



Grassroots defense is only hope in assault on women's rights and sex education. By Aria Seligmann

Separation of Church and State. Our founding fathers knew this was a critical element in any democracy, in order to prohibit any one religious dogma from dominating people's individual rights. Yet, the Bush administration, having caved in to the conservative evangelical Christian right, knows no such separation. As a result, federal decisions regarding family planning are affecting women worldwide, from Ethiopia and Somalia to Eugene and Springfield.

For years, anti-abortion activists have been lobbying Congress, pushing hard for legislation that would undermine a woman's right to reproductive freedom. The U.S. House of Representatives' passage last week of the partial-birth abortion ban isn't new. Congress passed it twice before, but Clinton vetoed it both times. Also, the Supreme Court ruled three years ago that such a ban was unconstitutional, lifting the bans already imposed by several states.

Now, the high court may be the only thing that stands in the way of the bill affecting the lives of millions of women, for if this bill becomes law, many fear it is only the first step in the road toward outlawing abortion for good.

But can the U.S. populace, who overwhelmingly favor safe, legal abortion access, count on the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the law?

From the national level to the interna-

tional level, the war rages. On his very first day in office, George W. expanded the global gag rule. Previously, the rule only banned the mention of abortion to anyone in any country who receives U.S. funding for birth control. Now, the gag applies to those receiving HIV/AIDS funding, and there is talk in the administration of limiting condom shipments to countries with HIV/AIDS epidemics.

AMERICAN WOMEN UNDER ATTACK

The climate of suppression is becoming more suffocating nationally, as well. The current administration is applying pressure to formerly apolitical institutions, such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC). NIH proved there is no link between abortion and breast cancer and had those findings published, yet the Bush administration forced NIH to amend the findings to say they were "inconclusive." Meanwhile, CDC had a fantastically comprehensive website with information on condom use and sexually transmitted infections (STI's). But that lifesaving information was dismantled, amended and replaced with watered down rhetoric.

Now, the federal government is planning on funneling up to \$133 million into abstinence-only education funding. That money will be diverted from other health and human service needs, but that's OK

with Bush-appointed Health and Human Services Chair Tommy Thompson, who put abstinence-only and anti-family planning ideologues in charge of major reproductive health programs. In addition to his abstinence-only approach to sex ed, insiders report one-third of the new and much touted HIV/AIDS prevention funds will be spent on preaching abstinence rather than prevention.

As to organizations that not only benefit from federally funded programs that help prevent teen pregnancy and STI's, but also help local school districts in carrying out their sexuality education curricula, the ante's up if they dare to speak out against the new Gag Ed. The feds have already threatened to audit Planned Parenthood and others who have been trying to inform the public of the gutting of our children's health education.

FROM THE BOTTOM UP

In her recent book, *Behind Every Choice is a Story*, published in time to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Roe v. Wade in January, Planned Parenthood National President Gloria Feldt outlines the battlefield of what she calls "the family planning wars." Using anecdotes from women across the U.S., she recounts the stories of women who have and have not had access to legal, safe abortion and other family planning options and how that's affected their lives.

Nationally, Planned Parenthood is working on new legislation, the Freedom of

Choice Act, which would establish federal and state civil rights protections to guarantee reproductive freedom for all women in the U.S.

The Supreme Court is hanging in the balance (it currently swings pro-choice 5-4), and Feldt, speaking on a recent book tour to Portland, said women can no longer count on the law being imposed from the top down, but must get active to protect their civil rights "from the bottom up, mobilizing the grassroots to codify reproductive rights" in every state and at the federal level.

"It may take another generation and will be the hardest thing we've ever done," she says. "But we will build a new and stronger tent of freedom and justice."

What Feldt calls a "bold agenda" that shoots for a target date of 2025 includes:

- medically accurate sex education
- contraceptive insurance coverage for all
- the right — and access — to abortion services for every woman who needs and wants them
- family planning and full reproductive health care services for all women in the U.S. and around the world, without gag rules
- emergency contraception available to all, which can reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and abortions by half.