

Abortion under capitalism

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Christina Duval examines why women are not allowed to control their own fertility.

In recent years women around the world have faced major attacks on their ability to control if and when to have children. In Poland, Mexico, Romania, Ireland, Germany, the USA, Britain, Spain and many other countries there have been attempts to limit women's access to safe, legal abortions.

Such attacks have serious consequences for women since abortions will continue to take place, but where it is illegal women face greater complications of incomplete abortion, infection, haemorrhage, subsequent infertility or even death.

Women will get abortions whether or not they are legal. Countries where it is illegal often have a high rate of abortion, whereas the Netherlands, which has relatively liberal abortion laws, has one of the lowest abortion rates in the world.

In Romania, abortion was completely outlawed in 1966. In the next two decades the maternal mortality rate almost doubled (from 86 to 150 maternal deaths per 100,000 births), with 86% of these due to abortion. In 1988 there were 505 recorded abortion-related deaths in Romania.

In Ireland despite abortion being completely outlawed through a constitutional amendment in 1983, 5,000 women travel to Britain each year for abortions.

Why then, given that so many women are having abortions, are states continuing to restrict or further criminalise abortion?

Abortion is not a new phenomenon. For centuries women have found ways of inducing abortion either through surgical procedures or by taking drugs (abortifacients). Regulation of abortion developed in Western Europe in the early nineteenth century as the state designed policies that shaped family, health and sexual behaviour.

Abortion became a statutory offence in Britain in 1803, with subsequent tightening of the law between 1828 to 1861. This was largely aimed at working class women who were having abortions and other forms of birth control to reduce their family size and thereby improve living conditions. The state's opposition to this was accompanied by propaganda stressing the virtues of motherhood.

Similar developments in other countries, and the expansion of colonial and imperialist interests, led to the criminalisation of abortion in most countries and cultures. This didn't halt abortions, however. In 1914, over a hundred years after abortion was made criminal in Britain, doctors estimated that 100,000 women were taking abortifacient drugs each year.

Russia was the first country to de-criminalise abortion in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution but this advance was later reversed with Stalin's counter-revolution. Elsewhere the situation has changed during

the twentieth century, and since the Second World War laws have been altered in many countries to allow limited access to abortion. However, this access has generally been restricted through time limits and the need to obtain approval from one or more doctors, or even the woman's husband or father.

Liberalisation of abortion laws in many imperialist countries (e.g. France, the USA, Britain) took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Industrial expansion had drawn in millions of women workers in the previous decades. Educational opportunities for women multiplied, and there were major improvements in contraceptive techniques.

This led to demands from women for more control over their fertility, including improved access to abortion. In addition, it made sense for bourgeois governments to regulate the illegal abortion trade, as this was leading to considerable suffering and deaths of women that alienated middle class and bourgeois support.

But the capitalists still refused to make abortion fully legal and controlled by women, and now we find that even these gains are constantly threatened by the re-criminalisation of abortion.

The consistent refusal to grant full abortion rights is rooted in the position of women in class society. Because of their role in reproduction women have historically been the primary childcarers and, particularly under capitalism, the providers of free childcare and other domestic labour in the home.

Under capitalism the family plays a crucial role in reproducing the next generation of workers, and women are fundamental to this task, both through their reproductive capacity and through the domestic labour they provide at little cost to the capitalist state.

This role of women is partially undermined by the increasing participation of women in the workforce outside of the home. But since capitalism can't afford to let women stop providing this domestic labour and childcare, there is a constant pressure for women to accept their 'natural' role as mothers and carers. If women gained complete control over their fertility, then this role so crucial to capitalism would be undermined and women would no longer be compelled to see themselves primarily as childbearers.

For women to continue to accept this role when society and science is continually offering women other options, the state has to maintain a constant ideological offensive to reinforce the idea that the primary place for woman is in the home. This is why genuine free abortion and contraception on demand do not exist in any country: it is an important way of ensuring that the link between women and the family is maintained.

This ideological offensive against women's control over their fertility explains why full abortion rights were not granted even in a period of booming capitalism. But how can we explain the recent intensification of legal, ideological and physical attacks against abortion around the world?

Is there a global campaign against abortion rights? Is the economic crisis obliging the state to try and push women back into the home in order to reduce the size of the workforce? As we shall see, things are not so simple.

It is clear that there have been and there continue to be a series of attacks in many different countries against abortion rights, and that these relate to the changing period of capitalism with economic crises and increasing unemployment. Some of the attacks on abortion, notably those by various far-right groups, are indeed co-ordinated on an international scale.

But these attacks on abortion are not an attempt to reverse the changes in the workforce that have taken place over the past thirty years. They do not simply represent a 'women out first' policy, to drive women

out of the workforce by making them have more children. They reflect the real contradiction that exists within capitalism. There has been a massive increase in the use of highly exploited cheap labour, mainly women and often with part-time jobs, in capitalism's drive to increase its mass of profits.

But capitalism also has to ensure that women meet their obligations at home. In the post war boom the expansion of health and social services in the imperialist countries freed women from some of their domestic responsibilities. Now the bosses are cutting back on these services and expecting women to take up the slack. Restrictions on women's control over their fertility help to maintain this position within the workforce, with employers denying women full pay and protection on the basis that they move in and out of work. In addition it helps to strengthen the idea that the role of mother and carer is the central, although not the only, one for women.

Restrictive laws on abortion have far greater effects on working class and poor women than on the middle classes, and even where abortion is permitted by law poor women often do not have the money to obtain safe abortions.

Women with money and contacts in the medical profession can always get relatively safe abortions, but millions of other women have no choice but to try cheap, unsafe and often illegal methods. In many countries although abortion is allowed, up to a certain time limit for example, the state will not provide facilities, and it is excluded from usual medical insurance schemes.

In the USA although abortion was legalised in 1973, there have been repeated restrictions on the access to abortions for working class women. The absence of a state health care system means that poor women find it more difficult to gain access to any care, including contraception, counselling and abortion. In 1976 state health insurance (Medicaid) was removed for abortion except for cases of rape and incest, and in 1981 this was removed completely.

In 1989 the Webster Amendment totally prohibited abortions in public hospitals, and according to the American Civil Liberties Union over 20% of women who want abortions can't get them. At the moment new restrictions are being put in place state by state, once again discriminating against those women without the resources to travel and obtain abortions in more liberal states.

Despite Clinton's recent decision to allow public hospitals to carry out abortions, they will still not be supported by Medicaid and the new President's declared intention is that there should be as few abortions as possible.

Restrictions on abortion and contraception often reflect the influence of the Catholic Church [see box]. In Ireland the church retains a significant influence in government and has ensured that liberalisation on abortion, contraception, divorce and homosexuality has been resisted. In other semi-colonies the church has opposed liberalisation of abortion laws and even obstructed campaigns against AIDS through opposition to the use of condoms.

But in some semi-colonies the strength of the Catholic Church has posed a different problem as it has formed a focus of opposition to imperialist-imposed population control programmes. In the last two decades there have been concerted campaigns by international agencies to 'control the population' in the semi-colonies.

Control programmes, including the provision of contraception, abortion and sterilisation, have been advocated, and often linked to the provision of loans by the IMF. These programmes, imposed from the outside, often carried out brutally and without regard to local conditions or individual rights, have included

forced sterilisation, repeated abortions, and clinical trials with dangerous contraceptives.

Such measures have been used to try and limit the population of certain sections of society such as indigenous Indians in Latin America and blacks in South Africa. Because of this many women and much of the labour movement see birth control as an imperialist attempt to exert even more control over them.

The programmes have been resisted by local women, and also by the church which is opposed to contraception in principle. This has created the dangerous illusion of a radical role for the church in the eyes of many women and anti-imperialists.

In the former Stalinist states of Eastern Europe and the USSR abortion rights varied considerably. Under the rule of the Stalinists availability of abortion depended on the particular needs of the bureaucracy rather than on the needs of women.

In Romania abortion was completely illegal and severe penalties taken against women seeking or obtaining an abortion, whereas in the GDR the laws were more liberal and allowed women abortion on request in the first part of the pregnancy.

Both countries wanted to increase their populations, but the former chose the stick, the latter the carrot approach to getting women to have more children. In the USSR the unavailability of effective and safe contraception led to abortion being the major method of birth control, with four out of every five pregnancies ending in termination with obvious consequences for the health of the women.

The effect of denying women control over their fertility is that they cannot participate equally with men in production, social and political life. The burden of repeated pregnancy and many children, of uncertainty about whether or when another child will be added to the family, the restriction of sexual pleasure as a result of fear of pregnancy?all of these undermine women?s ability to participate fully in social life and achieve independence and control over their lives.

The provision of free contraception and abortion on demand for all women is therefore an essential part of liberation. The choice as to when and whether to have a child gives working class and peasant women the ability to decide on their role in life and their relation to the world of work.

The argument that having children is natural, that motherhood is glorious and that family planning is a Malthusian conspiracy against the working class is ahistorical and denies the fact that at least 25% of pregnancies world-wide are unwanted by the woman.

In some societies large families are encouraged by the church and local custom. This usually relates to the level of development of productive forces, and the dominant relations of production. Where the family is a productive unit, and where mortality is high, families may ?need? many children to maintain production and support for the extended family in the future.

It is generally accompanied by ideologies which reinforce the pattern?Catholicism for example. In Latin America ?machismo? stresses the need of men to father many children and leads to enormous pressures on women to have children even when they cannot afford or do not want them. Many Asian cultures, both Hindu and Muslim, place stress on couples having many sons as a way to security and prosperity.

These ideologies reinforce the oppression of women and their primary association with domestic and family life, but are increasingly in contradiction with reality. More and more households in Latin America are headed by a woman who has to earn money through wage labour. Agriculture is being taken over by imperialist owned capital and family production replaced by wage labour. Manufacturing industries in Asia

and Latin America are using cheap female labour.

Women's relationship to production is therefore changing, and so is their role in reproduction. In this situation control of fertility is key for women to be able to both participate in economic life, and to organise politically to resist their high level of exploitation. This is why it must be supported by revolutionaries and working class organisations.

Having children should be a fulfilling experience for women, but even in the best conditions it is not one which all women would choose. But as long as having a child means taking full responsibility in caring for and raising it, financially supporting it with little or no help from the state, then women have very limited choice.

The limited independence which women achieve through participating in work outside the home is a fundamental part of the programme of socialists, and necessary to the success of any revolutionary struggle against capitalism. When women are isolated and stuck at home caring for children and other dependents then it is difficult for them to be drawn into the collective activity and organisation of the working class. This weakens the class by leaving half its members un-organised, and makes the task of socialists that much harder.

That is why revolutionaries have to intervene in the struggles around the current attacks around the world on women's rights to abortion both to defend the basic democratic rights to free and safe access to abortion, and as part of the revolutionary programme for increasing the integration of women workers in the organisations and struggles of the working class.

Just as abortion happens despite its criminalisation so struggles for abortion rights take place with or without the participation of revolutionaries. But the record of feminist and reformist leadership of pro-choice movements cries out for the active involvement of revolutionaries in these struggles.

Previous struggles for abortion rights have failed to safeguard women from attacks, because they have left these rights subject to controls by doctors, politicians and lawyers. In addition, they have refused to take up crucial economic issues connected with abortion rights that affect working class women so harshly.

Contraceptive and abortion rights are part of a democratic programme, not just a socialist one. But like all democratic rights in the epoch of imperialism, they can only be consistently defended and extended by workers' action. The capitalists may concede abortion rights for certain reasons for certain periods. But these very rights will become the target for a reactionary offensive when the economic or ideological climate changes.

That is why any campaign to defend existing rights cannot be separated from the struggle for free abortion on demand and for a working-class based campaign to win this right, including the fight for workers' control of the health system.

Women in the imperialised world are generally faced with a double enemy: they have to fight against the reactionary role of the church as well as against the imperialists and their local lackeys who dictate how women should control their fertility.

For these women, abortion is literally a life and death issue. In the semi-colonial world the fight for free, safe abortion must go hand in hand with the struggle against imperialism, including demands for employment protection and improved wages for workers, social and health services and for maternity rights for women—all things that threaten the profits of the bosses and demand answers such as renunciation of the foreign debt.

In the ex-Stalinist states, the fight for the defence and extension of abortion rights is part of the struggle against the restoration of capitalism. The 'rule of the market' will not mean more freedom for women. The devastating effects of the attempts to introduce capitalism are already clear throughout Eastern Europe. Workers' living standards have been drastically reduced. Women's health and working conditions will be the most heavily affected by the new wave of austerity attacks.

The struggle for abortion rights is therefore part of a general struggle for women's rights, for employment protection and the right to maternity benefits and support for mothers, for free state-funded health care including the availability of safe contraception.

Abortion should be available whenever a woman wants it, at whatever stage of pregnancy she needs it. Abortion is not an easy choice for women, even when it is relatively easily available, and funds must be put into providing and developing good safe contraception and full sex education in schools so that young women and men understand how to avoid unwanted pregnancy.

Easier abortion methods, such as the recently developed abortion pill (RU965), should be made available where appropriate so that women avoid the traumas of a surgical procedure. But where these methods fail, or a woman is not aware of them or for whatever reason was not able to use them, she must be able to terminate the pregnancy. It is her body and her decisions about what to do with it must be respected.

In order to win such a fight for genuine abortion rights, women need to break from the cross-class alliances which have dominated the pro-choice movements. For pro-choice campaigns to succeed, they must orient to working class women, who can take the fight into the labour movement where real power lies.

But although access to abortion is a particular issue for working class women, labour movement organisations have rarely taken up the fight. In Britain in the early 1980s the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was forced through the pressure of socialists and women in the movement to call a national demonstration against a parliamentary bill aiming to restrict abortion rights. However, since that bill was defeated the TUC has done nothing to resist the cuts in abortion facilities in the health service.

Like other official union leaderships, the British TUC is male dominated and reformist, regarding issues such as abortion as outside of its interests. Other labour movement organisations, such as Solidarnosc in Poland, have been dominated by leaders with reactionary positions on abortion who obstruct pro-choice struggles. Socialists and militant women will have to break the hold of these leaders if the labour movement is to be mobilised in the struggle for abortion rights.

An effective pro-choice campaign would need to take up the interlinked issues of free contraception and child-care, low wages and control of the health service.

Working class women need to be organised to ensure that these issues are raised consistently and effectively, and that the energy of women who are mobilised in particular struggles—such as those around abortion rights—is not dissipated but is rather focussed on the final enemy.

They need a working class women's movement, committed to fight for women's liberation in all its aspects, from abortion rights to the destruction of capitalist society itself as part of the building of revolutionary parties and a new revolutionary international.

The Catholic church and abortion

The Catholic Church retains its grip on the everyday lives of hundreds of millions of women around the world. The total opposition of this church to abortion and contraception means that where it has significant influence in government and state extremely reactionary policies can be adopted.

While the arguments of the church help bolster the ideas about women's primary role as mothers and their responsibilities in the home, the church can also be obstructive to the liberalisation of abortion laws when this makes sense for the bosses.

IRELAND: In February 1992 the Irish state outlawed a 14-year old rape victim's decision to travel to Britain for an abortion. Focused on one young woman raped, pregnant and suicidal the abortion issue was set free from the hypocritical moral strait-jacket that it had been kept in by the church.

Public indignation exploded; thousands marched in the biggest mobilisation on women's issues for more than a decade. For nine months debate raged, leading finally to a referendum in November.

This incident presented an opportunity to challenge Ireland's horrendous record on abortion rights. In 1983 the Eighth Amendment was added to the constitution guaranteeing an 'equal' right of life to mother and foetus.

In practice the 'rights of the unborn' took precedence over those of the woman.

'Pro-life' reactionaries led the attack: abortion information and non-directive pregnancy counselling were banned, clinics were closed down and students who defied the ban on information were hounded through the courts, whilst women's magazines containing abortion helpline numbers were censored.

The anti-women wrath of the reactionaries is not limited to abortion itself: pregnant women with breast or brain tumours are frequently denied radio- or chemotherapy in order not to put the foetus in danger. In miscarriage, treatment to stop the woman suffering pain and bleeding can be withheld for hours in order that foetal death can be definitely proved, even though it has no chance of survival. Sex education and contraceptive provision are severely restricted.

Official statistics show that 5,000 Irish women travel to Britain each year for an abortion. For the most part they do so under intolerable conditions: unable to obtain adequate information, making excuses to explain their absence and desperately finding the money for the journey. This burden of secrecy, ignorance and fear bears down on them at a time when they already have to cope with the guilt inflicted on them by the Church.

Following the outcry over the 14-year old rape victim, the ban on her travelling to England was lifted by the Supreme Court and abortion became legal where there 'is a real and substantial threat to the life of the mother'.

In the November referendum around 60% voted to give women the right to travel abroad for abortion and to allow information on abortion.

On the other hand 65% voted to grant the right to abortion where there might be a risk of suicide and to allow threats to 'health' as distinct from 'life' to be grounds for abortion.

The results represented a limited victory for women. However, both the Eighth Amendment and the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (which criminalises abortion) remain in force.

As well as fighting for freedom of travel and unrestricted access to information, pro-choice activists must demand the repeal of Sections 58 and 59 of the 1861 Act as well as the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

In Poland the role the church played in nurturing and protecting the opposition movements to Stalinism has bequeathed it considerable influence today over government policies.

Yet although the reactionary, pro-church, pro-capitalist and anti-women parties currently in power in Poland are keen to get rid of the abortion law, which is considered as a remnant of the workers' state, it rapidly became clear that banning abortion would not be plain sailing.

In 1991, faced with massive opposition, the Polish government decided to indefinitely postpone any decision on abortion. Opinion polls showed that 60% of the population as a whole and a higher percentage of the working class were in favour of retaining abortion rights. The Polish proto-capitalists did not want to further alienate the working class from their restorationist plans which were already having a devastating effect on workers' living standards.

At the end of 1992 abortion hit the headlines again and a bill was presented to parliament which would ban abortion. The congress of the Democratic Union, the majority party in the governmental coalition, rejected the government proposal to ban abortion and supported the call from the Democratic Left Alliance for a referendum.

This was an open snub to right-wing coalition partners like the Christian Democrats who made the fight against abortion their battle cry in the election. It also alienated the Prime Minister, Hanna Suchocka, from her own party since she is utterly opposed to legal abortion. When the bill was finally put to the vote in December 1992, it failed to get a majority.

This open rift within the forces of restoration over abortion presents the working class with the opportunity to go on the offensive against the government on all economic and social issues affecting the daily lives of Polish workers.

Abortion in Latin America

Women in the semi-colonial world face extreme hardship, not least in controlling their fertility. The devastating effects of imperialism mean that the majority of women live in abject poverty, unable to obtain contraception and therefore forced to rely on abortion as one of their primary methods of birth control.

This fact is either not realised by many Latin American leftists, or it is simply rejected. A typical attitude of many (usually male) activists is that working class women don't have abortions because they love children, and that abortion is a strictly bourgeois phenomenon, a conspiracy to impose their population control upon the working class and defuse its growth and threat to capitalism.

Behind a left-sounding 'class' analysis lurks a machista adaptation (conscious or not) to the anti-woman policies of the bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalists.

For example, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua refused to repeal Somoza's anti-abortion law, claiming that only middle class women would be concerned and that anyway, Nicaragua needed strong youthful arms to defend the revolution . . .

The Peronists in Argentina have used the same kind of arguments, opposing not only abortion but also contraception.

Whatever male leftists may think, abortion is a terrible reality faced by hundreds of thousands of Latin American women every year. Official figures for Argentina show that in 1990 over 30% of pregnancies ended in abortion, leading to around 400,000 abortions. According to the government hundreds of women die from the consequences of abortions. The real figures are doubtless far higher.

Unlike the situation in the imperialist countries, in the semi-colonial world contraceptive availability is not simply the product of workers' struggles. In some situations women are used as guinea pigs in population

control programmes where they are injected with dangerous drugs or are forcibly sterilised. Supporters of choice have to take up these issues and fight for birth control to be used in order to liberate women instead of being applied according to the dictates of the IMF and the benefit of the profit margins of the multinational drug companies.

This question has dominated the debate in Mexico over recent years. In October 1990 the parliament of the Mexican state of Chiapas voted to decriminalise abortion. President Salinas has been under pressure from the IMF to reduce the rate of increase in the country's poor population. That way it would reduce the demand for welfare on the state and releases even more funds to pay Mexico's debt to the world's banks. Legislation was passed in the Chiapas where forced sterilisation of Indian women has been taking place for some years now, along with the mass distribution of second rate IUD's and the injection of contraception hormones in massive doses, a practice that is forbidden in the west.

It is not surprising then that some women's groups and anti-imperialist groups are suspicious of birth control methods imported from the west. These fears are played upon by the Catholic Church which called on the population to demonstrate against the decision. The extreme 'pro-life' group Pro Vida distributed the infamous anti-abortion film 'The Silent Scream' and ran a virulent campaign against the pro-abortion parties in the 1991 election.

Whilst the reactions of women to the use of fertility control in Mexico are justified, this must not blind them to the facts. At the end of the 1980s an estimate one to two million women in Mexico had illegal abortions, leading to 140,000 deaths. In this context safe contraceptive methods are vital for Mexican women. The idea of choice has to be defended whilst at the same time attacking the imperialists' cynical disregard of women's health.

Some women's groups have been taking up this issue particularly during the Chiapas debate. They rightly demanded that women be able to control their own fertility, to have access to abortion, contraception, and adequate sex education, with the state providing decent child care.

They also posed the need for men to take responsibility for contraception. This is an important issue for Latin American women since machismo culture leads men to consider the use of condoms as undermining their masculinity.

In February 1991 the Chiapas Front for Voluntary Maternity was set up, composed of women's groups, political parties and trade unions. The name suggests it should be dealing with all these issues. But the question is, how to achieve these objectives and how to guarantee an end to the forced control of women's fertility?

It is essential that the labour movement and the left demand state funding and provision to allow women access to free abortion and contraception on demand, and also to chose sterilisations or abortions free from coercion from doctors or others.

The drug companies and health centres that are denying women these choices must be nationalised immediately and placed under the control of workers and poor peasants, with women playing a central role through community groups, mothers' groups and unions.

Sex education including information about contraception and abortion should be provided to all young girls and boys at school and college, with the church being removed from any institutional role.

