

Making the Links

South Asian Women and the Struggle for Reproductive Rights

by Sunera Thobani

Le présent article traite de l'importance des droits des femmes de la communauté sud asiatique du Canada en matière de reproduction. Il examine aussi le rôle central que les expériences des femmes de l'Asie du Sud ont joué dans la réévaluation actuelle des politiques du mouvement pro-choix sous la direction de femmes blanches de la classe moyenne. L'article passe en revue certaines des formes de racisme au sein du mouvement pro-choix ayant permis aux féministes blanches d'exclure les expériences des femmes de l'Asie du Sud dans le cadre de la création d'un mouvement antiracial unifié en faveur du droit des femmes concernant la reproduction.

The politics of "choice"

The feminist movement in North America has focused solely on abortion rights within the area of reproductive technologies, and this focus has been distorted by abortion rights being fought for on the basis of "choice." The slogan "abortion is a woman's right to choose" sums up the approach of the pro-choice movement to reproductive rights. At a time when women of colour the world over, including in North America, were being threatened with and subjected to sterilization abuse and forced sterilization, the centrality given by white feminists to abortion as an issue of women's "choice" revealed a clear inability on the part of white feminists to understand the issue of reproductive rights in their entirety. The white, middle class woman was posited by this movement as the "universal woman," and all women were only included in their analysis as long as their experiences were similar to those of this "universal woman."

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(Davis) For economically secure, relatively privileged white women, fighting for abortion on the basis of it being a personal, private right to choose became more than a tactic for claiming constitutional protection. "Choice" became the basis of their politics on reproductive rights for two decades, during which they remained blind to the experiences of women poorer than themselves, and women of colour who face the racism endemic in western societies.

The experiences of women of colour in their struggles for reproductive freedom have been excluded from the analysis of the feminist movement in Canada, which has been largely dominated by white, middle class women. However, this movement is now being forced to re-assess its position as a result of the proliferation of the new reproductive technologies, and the resulting recognition on the part of our white sisters that reproductive rights indeed cover a much wider range of issues and technologies than just abortion and the matter of "choice." And the experiences of South Asian women in Canada are playing a pivotal role in this reassessment.

Male selection as "choice"

In 1990, when South Asian women in British Columbia were targeted with aggressive marketing techniques by a U.S. doctor who was offering sex selection technology for sale on the basis of providing women with "choice," the pro-choice movement had to confront the inadequacy of its own position on abortion. (Thobani) Studies indicate that sex selection technology is overwhelmingly used to abort female fetuses. In practice, this is a process of male selection. South Asian women clearly understand that this technology is not an issue of "choice," but rather an expression of the devaluation of women in a patriarchal world. Similarly, although other new reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization and surrogacy are being marketed to women in the name of "choice," women of colour also understand this as a further exploitation of women's reproductive capacities.

The recognition on the part of some of our white sisters of the threat to women posed by such misogynist technologies reveals the dangers implicit in the superficial analysis of reproductive freedom which has dominated the pro-choice movement. "Choice" has nothing to do with increasing women's control over their own reproductive capacities, rather it means the "choice" to buy expensive, experimental technologies which take the control of women's reproductive capacities away from women. The arena of reproductive rights is one of the most bitter struggles that women the world over are going to have to engage in, as women are pitted against women by technologies which enhance the fertility of affluent, white women, and which severely curtail

the reproductive capacities of poor women and of women of colour.

This control over women's bodies and our reproductive capacities is one of the cornerstones of the patriarchal exploitation of women globally. The institutions against which women have to fight to regain this control are very powerful. In order for the white feminist movement to build alliances with women of colour, it has become absolutely essential to address the racism within its own ranks. For although white feminists have recognized the importance of reproductive freedom in the overall struggle to end the patriarchal exploitation of women, this recognition has been tainted by the divisions of race and class endemic in this movement. Racism and bourgeois values continue to remain an obstacle in the development of a unified anti-racist, anti-bourgeois feminist movement for reproductive freedom.

Abortion as a "white woman's" issue

Statistics released by the Worldwatch Institute show that about 50 million abortions are performed globally every year. It is estimated that about half of them, that is about 25 million abortions, are performed illegally. It has also been estimated that 200,000 women die every year from these abortions. For each woman who dies, thirty to forty women survive who suffer from serious health problems. (*The Vancouver Sun* 1990)

Every year, a minimum of one million women die, and an additional one hundred million women are left with disabling illnesses from reproductive health related causes, such as unsafe abortions, complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth. These results are from a study by Jodi Jacobson, who also states that the leading killer in the Third World of women of childbearing age is reproductive problems. Out of the half million women who die every year from pregnancy-related causes, only 6,000 are not from the Third

World. The rest of these half million women are all from the Third World. The chances of women dying from pregnancy related causes are 1 in 21 for women in Africa, 1 in 54 for women in Asia, and 1 in 73 for women in South America. (*The Vancouver Sun* 1991)

Most of the women who are dying in the world today as a result of unsafe, illegal abortions are women of colour. Access to affordable safe, legal abortions, to safe and effective contraceptives, to reproductive health services as well as to general health services is often a matter of life and death for women globally. The struggle for reproductive rights is a struggle for the right to women's autonomy and it is a

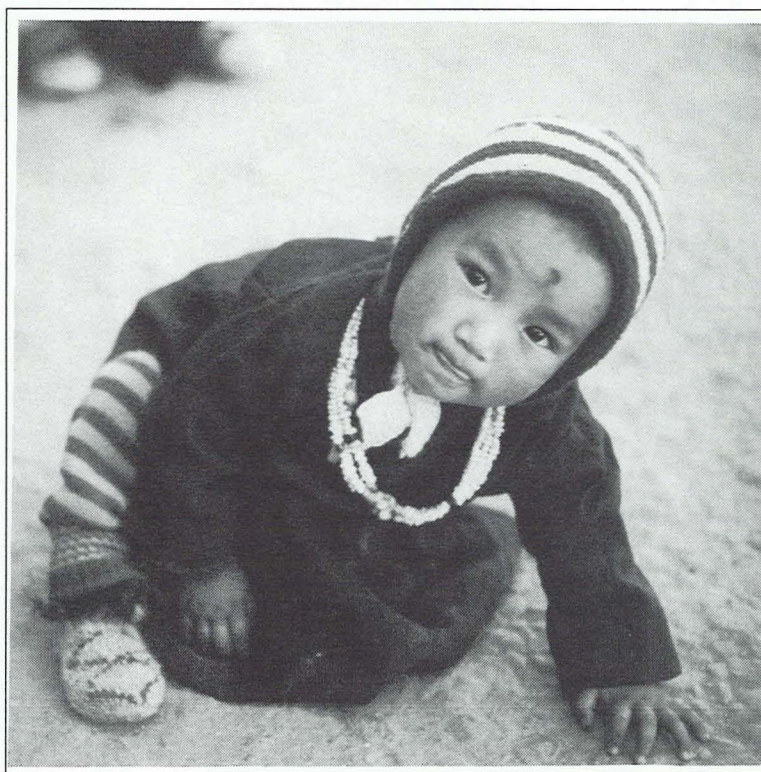


Photo: Brenda Cranney

struggle for which women of colour are paying with their lives every day.

If white women struggling for the right to abortion cannot work with women of colour, with the very women whose lives are most affected by the fight for reproductive freedom, then it is the white women's "pro-choice" movement which needs to be reassessed in order to understand what it is about this movement that makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for them to work with women of colour.

And it is not only women in the Third World who pay the highest price for lack

of control over their reproductive capacities. Women of colour within the advanced capitalist countries also have relatively less access to safe and effective reproductive health care. In the United States, for example, before abortion was decriminalized in 1973, the "overwhelming majority" of the women who died from illegal abortions were women of colour. Women of colour accounted for 64 per cent of deaths resulting from illegal abortions in 1972, and African-American and Puerto Rican women made for 80 per cent of the women who died in New York City. Polls in the 1960s and 1970s showed that black women were more likely to favour de-criminalization of abortion than white women. "The realities indicated that Black women, Puerto-Rican women, Native American women were in greater need of decriminalizing abortions than were white women." (Davis)

While studies on the abortion patterns of South Asian women in Canada remain to be carried out, the conditions in which South Asian women find themselves upon settlement in Canada point towards the potential for a similar experience.

South Asian immigrant women are situated by the workings of racist State immigration policies at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Although officially acknowledged as immigrating to Canada under the family dependent category, the women end up doing low-paying, low-status work in the Canadian economy. The official non-recognition of these women as workers who have higher labour force-participation rates, along with other immigrant women, than Canadian-born women, means they are not given access to adequate training programs and services which would enable them to enter the job market on an equitable level. The lack of accreditation also ensures that South Asian immigrant women who come into Canada with professional skills and educational qualifications acquired in their

countries of origin remain unrecognized in Canada, and the women often find themselves being de-skilled into occupations well below their educational and professional levels. Working mainly in occupations such as janitors, home makers, farm workers, and garment workers, these women live under considerable financial constraints and their access to affordable housing and appropriate child-care is severely limited. Their status within the gender and race segregated labour market, where pay inequity and discrimination in employment remain the order of the day, also makes them more vulnerable to poverty, to sexual harassment and reproductive health hazards present in their work environments. The right to safe, effective contraceptives, and to legal abortions, is vital in their lives as they struggle to settle in Canada and to better the standard of living for themselves and their families, despite the racism they encounter at every level of Canadian society. Therefore, the reproductive rights of South Asian women include access to safe and legal abortions, as well as access to adequate support and services to allow child-rearing. For in many cases, "a woman's right to choose" means having adequate resources to "choose" to bear and raise a child.

At times when abortion was illegal in Canada, many white, middle class women went to the United States and Europe to secure abortions. For the majority of South Asian women, such options would have been out of the question. Apart from having to secure the financial resources to travel outside the country, they would have had to go through the racist immigration controls at the border which make travel much more difficult for South Asian women who are more prone to be barred access to neighbouring countries, such as the United States, than are white Canadian women. In fact, even when abortion is legal in Canada, access is not guaranteed, as clinics and hospitals which provide abortion services are constantly under attack. It is estimated that 3,000 to 6,000 Canadian women go to the U.S. for abortions every year, although abortion is not currently criminalized. (Coffin)

Access to abortions is never guaranteed, and given the lack of adequate and appropriate health care provision to immigrant communities, access to abortion

services for South Asian women is much more limited. When the government attempted to criminalize abortion by introducing Bill C-43, the anti-choice forces responded by isolating individual doctors and harassing them, as well as threatening legal action against them. A number of doctors who were thus intimidated were people of colour. (Bakan) And for the women who do not have the necessary language skills, access means overcoming additional barriers such as dealing with racist health-care providers.

The attack from the right

The blindness of the pro-choice movement in North America to the racist basis for the attack on abortion rights by the anti-choice forces is a matter of concern for women of colour. The hysteria being

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generated by the possibility that parts of North America will no longer have white majority populations in the foreseeable future serves to fuel the anti-choice fires. It is predicted that by the end of this century, the South West of the United States will no longer have white majority populations. In Canada, the falling birth rate and the increasing dependence on immigrants set the stage for attacks on abortion rights in the bid to get white women to do their bit for the interests of their race by reproducing at higher levels. And at the same time, new reproductive technologies continue to curtail the reproductive capacities of South Asian women, as illustrated by the recent intrusion into that community in both British Columbia and Ontario of sex selection technology.

Instead of dealing with these questions pertinent to the experiences of South Asian women, the pro-choice movement has often readily colluded with the racist representation of South Asian women and our issues.

Racist myths about abortion

One of the common racist myths is that there are too many people of colour in the world, and that South Asian women need to be "taught" to value the right to abortion, and in the interests of ending their poverty, they should bear fewer children. The "population explosion" argument that is used by imperialist nations to justify underdevelopment and its resulting poverty in the Third World, particularly South Asia, has often been used just as readily by the white women's movement. That stronger immigration control is needed if the country is not to be "swamped" by immigrants stems from a similar racist rationale. The pro-choice movement has proved itself incapable of understanding, to date, that poverty is the result of power relations which allow the inequitable access to the world's resources, which are currently monopolized by the imperialist nations within the global capitalist system based on the exploitation of working peoples.

Another popular racist myth is that women in South Asia do not have to fight for reproductive freedom as they have easy access to abortion. To argue thus is to remain blind to the fact that women in South Asia have relatively easier access to abortion not because they have more reproductive freedom, but rather because of the population control measures forced upon these women by international finance capital.

It is also argued by white women that South Asian women are reluctant to get abortions because of their cultural and traditional values, despite documentation to the contrary.¹ The stereotype of South Asian women as long-suffering, subservient, passive observers of patriarchal mores is nothing new. This representation of South Asian culture as inherently patriarchal and backward has done untold harm to the possibility of a positive relationship developing between white women and South Asian women. This myth continues to negate the active agency of South Asian

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women in resisting patriarchal exploitation within the context of our own cultures. The British came to India and argued that they represented a modern society, a civilized race, and that they would teach us modernity through colonization. The missionaries came and told us we were heathens, that they had the true religion, Christianity, and that they would save our souls by teaching it to us. It is no different to us when white women come and tell us that they are feminists, and that they will teach us to become feminists.

Towards an anti-racist reproductive rights movement

In order for any meaningful alliance to be forged within a truly inclusive, anti-racist feminist reproductive rights movement, the argument that abortion rights have relevance only for white women, that this is somehow "their" territory, and that the only issues which are of relevance to women of colour are those of forced sterilization and sterilization abuse needs to be dismissed by white women once and for all. That women of colour have been, and continue to be, subjected to sterilization forcefully and against their will is true, and women of colour have fought against this kind of abuse for decades. But the right to state-funded, safe, legal abortions is a central right for which women of colour have also fought in order to gain more control over their lives. The fact that the pro-choice movement has been unable to reach South Asian women is a problem indicative of the racism within that movement, and the posing of abortion rights in narrow white, bourgeois, individualistic terms. To explain this inability by arguing the lack of politicization of South Asian women on the issue of reproductive freedom is racist in the extreme.

To South Asian women, as women of colour, forced sterilization means that re-

productive control is being taken out of the hands of women, and also out of the hands of our communities, by a racist, patriarchal system which depends upon genocide and cultural devastation to maintain its control over colonized peoples. Communities of peoples of colour were, and are, being wiped out the world over through sterilization abuse, as well as through other forms of reproductive coercion.

Reproductive freedom depends on the collective rights of all women to control their bodies. To pose this freedom in individualistic, bourgeois terms of the right to privacy of individual women opens the door to opportunism on the part of those women who have the economic resources available for them to "choose" as a result of their class and race affiliations. The fight for reproductive rights means more, much much more, than a "woman's right to choose" to South Asian women. It means the right of a community to survival, the rights of colonized peoples to determine the future of their own communities and resources. For South Asian immigrant women, the right to abortion is central to gaining control over our own bodies, as is the right to bear and raise our children with access to the resources necessary to do so.

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standards of the Brahmin Scriptures. Likewise, Betsy Hartmann states her surprise upon travelling to Bangladesh and realizing that the women there, contrary to her expectation, had no moral or "traditional" resistance to using abortion and contraception.

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¹ In the section on abortion in *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Barbara Walker states that abortion was legal up to the fifth month even by the