

Women's Health, Women's Bodies, Women's Rights: Reflections on the 1970 Abortion Caravan

Presentation & Discussion

*with Dawn Hemingway, Associate Professor, a Director of
Northern FIRE/Women North Network & an organizer of the
1970 Abortion Caravan*

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UNBC Prince George Campus Rm 7-238

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As part of Inspiring Women Among Us 2016



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pq_JZhLT5y8&feature=em-share_video_user

The Context

- 1960s growth of youth, student, anti-war, 2nd wave feminist and other political and activist movements
- Many activist women engaged in many of these – if not all
- Many intersectional questions were beginning to be raised: class, race, sexual orientation, hereditary rights of indigenous peoples, age, ability and more
- International situation: wars of aggression, imperialism impacting 3rd world countries, threat of nuclear war, cold war, etc.

Context...cont'd

- No women's studies/gender programs
- Women's health clinics just beginning
- The right for women to have control over their own health and bodies being put squarely on the agenda of the women's movement
- Abortion remained in the Canadian criminal code despite the federal government's 1969 "liberalization" of the abortion laws
- Illegal abortions were killing and injuring thousands of women every year.

Abortion Laws at time of Caravan

- At the time of the Caravan, abortion was illegal **except:**

An abortion could be performed by a qualified medical practitioner in an accredited hospital but only AFTER a 3-member hospital-based abortion committee had reviewed the case and the majority (2 out of 3) had decided that: “...in its opinion the continuation of the pregnancy...would or would be likely to engender her [the woman’s] life or health...”

Perspective

Vancouver Women's Caucus developed a strategy and plan for a national campaign...

- *“We see the demand for the right to control over own bodies as a necessary part of the fight for control of our own lives. Women will not be liberated until they have this, among other basic rights.”*
- *“We cannot tolerate compulsory sterilization or birth control any more than we can tolerate compulsory pregnancy.” (e.g., sterilization of women – impoverished, indigenous, with disability, Third World, etc.)*
- *Advocated research into safe birth control for women and men (and not using women in the Third World a “guinea pigs”) ...and access to safe birth control as a basic right.*

Perspective cont'd

- Proposed research into the structure of the medical profession and “alternative methods of medical organization other than the free enterprise, fee-for-service method” ...e.g. community-controlled clinics which provide birth control information and contraceptives to women, abortions, pre-natal and maternity care.
- Raised the question of the role of unelected hospital boards and hospital abortion committees
- Advocated for abortion to be taken out of the criminal code and made available to all women as a basic right.
- Organized a caravan to Ottawa to raise awareness and meet with federal politicians

Plans Leading up to Caravan

Bringing our concerns, perspectives & demands to:

- women of BC
- the wider community
- the “powers that be” e.g., the Provincial & Federal governments along with organizations representing physicians

Using multiple methods:

- Leaflets, letters, position papers & research
- Guerilla theatre & demonstrations
- Meetings and panel discussions
- Media – our own newspaper & other media

Organizing Across the Country

- Was decided that a Vancouver Women's Caucus member would travel across Canada – the same route as proposed for the caravan – to engage women, women's organizations and community members to discuss the issue and consider participating in the caravan
- The same mechanisms were used as in BC – meetings, rallies, panel discussions, etc.
- I was tasked by our collective with this work

Caravan to Ottawa

- Travelled from Vancouver to Ottawa with women also joining us in Ottawa from further east
- Demonstrations and meetings along the way with more participants joining
- Much discussion amongst participants:
 - Were we only concerned about reforming abortion laws? What about equal pay? What about violence, rape? And so much more...
 - Where did women's rights fit in with more fundamental systemic change? (e.g., the caravan car with "smash capitalism" reflected the substantial nature of the discussion)

Ottawa

- No response from our letter to Trudeau (PM), John Munro (Health Minister) or John Turner (Justice Minister) – no agreement to meet
- Caravan members and local supporters demonstrated outside Trudeau's residence & on Parliament Hill

House of Commons Action

- A smaller number of women organized to go into the House of Commons.
- Obtained “appropriate” parliamentary apparel from mothers of local women.
- With invitation cards to the Visitors’ Gallery in hand, we entered the parliament buildings and situated ourselves in all four gallery locations.
- Once settled in, we chained ourselves to the gallery seats and, one after the other, began to speak to MPs about why abortion should be removed from the criminal code and related information.
- Security was quick to arrive and seemed quite flustered when they realized we were in all four galleries and, couldn’t quickly remove us – wire cutters would have to be located.

House of Commons cont'd

- Ultimately, all women were removed from the galleries
- No concrete action was taken by the government at that time but the Caravan drew national attention to the issue.
- Abortion was now on the public and government agendas – a first significant step leading to removal from the criminal code.
- Later that week a media report appeared in the Vancouver Sun under the following headline:

***“After Women’s ‘Invasion’:
Protective Shield Urged for MPs”***

Meeting with Trudeau in Vancouver

- A few months later, Trudeau came to Vancouver and agreed to meet with us – but wanted just a couple of representatives to attend – we did not agree; thus a large group met with Trudeau – again no concrete result
- Work continued across the country to have abortion removed from the criminal code;
- That discussion is for another time...

Reflections/Learnings

- Collective work and engaging as many people as possible in the work
- Looking into questions and engaging women not just in a “slogan” (Free Abortion on Demand) but in researching and taking our own position on how to move things forward in terms of abortion but also other fundamental injustices, etc. What about basic human rights for all?
- Researching questions such as the structure of the medical profession and health care, the pharmaceutical and medical supply company research – who were they testing new products on? How accessible and affordable were these products once tested and produced?

Reflections/Learnings cont'd

- Talking about intersectional questions (not called that in those days) – what about working class women? How to engage them? Working conditions? Equal pay? What about women with disabilities? Indigenous women having children removed in the 60s scoop? Lesbian women? Women from other countries?
- We discussed fundamental questions such as:
 - Is the liberation of women a necessary condition for the liberation of everyone?
 - What about the socio-economic system of capitalism?

Final thoughts re Caravan contributions...

Re: Abortion rights –

- The Caravan was an important historical event that put abortion and, more broadly women's health and rights on the agenda.
- Demonstrations and strikes by women in Poland this past weekend, the potential for Roe vs Wade to be challenged in the US, etc. are signals that the question of women's right to control their own bodies remains one on the agenda, even today

Final thoughts re Caravan contributions...

Re: How we organize – involving women collectively in research, developing a position and implementing a strategy to bring about change. Undertaking work in a serious, thorough manner, drawing on each person's skills and ability to contribute

Beginning substantial discussion of root causes of women's oppression/exploitation and the impact on women from different circumstances – engaging in the larger questions that impact how we organize for change

THANK YOU
Discussion?
Questions?

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