper 1870 *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, mentions the physical effects on women as a side note to her main point: "...we can only judge of the number by the daily accounts given in the newspapers of some woman dying or dead from the effects of an abortion or premature birth, and newly-born, cast-away infants... (p. 76)."

Dr. Anita Tyng, was part of the women's rights movement but wasn't involved in the push for suffrage. She links the death of both mother and child in an 1878 report to the Rhode Island State Board of Health. Tyng wrote that many women labored under the "erroneous idea" that "in the early months of pregnancy, there is no sin, and little danger to the woman's life." Though "this is the very reverse of the truth", she argued, both "legislators and the public fail to recognize the true character of the crime..." Even where laws against abortion were on the books, there was "no cognizance of the murder of the child" or of "the ill health of the woman for the remainder for her life."

How were 'quack or immoral' medicines, opposed in *The Revolution's* inaugural edition, differentiated?

In the 19th century, quacks or quack medicines did not necessarily mean doctors practicing medicine or prescribing medicines without a license. *The Revolution* itself ran ads for therapists and medical treatments that were 'unlicensed'. While the paper refused alcohol-based products, the health benefits of some medicines it advertised were questionable or unknown. For instance, one medicinal ad that appeared in *The Revolution* contained mercury.

Quack was more closely defined as practices that violated the purpose of medicine, that is to heal. Over 20 editorials in *The Revolution* explained the advertising policy by condemning abortion, a practice which they believed destroyed life and dishonored the practice of medicine. No reference to the advertisement policy indicated any practice other than abortion. *The Revolution* opposed even 'patent' medicines if they were abortifacients:

"IMPORTANT MOVEMENT. - A bill has been favorably reported in the N.Y. legislature providing for the inspection all "patent or quack medicines." The audacity of which newspapers, religious as well as others, will advertise these abominations, has done much to rouse the popular indignation. It is high time to move for some protection against their deadly influence, both moral and spiritual as well as material. Restellism has long found in these broths of Beelzebub, its securest hiding places."

-*The Revolution*, April 8, 1869, p221.

Wouldn't the lack of women's freedom cause support for abortion, not opposition to abortion?

It would appear so.

- Abortion was opposed at a time when out-of-wedlock childbirth ostracized a woman.
- A woman had little independence, education or employment opportunities to raise a child on her own.
- Little was known about pregnancy and embryo development.
- Rape laws were liberal and unenforced.
- Contraceptive methods were a taboo topic and not well understood. Some sources say childbirth was as dangerous as abortion.

Against this backdrop, why then was abortion opposed?

Three mid-19th c / early 20th century factors contributed to suffrage thinking:

First, suffrage writings opposing abortion were written after the Civil War, a period when the great moral question of the time was debated on the national stage: Was slavery wrong? Who was considered a human being? Was ownership of another human being moral? Elizabeth Cady Stanton's letter to Julia Ward Howe seeks to address that question in the context of abortion: "When we consider that women are property it is degrading that we consider our children as property to destroy as we see fit." (Note: This letter, quoted in multiple secondary sources, has been moved/stolen/misplaced from the archives at Harvard University.)

Second, like the abolitionists who were evangelical Christians, many of the suffragists were also religious. Their faith led them to believe the taking of the life of or ownership of a human being was immoral. In particular for Quakers like Anthony, abortion violated the 'inner light' that was God represented in human beings. It was why Quakers also believed war and capital punishment were immoral. *The Revolution* also had a policy to oppose standing armies, for instance. Despite this, religious reasons were not often stated explicitly in their opposition to abortion and rarely if ever in *The Revolution*. In fact, suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Jocelyn Gage were highly critical of religion but opposed abortion.

Third, a claim could be made that suffrage leaders saw support for abortion contrary to their promotion of care for children and family, thereby losing followers. Anti-suffrage organizations threatened that the domestic sphere was going to be diminished if a suffrage amendment was passed. Suffragists were loath to give credence to this position. However, because of the extent and passion with which *The Revolution* addresses abortion, and does so in greater detail than other social justice issues except women's suffrage, it is doubtful that their anti-abortion position was more of a strategy than a passion for equality.

Why were suffragists as a group more outspoken against abortion?

Other than the reasons stated above, Suffragists believed that greater independence of women would eliminate or at least greatly reduce poverty, rape, and prostitution. They believed these evils produced women's desire to abort their children. Women's enfranchisement would provide education and employment opportunities, change divorce laws related to drunken husbands, and take away the stigma of single motherhood. Having access to the vote would 'scourge the evil of abortion'.

Who was Madame Restell?

Madame Restell, a.k.a. Anna Lohman, had abortion establishments in several other major cities, including NYC. She had no formal medical training, but was married to a man who dealt in drugs and medicines. Her practice used these for both contraceptive and abortive purposes, the latter for which she was 'notorious' (Broder).

Where did people get their training to perform abortions?

Abortion violated the Hippocratic Oath, therefore was not part of any formal medical training. However, some midwives performed abortion using herbs and toxic substances, knowledge handed down over generations. A wildly popular book of natural treatments throughout 17th century New England was John Gerard's, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* [sic]. Another herbalist book, said to contain more than a dozen preparations of botanicals used to cause miscarriage, was Culpeper's, *The English Physician and Complete Herbal* (Brodie, p. 42).

What did other people say about abortion? How did men feel about it?

The public generally condemned abortion, and men were no exception. Suffragist opposition was particularly blatant. Suffrage writings indicate they not only held women individually accountable, a disenfranchised group they represented, but laid guilt at the feet of society as well as their male counterparts, both individually and collectively, who they felt were responsible for women's lack of independence.

For instance, *The Revolution* recounts a story about Dr. Charlotte Lozier who was approached by a man trying to procure an abortion for his 'cousin'. Lozier, who called abortion 'anti-natal infanticide', offered compassionate help for the woman, but went so far as to cause the man's arrest for his 'inhuman proposition'.

What was the American Medical Association's position on abortion in the 19th century? Did it affect suffrage opinion?

The American Medical Association (AMA) was founded in 1847 and in 1857 appointed Dr. Horatio Storer, well-known for his opposition to abortion, as committee chair responsible for investigating criminal abortion. The committee's report was later accepted and published. The AMA also, as a result of the report, urged legislators and Tennessee medical societies to work to make abortion more difficult to obtain. According to Janet Farrell-Brodie, "for the rest of the century, under the aegis of the AMA, physicians became the most visible single group seeking to tighten the laws against abortion (p.267)." Suffragists supported this effort.

Like many in his field, Dr. Storer was not considered a supporter of suffrage. He believed a woman's place was in the home. "The true wife," didn't pursue "undue power in public life ... undue control in domestic affairs ... [or] privileges not her own." He also believed in and expressed fear of Mexican, Chinese, and Black, Indian, and Catholic babies dominating the spread of "civilization." "Shall" these regions, he asked, "be filled by our own children or by those of aliens? This is a question our women must answer; upon their loins depends on the future destiny of the nation."

What were other reasons for women to become doctors?

Other than general humanitarian reasons, female doctors wanted to teach maternal and family care, and promote a general understanding of pregnancy, embryology and childbirth. Understanding the female anatomy was critical to *The Revolution's* publishers. It published lectures on the development of the embryo by Anna Densmore French, the founder of Sorosis, an organization that emphasized care for single mothers and their children.

Wouldn't suffrage support for 'voluntary motherhood' include abortion?

Most suffrage leaders believed in limiting the number of children they conceived. But, some contemporary feminist historians, like Dr. Allison Parker, believed suffrage leaders unanimously opposed contraception as well as abortion because both practices encouraged male promiscuity.

Suffragists in *The Revolution*, however, appear to be condemnatory of abortion without conflating it with an expressed view about contraception.

Suffrage leader's anti temperance activity was related to limiting family size. Refraining from alcohol, they believed, 'tempered' the male sexual appetite, controlling the number of children a woman would conceive.

Why do some women historians and the Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester claim that Susan B. Anthony's position on abortion is 'Unknown'?

The controversy centers on one anti-abortion article in *The Revolution* signed by 'A' that some contemporary anti-abortion groups claim was written by Anthony. The SBA Birthplace Museum supports the claim that the article is not likely to have been written by Anthony.

Another challenge is the claim that while suffragists did oppose abortion, they did not want to make abortion 'illegal'.

Note: Discussion about the pros-and-cons of the claim give insight into how contemporary politics and history can often conflict. For instance, the quote signed by 'A' is promoted by The Susan B Anthony List, an organization today that is dedicated to making abortion illegal. Opponents of the claim are generally contemporary supporters of abortion-rights who often dismiss primary resources re: to Anthony's position on abortion.

Did suffragists support making abortion legal?

The Revolution quote signed by 'A' discussed above ('we want prevention, not merely punishment') does not indicate that suffragists wanted abortion to be legal. To the contrary, the authors believed being a crime was not enough. They wanted to prevent the need for it through the vote. As stated earlier, Dr. Charlotte Lozier used the law to arrest a man seeking an abortion for his 'cousin'. Dr. Alice Bunker Stockham said the persons responsible 'for the forcible deprivation of existence of the embryo...is guilty of the crime of all crimes.'" *The Revolution* even congratulated New York for tightening abortion laws.

Suffragists' language did not frame their frequent use of the word crime as it related to abortion in oppositional terms. 'Crime against humanity', 'the crime of child-murder' hardly implies their opposition to it being a crime.

Was abortion legal in the 19th century?

Abortion was legal prior to the mother feeling fetal movement or 'quickening.' This was the point when most women believed the unborn child became alive. There was little technology or medical image to inform the law.

Suffragists, however, believed in educating women about embryo development. *The Revolution* ran lectures by Anna Densmore French that would impact maternal understanding that the unborn was alive throughout pregnancy. This education by suffragists, particularly in *The Revolution*, and the public debate it spurred, is likely to have played a role in changing laws to make abortion illegal even earlier in pregnancy.

Resources

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