

Jenet Erickson: Abortion's culture is antithetical to women's equality

By [Jenet Jacob Erickson](#)

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Once again, Roe v. Wade finds itself at the center of a Supreme Court nomination battle. And regardless of whether Roe v. Wade is ever overturned, there is no question that scientific advancements have “remade” the abortion debate. With ultrasound imagery and innovations in neonatology, a developing fetus is no longer referred to as “a mass of tissue,” even by abortion advocates. Public opinion reflects this change. Strong majorities of Americans, across demographic groups, oppose abortions in the second (65 percent) and third trimesters (81 percent). And even in the first trimester, a majority (53 percent) agrees abortion should be illegal when the woman’s only reason is not wanting to have a child.

Whether abortion means terminating a developing life is no longer debated. That is clear. The debate now centers on what abortion means for women. In the face of public support for some abortion restrictions, pro-choice advocates argue, “abandoning abortion rights means abandoning women.” NARAL Pro-Choice America President Ilyse Hogue claims that those who advocate for restrictions on abortion are “not really anti-abortion. ... They are against a world where women can contribute equally and chart our own destiny in ways our grandmothers never thought possible.”

But Hogue’s claim belies a damaging assumption. One we must take seriously. She assumes that women cannot be equal to men unless they act destructively against their bodies and the developing life they carry. Essentially, women are told that by sacrificing life they can achieve an “equal” life.

As Harvard visiting scholar Erika Bacciochi explains, abortion advocacy assumes a “troubling natural inequality” for women because they get pregnant and men do not. Abortion eliminates that difference so women, like men, can enter into sexual relations without commitment, “free” to become, both socially and economically. But to do so, women must act “affirmatively and destructively” on their bodies to imitate men.

In the words of pro-life scholar Camille Williams, in essence, women are reduced to “defective men,” living “at the mercy of our bodies, too weak, irrational and incompetent to resist irresponsible men who impregnate us, and too politically weak to shape our educational institutions and workplaces” to accommodate the gift of our fertility.

Abortion does not remedy inequality for women. It entrenches it by refusing to acknowledge and respect the sexual difference between men and women. Instead of shaping our educational institutions and workplaces to respect, protect and support women’s childbearing, abortion encourages us to ignore it. Instead of seeking remedies for the challenges and injustices faced by

pregnant women, abortion “submits” to them, masking and not responding to the realities women face.

The assumptions underlying abortion have also undermined the responsibility men and women feel for each other, and the life they create. Abortion on demand teaches that relationships are terminable at will — that love, sacrifice and commitment are contingent upon self-interest and fulfillment. It says not only to a developing person, but to the mother herself, “I will love and care for you when it works for me.” But in the rejection of her pregnancy, she is also being rejected. To denigrate the gift of life unavoidably denigrates the person who carries that life.

As sociologist Mark Regnerus’ research found, “Sex among singles used to occur in and during the search for someone to marry. ... The average woman could and did count on seeing evidence of commitment before sex, because sex risked pregnancy. ... Now having sex and thinking about or committing to marry are two very different things.”

The tragic result is fewer marriageable men, less commitment, and a sexually permissive climate where women are easily objectified. Permissive abortion allows men to be absolved of responsibility for the gift of life that may result from their sexual relationships, whether aborted or not. And so, ironically, since *Roe v. Wade*, the out-of-wedlock childbearing rate has grown from 5 percent to 41 percent with profound negative implications, especially for low-income women and children. Although abortion is often marketed as a means of planning for child-rearing, easy access to it has undermined our capacity to form the committed relationships children depend upon.

A culture of abortion is ultimately antithetical to the equality women deserve, and it undermines the desire many women have for committed relationships with men as husbands and fathers, and with the children of those fathers. Given the long-term implications of the assumptions underlying a culture of permissive abortion, we can and must do better for women.

Jenet Jacob Erickson

Jenet Jacob Erickson is an affiliated scholar of the Wheatley Institution at BYU.