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Ties That Double-Bind Us: Amy Agigian Speaks on Feminism and the Fertility Industry for the Annual Roe v. Wade lecture

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5zp8c9vq>

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Publication Date

2009-02-26

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Ties That Double-Bind Us

AMY AGIGIAN SPEAKS ON FEMINISM AND THE FERTILITY INDUSTRY FOR THE ANNUAL ROE V. WADE LECTURE

On the 36th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, we are reminded that this decision not only protects women's health and reproductive freedom, but stands for a broader principle: that government should not intrude on our most private family matters. I remain committed to protecting a woman's right to choose.

– President Barack Obama,
on the 36th anniversary of Roe v. Wade

AT THE SAME MOMENT President Obama affirmed that “government should not intrude on our most private family matters,” Amy Agigian, this year’s invited speaker for the CSW Annual Roe v. Wade lecture, brought to light for her audience the near-impossibility of either privacy or choice for women in an era of assistive reproductive technology. Government policies regulate women’s fertility and their access to fertility through interlocking webs of social and biological factors, creating double-binds both for women who need fertility and for women who provide fertility. Agigian argued that structural inequalities linked to race, gender, class, and location exacerbate biological factors that negatively impact fertility, such as age and health,

and that these combine to knit women together not by choice, but rather, through lack of choice. Commenting on President Obama’s statement, Agigian observed that it is heartening to have a president who is capable of uttering the phrase “reproductive choice.” Yet, as Agigian explicated upon in her talk, “Ties That Double-Bind Us: Feminism and the Fertility Industry,” both “privacy” and “choice” are complicated matters for women who are or wish to become mothers in an era of assistive reproductive technology.

The concept of “choice” is highly relative to social positioning when describing reproductive health policies in the United States. As women of color activists have drawn attention to repeat-

Roe v. Wade Lecture, *continued from page 1*

edly, “choice” means very different things for women of varying racial, ethnic, class and other backgrounds. “Reproductive justice” is a concept developed by women of color activists and theorists who wanted to move the conversation about reproduction away from birth control and abortion to a broader understanding of reproductive “choice” that included the right to have children, to care for one’s children and provide them with basic needs such as food, clothing, education, shelter, health care and community. Reproductive justice is about building alliances across differences of race, class, sexuality, ability, and geographic location. Reproductive justice also draws attention to the United States’ history that women of color of all class backgrounds have been subject to eugenicist policies that restricted their ability to bear and raise children, and which gave (and gives) them little choice as to whom they would bear children for. Remarking on the high level of stratification between women who use the fertility industry to become mothers and women who provide fertility services, Agigian called for utilizing theories of reproductive justice to lessen the burdens of double-binds for women connected to the fertility industry.

While government policies such as restrictions on egg research or limited maternity and paternity leave benefits have broad implications for policy, medical professionals, lesbians and even for understanding geographic boundaries, Agigian focused primarily on two groups of women not generally placed in conversation with one another: women who need fertility and women who provide fertility. While sexism impacts many women who are involved in the fertility industry, providers and users are highly stratified by race and class, exacerbating the extent to which “choice” can be applied to pregnancies facilitated by the fertility industry.

The Mommy Tax, or the loss of about \$1 million in income over a lifetime, affects all women who become mothers, regardless of age, race, class or sexuality. This, along with other structural inequalities related to gender, place, class and race is often masked as a private matter, yet can

UCLA Center for the Study of Women presents

Annual Roe v. Wade Lecture

Ties that double-bind us
FEMINISM
AND THE FERTILITY INDUSTRY

AMY AGIGIAN

Associate Professor, Sociology
Suffolk University

THURSDAY
22 JAN

Feminists face a series of double-binds in our efforts to apprehend and intervene in the ever-expanding fertility industry. Lesbians and women of color face particular challenges. This talk maps some of these double binds and explores the potential of a human rights framework to lead us toward reproductive justice.

4 pm

314 Royce

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be understood as one of many catalysts for the double-binds Agigian addressed in her talk. For example, many professional track women learn that it is nearly impossible to have kids at “the right time.” While most work cultures have times when it is, as Agigian put it, “definitely a bad time” to have kids, there’s no corresponding “right” time to bear children. Having a child while young seriously disadvantages a woman’s abilities to meet professional class aspirations, yet waiting might mean missing one’s fertility window, effectively forcing professional class women into using the fertility industry if they want to have children. Although adoption is often offered as an alternative option to pregnancy, Agigian argues that adoption is not only expensive for adoptive parents, it is also often a difficult decision for the birth mother, making for a “choice” that is hardly ideal even when financially and socially possible.

On the flip side, Agigian offered statistics that indicate when working class and poor women give birth at younger ages, they pay costs in shorter life expectancy. However, if women from working class and poor backgrounds wait to have children, they experience the same risks of reduced fertility as their professional-class generational peers. Unlike professional-class women, though, working class and poor women are less likely to be able to afford the services of the fer-

tility industry. These are all structural problems, but they are experienced as private dilemmas.

This combination of social and biological factors leads to pushing professional class women to have children past the time when it is biologically safest. Of the services offered by the fertility industry, all carry risk, including increased risk of birth defects from IVF and ICSI, as well as the possibility that IVF damages eggs. Additionally, IVF is very likely to cause twins or multiples, which puts both women and babies at a greater risk of health complications. However, the fertility industry grossly exaggerates their success rates and minimizes the risks, leading some professional-class women to wrongly believe they can fall back on the fertility industry if they wait to become pregnant.

In terms of the double binds for women who provide fertility, Agigian addressed those for women in the US as well as for women from outside the US. The most highly-sought-after egg donors tend to be college educated women with high IQs, athletic or musical abilities, and who are relatively young. Such women are often looking to help pay for school, and choose to donate eggs so they can further their own professional-class aspirations. It is unknown if the hormones involved in harvesting eggs are linked to a later risk of cancer; however, there are reports that women who donate eggs experience

some difficulty getting pregnant after donating.

While there is eugenicist categorization of gametes by race, education, eye and hair color, and other physical and social features, surrogacy tends to be the realm of those women who would be considered “unsuitable” for egg donation. Surrogates generally come from poor or working class backgrounds, and if they are not highly educated, their earning potential in other fields is slim, leaving surrogacy as one of very few high-paying job options. While surrogacy is expensive for users, and thus cost-prohibitive for all but the wealthiest women and couples, a more affordable surrogacy option is available by using surrogates from overseas. Such services cost infertile couples one-fifth the rent of a healthy U.S. womb, making surrogacy possible for less wealthy women and couples. However, women who are surrogates overseas may, as in the case of one surrogacy compound in India that Agigian used as an example, be effectively coerced into providing their bodies to grow babies for those professional-class women who can afford to pay. Yet, as Agigian points out, banning egg donations or surrogacy simply limits options for women who want to have children, putting more money in the hands of doctors and the fertility industry, and limited earning potential for fertile women who may wish to work in this way.

Sexuality also creates particular double-binds

for lesbian and bisexual women with female partners, in that sperm is cheap but women must pay a lot to access it through formal channels. Lesbians may be forced to invent an infertile male partner in order to access affordable sperm or else pay prohibitive out-of-pocket costs for sperm. The “choice” here for lesbians who are not wealthy is to lie, to be incredibly creative in their attempts to procure sperm, or to not have children. Choosing an egg or sperm means inevitably choosing a relationship, and this choice has consequences, whether anonymous or known. Even anonymous donations may facilitate unintended relations, as can be seen in lesbian communities who stumbled across an unexpected biological possibility: that because lesbian communities are so small, the odds are high that multiple couples will use the same sperm donor, meaning that their children, while planned, have unanticipated biological relatives. The question then becomes, how do you deal with these relationships?

Returning to a reproductive justice model that attempts to build alliances across differences of race, class, sexuality, ability, and geographic location provides possibilities for unlocking these double-binds, argued Agigian, particularly when combined with a Human Rights Approach to reproductive justice. The human rights approach includes a wide range of positive human rights—

basic rights that not only include the legal rights of citizenship or voting, but also rights categorized as civil, social, environmental and cultural. Examples of positive rights include universal free health care, equal pay for equal work, child care and maternity leave, universal free education, social safety nets, preventing sexually transmitted infections and infertility, and strong environmental and health safety laws. Further, these positive rights must be made available to all people, regardless of gender, race or ethnicity, social class, age, ability, sexuality, marital status or citizenship. This seems a tall order, and as noted by one audience member, many national governments actively work against these positive human rights, including that of the United States. Yet, as Agigian noted from her own activist work in Massachusetts, sub-national groups and activists are working to implement these rights at the state rather than national level. This is one way for community activists to subvert some of the poor national policies and practices around issues of Human Rights so that positive human rights aligned with the goals of reproductive justice can be made available to all.

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Amy Agigian’s talk highlighted many of the uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous double-binds that affect women who are currently bound to the fertility industry. Despite advertising and popular mythology that present reproductive technology as an easy means to rescue infertile women from their barren state while supporting the professional-class aspirations of driven women, it has the potential to further complicate women’s lives, even as it provides income for some women, and desired offspring for others. It is an unfortunate case, Agigian noted, where “capitalism trumped patriarchy with a little help from lesbian activists.”

reproductive technology as an easy means to rescue infertile women from their barren state while supporting the professional-class aspirations of driven women, it has the potential to further complicate women's lives, even as it provides income for some women, and desired offspring for others. It is an unfortunate case, Agigian noted, where "capitalism trumped patriarchy with a little help from lesbian activists." Unlike Shulamith Firestone's pre-Roe v. Wade call for reproductive technologies and social services that would free women from the burdens of child-bearing and child-rearing, current assistive reproductive technology reinforces the nuclear family even as it complicates the ways we conceive our families, socially and biologically.

Ultimately calling for a Human Rights Approach to reproductive justice, Agigian argued for combining the brilliant work by women of color to bring about reproductive justice, with internationally known legal and policy approaches to broadly conceived human rights, in order to reduce some of the immobilizing double-binds impacting women involved in the fertility industry.

Vange Heiliger is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Women's Studies at UCLA. Her dissertation research utilizes a feminist analysis of class, shopping, and branding to investigate how social marketing campaigns of ethical capitalisms deploy race, gender, poverty, and morality to bolster neoliberal narratives touting the redemptive power of transnational capitalist trade. Her research interests include media and cultural studies of economics and development in the Americas, discourses of sustainability, and the new political ecology, with an emphasis on the discursive and embodied intersections of poverty, sexuality, race, religion, gender, rurality, and the environment.



Iska's Journey

FILM SCREENING & DISCUSSION
In Honor of International Women's Day

SUNDAY

March 8

1409 Melnitz Hall

3 pm

Iska's Journey tells the harrowing story of a twelve-year-old girl who shows courage in the face of harsh poverty, only to succumb eventually to its ravages. *Iska's Journey* is not an easy film to watch. It brutally exhibits the cruel conditions under which millions of women and children are exploited in the prostitution trade.