

It's Her Body



A Reflection from JFA's Executive Director, Steve Wagner

Part I in a Series — July 2018

Dear Friend,

I was in the middle of a conversation with a few young women who had stopped to sign our “Should Abortion Remain Legal?” poll at Colorado State University in April. They were putting their mark on the “Yes” side. I asked a few questions, and each began to explain the limitations she would put on abortion at different times and in different circumstances of pregnancy.

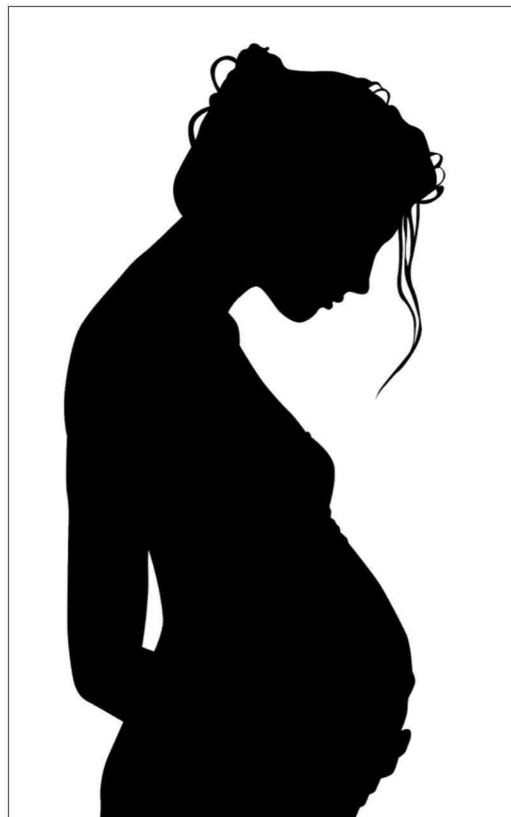
Another young woman stopped and interjected, “It should be legal up until birth.” Without much prompting, she gave her reason: “I have a right to do what I want with *my* body.”

At this moment, I wanted to launch into a precision set of questions and counter-arguments to show this woman and those standing nearby that her right to her body doesn't entail a right to kill another human by abortion. I have been thinking, writing, and teaching about appeals to bodily rights for more than 15 years. I was ready.

But as I looked at this woman, I hesitated. I stuttered and said something not too tidy, struck afresh by the fact that this topic affects this *person* very *personally*. Reflecting on it later, I was a little embarrassed that I hadn't had more to say, but then I realized there was something quite right about the approach into which I had fallen. Rather than saying something intellectual, I think I said something more along the lines of sympathy and concern, a little like this:

“I don't know if I can fully understand what it's like for matters so personal as your body and your right to do what you want with your body to be brought up on your campus. I don't know what it feels like to consider the possibility of being pregnant or to think about the government placing restrictions on your ability to control everything about your body. These things are very heavy to think about. Your right to your body is important.”

I don't want the conversation about a woman's right to her body to end there, but I think it needs to start there. Indeed, my conversation with two of the women who heard this exchange was very productive, I think due in part to the moment in which I chose sympathy over argument. But the conversation can't end with sympathy for the woman only, because this woman's view that abortion should be legal until birth also affects an unborn *person* very *personally* (and not just one unborn child, but thousands each day). If we focus on the unborn, though, without first seeking to understand the woman's concern for her body, we not only will make practical success in the conversation much more unlikely, failing to build a bridge when we could, but we'll also fail to accurately describe what's true. For what we're discussing is a *person* with equal value to the unborn person, and yes, she has a right to her body that we should be the first to champion. I mean “right to her body” not in the controversial sense of abortion but in the uncontroversial sense that she should be protected from harm, terror, assault, and oppression. She should be valued as an equal. In general,



Some of JFA's recent outreach exhibit panel designs feature images like this one in order to communicate concern for women and sympathy for their experiences of pregnancy. See the *Stop and Think* Exhibit page (www.jfaweb.org/stop-and-think) for exhibit designs and commentary.



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individuals and the government should leave her to be free, unless she is causing harm to someone else.

At JFA we've been making the point for more than a decade that when discussing abortion in the case of rape, those who are defending unborn children must meet the "relational challenge" first, focusing on the horror of rape and showing sympathy for the woman who has been assaulted, even if this means that we set aside for the moment our agenda of changing a mind about whether abortion should be legal in the case of rape (the "intellectual challenge"). This is primarily because it is good and right to communicate love, concern, and sympathy for women who have been violated by an evil act of rape. It also turns out that it's practically essential. People are much more likely to listen to our argument against abortion in the case of rape (or any other case) if they can tell that we are genuinely concerned about the evil that occurred in that act.

I've realized that anytime a woman defends abortion by referring to her right to her body, we confront essentially the same two challenges. There's a relational challenge ("Do you care about the woman's bodily rights?") and an intellectual challenge ("Do the woman's bodily rights include the right to abortion?"). Let's say you are a woman claiming you have a right to your body that includes the right to abortion, and I am responding to your claim. Even though you and I are not discussing assault, *per se*, we *are* talking about whether the government should restrict your freedom to do something that you think affects *only* your body, and so that idea of

government intrusion may very well feel similar to assault for you. Many men will view this in the same way, through the prism of concern for their sisters, mothers, and female friends. We would do well to consider bodily rights claims through this same prism, letting the beginning of our response be guided by a realization: we are talking about *somebody's body*.

It's Still *Her* Body, Even if it's Not the *Only* Body Involved.

Now, perhaps you are longing at this point, as I am, for there to be a balancing of the scales, a revealing of the truth about the unborn child alongside this sympathy and concern we've been showing towards the woman. We who consider the unborn an equal human being know there is much else to say that brings this "prism of concern for somebody's body" into proper light. (See the P.S. below.) There's a reason, though, other than limits of word and page count, that I emphasized the woman's bodily rights in this letter and stopped short of saying other important things about the topic: *we pro-life advocates are sometimes too quick to gloss over the woman*. At times we only give lip service to her value (if we mention her at all), and then we proceed with our arguments as if she is (for the most part) not even there. Let this letter's singular focus on the woman be a reminder of the need to pause and the need to let every statement about the value of the unborn that follows be colored by the truth that the woman's body is still *her* body, even if it's not the *only* body involved.

In Christ,



Steve Wagner
Executive Director

PS: See www.jfaweb.org/blog/bodily-rights to access a series of additional thoughts this letter brought to the surface for me. I consider these posts to be equally important to this letter, and they are meant to be read in conjunction with it:

- *It's Her Body (Part I in a Series on Bodily Rights Defenses for Abortion) – This Letter*
- *How Important Is Your Body to You? (Part II)*
- *Focusing Only on the Woman for a Time Is Not Compromise (Part III)*
- *Practical Suggestions for Concern and Common Ground Regarding Bodily Rights (Part IV)*
- *Is "It's Her Body" a Statement about Biology? Ask a Question to Find Out. (Part V)*
- *From a Foundation of Love for Women and Children, We Respond Intellectually to Bodily Rights (Part VI)*
- *A Few Additional Thoughts on Bodily Rights (Part VII)*