

Violent threats to silence debate continues to grow

Lois Nantais - August 2022

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." Shirley Chisholm. The other day I observed two men arguing on social media about the abortion rights issue. The highly controversial issue has recently resurfaced due to the US Supreme Court's overturning of the Roe vs. Wade decision and since then, this issue has become an inflammatory subject and common debating issue for many of us -- even in Canada where the laws are very different from the US.

These two men, arguing the traditional perspectives for each side of the abortion issue, were responding to a post from a highly experienced, esteemed female member of this community who has advocated in her leadership for women her entire career. What I found interesting was neither of the men paused to give space for the female frame. They were both engaged in their own opinions, and even the man who agreed with her said, "You're right," and then went on to explain the reasons why he felt she was right. I've been teaching about social movements, social activism, and civil disobedience for years in my profession as a social science professor. Not to say that activism was ever dead, because it certainly was not, but I'd call the 20 years of teaching up to this point "the quieter years" relative to the social activism society knew in the 1960s and 70s. When it came to discussing issues involving women's rights in particular, my observation was that a lot of female students tended to distance themselves from a "feminist" label. The problem, they told me, was the anger that was a part of the platform; many said they just didn't want to be associated with radicalism and man-bashing, and for many that's what their impression was involving the feminist movement.

Countries across the globe have each addressed the issue of abortion, and in the diversity of responses over time we can see what approaches are proven to be most effective at reducing the incidences and expressed need for abortions. Abortion rates in countries with access to reproductive health services have lower abortion rates annually (Greece has 5 per 1,000 women, Switzerland and Belgium each at around 7.5). Countries with restrictions or limited women's reproductive services have higher rates of abortion (for example, Russia's annual rate is at around 54 per 1,000 women). The abortion rate for the States, before the Supreme Court overturning of Roe vs. Wade, has the rate at 20.8 per 1,000 women. The UK and France stand around 17 each and Canada's rate per 1,000 women is 15.2 annually (World Population Review, 2022).

But let's say that, for some, making abortions less of an expressed need is not the priority -- but that the approach to governance is actually the priority. There are particular religious worldviews that believe that the best political approach to reducing abortions is paternalism in governance: rather than increase the various support services for women that would allow holistic care, they will choose to eliminate clinical access to abortions.

When it's the case that reducing abortion rates is statistically connected to support services for women, then we can say, with some extension of reason, that the overturning of Roe vs Wade is a preferred approach to governance and not pragmatism. We can also say the abortion issue, as it's commonly debated in North America, is really a debate about religion's place in determining the approach to governance and how suitable it is to put into law the values of that religion, including paternalism.

I was recently down in Florida with my dad. On the way to a tourist attraction we took in near central Florida, we passed a sign that said, "People from New York: if you're not voting Republican you don't belong here." The tour we took finished up with the chance to admire a collection of classic cars -- some Ford Model As and one very cool, rare off-white Ford Roadster. The guide, in speaking of the evolution of the automotive industry, found his way to criticizing all Californians as electric car loving fools. My dad started grinning and so I mouthed over to him, "Don't you dare!" I could tell he was thinking that it would be a great time to put his daughter's defensive discourse strategies to the test. My father has never protected me from adversity, and his underlying approach that day in Florida and in general spoke a truth: he believes his daughter has

enough abilities to speak for herself and to defend herself when necessary.

During the federal election, I experienced plenty of threats and I often reflect on how inappropriately necessary I felt it was to normalize that reality to push past it. For example, an anonymous man posted a video to my political Facebook account. My team at the time warned me and said the man was talking about how he'd like to take me to his shed. He showed the inside of his shed in the video and showcased the tools he'd like to use on me. I added it to the pile of verbal threats I was getting daily by phone and kept moving forward.

It seems we have left the relatively quiet time in public discourse where expressed anger was understood as unappealing; our political landscape has shifted. Increased violence in word or deed, normalized as means to leverage political influence, is an important marker for intention toward diminished rights. The attempt to silence any person through threat is also a similar marker. My bet is that we will see more activism, more civil disobedience, and more social movements as a result.

When it comes to women's rights specifically, I believe support for people's wellbeing is the best approach and that's especially when an approach to governance advocates repression of any groups' rights. Ultimately, however, whatever choice people make regarding how they wish to prioritize issues is also a vantage point on how they wish to be governed – the separation of religion and governance, or a religion-informed governance. The choices we make reflect a wider worldview on how we wish to treat each other and see each other in this collective experience called life.