

**SPEECH GIVEN AT *ROCK FOR CHOICE*, UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE,
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Introduction

First of all, let me tell you how glad I am to be here tonight with you. Standing in unity with all of you in support of the principle that women should control their own bodies invigorates me and makes me thankful that young people like yourselves, from a new generation, have come along to carry on this important struggle. This is a struggle that must be spiritually/emotionally renewed at events like this. It is also, of course, a struggle that physically must be taken to abortion clinics where we must stand in unity with those who are too often threatened with violence there. Given the urgency of these times for the pro-choice movement, I cannot express in words how proud it makes me feel to be here with you at this Rock for Choice solidarity concert.

I hope by the time I've finished speaking, I will have made one thing absolutely clear: that my sentiments about being here tonight and about the pro-choice issue in general are about as far from being token sentiments as you can get. Reproductive rights are an important issue to me and has been for decades. In the Polish working-class community in which I grew up in Wilmington, I learned early on, even before adulthood, that if a woman had no control over her own body, she became enslaved to her biology – and it was clear that almost always this enslavement was at the expense of her emotional health. Being a mother is a wonderful thing; I am one and I know. But being *forced* into motherhood is an entirely different matter. The word “force” says it all. Forced motherhood is a form of oppression, not a form of liberation.

So, should women have the right to choose for themselves whether or not to have an abortion? You're damned right they should! What's more, every precaution must be taken to make sure that women's existing abortion rights aren't eroded – for instance, through efforts that would further limit government funds for use in abortion procedures.

The Meaning of an Event like Tonight's

Let me be clear about one thing before saying anything else. I'm not just glad to be here tonight because as a political candidate I hope to gain some exposure and win a few votes. Of course I *do* hope you agree with a lot of what I say, but that doesn't change the fact that I have other reasons for feeling honored to be here and for wanting to take advantage of this moment.

First of all, I have been a grassroots women's rights activist for well over twenty years and as long as the pro-choice struggle continues, and as long as I can still walk and talk, I want to be *part* of that struggle, not someone sitting on the sidelines.

Second of all, seeing you all in the audience tonight reinforces my sense that your generation is definitely not the "quiet generation" that some people have labeled you as. On the contrary, in many ways you are an awake, active and alert generation! In fact, some of your peers – maybe even some of you – have demonstrated for saner controls on institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, institutions whose policies often have negative consequences on people of color around the world, particularly women and children. And many of these protestors also have demonstrated for a peaceful solution to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because of such activities, I see your generation as one that includes many people who discuss and debate important issues. This enlivens someone like myself who is almost 60, and because it enlivens me I say to myself: Delaware and the nation should thank God for young women and men like you.

A third reason I'm glad to be here tonight is because I consider it historically important that tonight's pro-choice rally should also be a rock and roll concert. The reason this combining of politics and music is significant is because all the major political movements of the last 50-60 years had as their soundtrack some aspect of roots music or rock and roll history. Successful political movements aren't dry affairs in which overly serious men or women quote data and have no sparkle in their eyes. Successful political movements are factually clear about what they want, but they are also alive with the rhythms, noises, angers, joys, and longings of daily life. And often those things are expressed not in speeches, but through music.

Look at the civil rights movement as an example, with its blues background music like Muddy Waters "Screamin' and Cryin,'" which among other things talked about the physical/emotional weariness of oppression as Waters' accompanied his driving guitar with lyrics like the following.

*Sceamin' and cryin', wonderin' where our people gon',
Well you know I feel my poor self sittin' down,
Child, I don't think I can make it on.*

Do you have any idea how often in the history of the civil rights music songs like this, ones that were in fact heavy with sorrow and pain, in fact became anthems of triumph because they expressed a people's willingness to fight back and overcome the odds? This is an example of the glorious depth that culture – music and poetry in particular – can bring to a movement for justice.

Let me give just one more example of music helping us to create a liberation language. This particular example speaks directly to the women's rights issue and how this issue is often bound up with broader cultural forces.

In the late 1970s a demolition-crew-like punk band called the Xray Specks – maybe some of you have heard of them? – came on the scene in Britain. The band, unusual for a punk group of the time, featured a saxophonist and also a female lead singer. She was called Poly-Styrene. Anyway, one of the songs they recorded was “Oh Bondage up Yours!” The song opened with no instruments playing but only a statement by Poly-Styrene, spoken in a soft wacky little girl's voice, which said

Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think

– and then her voice suddenly changed as she screamed the next words –

*OH BONDAGE
UP YOURS!*

This is when the music – a chaos of drums, guitar, sax and bass - began playing while the singer kept ranting in a voice that was both sarcastic and weirdly jubilant

–

*Bind me tie me
Chain me to the wall
I wanna be a slave
to you all*

and then she followed up these lines with a liberation war cry:

*Oh bondage up yours!
Oh bondage no more!*

I mention these lyrics because the lyrics, written in the 1970s, were prophetic. They were prophetic because they signaled the start of an era during which society would become, as the result of women's rights battles around the globe, more conscious of the particular types of domestic and public battery that women are subjected to. Because of the timing of the X-Ray Specs' bondage song at the beginning of this era, anyone who wants to claim that this song should be the anthem for the anti-violence-against-women movement would be standing on solid ground. This is just one more example of how, from blues to rock and roll, music has often been a heavy carrier in the struggle for justice.

Having said this about music I would like to thank specifically the bands that are here tonight for giving their time and sense of life's music to the struggle for pro-choice. Let's give them a big hand!

Moving Beyond Where We Are

Before closing, let me get back to the pro-choice issue for a few minutes in order to make a few final points that I think are – or should be – very pertinent to the reproductive rights issue we are dealing with here tonight.

It sometimes seems amazing to me, as I'm sure it does to all of you, the levels of hatred and fanaticism that are too often directed against women who want to avail themselves of their right to abortion. The idea that there are those in our society who will bomb clinics and kill people in the name of their so-called "reverence" for life is frightening. Such disregard for the physical well-being of women and for our right of reproductive self-determination is appalling in a country supposedly dedicated to democracy.

But as horrible as such anti-abortion violence is, we must remember that the pro-choice struggle is only one part of the reproductive rights issue.

Too often in the past, the U.S.'s and Delaware's mostly white women's movement has shied away from dealing with other reproductive rights issues, and this has, over a long period of time, hurt our overall movement. The bottom line is that as women we will not be able to adequately protect our rights until we look like a real coalition of the nation's population: African-American, Latino and Latina immigrants, Asians and so on. To become such a coalition, we must revisit the whole reproductive rights agenda. By revisiting I don't mean that we must dispense with our pro-choice work, but only that we should place this work in the proper context.

Sterilization Abuse: Going beyond Pro-Choice

Let me give you just one example to show you what I mean about expanding the context in which we look at the reproductive rights issue. That example is sterilization abuse.

The U.S. track record of forcing sterilization upon so-called "unfit mothers" is an embarrassing one. Even today, when efforts theoretically have been made to solve the problem, the regret rate among sterilized women remains at an unnerving 25%-35%.

An unfortunate aspect of the sterilization abuse issue has been the predominantly white women's movement's resistance to dealing with it. Over the years, while the movement's mostly Caucasian leaders have focused on the pro-choice issue, women of color – who in fact often supported pro-choice – nonetheless felt alienated from the pro-choice movement because they believed the movement wasn't sensitive to other reproductive rights problems like sterilization abuse. Since sterilization abuse is an issue which affects people of color communities more than other communities, it isn't difficult to figure out why women of color have felt

alienated from the women's movement's tendency to focus exclusively on abortion when talking about reproductive rights. This failure of the so-called official women's movement has represented an inability to recognize a simple basic fact. And that fact is this: *that a women's right to terminate a pregnancy goes hand in hand with her right to remain fertile __ in other words, not to be sterilized __ if that's what she wants.*

This miscalculation on the part of the pro-choice movement has been harmful to the unity of women's rights movement and must be corrected if we want to grow stronger.

This is one of the things I hope you younger women and men, with your energy and skills, can play a major role in accomplishing. Just as it is horrid that so many women are subjected to violence because of their desire to avail themselves of their legal right to abortion, so it is also horrid that a dramatically disproportionate number of U.S. sterilization abuse victims are Native American, African American, Latina, Puerto Rican. For instance, by the 1970s after decades of population control "experiments" on the island of Puerto Rico, 35% of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age had been sterilized. By the 1980s about one out of every seven Native American women was sterilized and approximately 43% of the women sterilized in federally financed family planning programs were African American.

Tragically, these same patterns have now been exported to other parts of the world as U.S. agencies and multinational companies target countries like India as good places to conduct reproduction-related experiments and also to find new markets for their products. Vandana Shiva, an Indian physicist and feminist, has pointed out that American-funded population control programs in India continued to use the loop as a contraceptive method long after it was discovered that the device caused negative side-effects in a high percentage of Indian patients. According to Shiva, "In this case, as in many others, Third World women were used as guinea pigs by multinational drug companies."

To say the very least, such facts are frightening in what they suggest about the racial bases of U.S. population control policies. This, too, is a part of the reproductive rights issue. And we can't afford to ignore it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me say this.

First, I stand here with you today in full solidarity with your efforts.

Second, I stand with you as a member of an older generation of women's rights activists, an older generation that has done good work but that has also made some mistakes.

And third, as an act of cross-generation solidarity, I ask you younger people to please help us older ones correct some of our mistakes so that now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we can start building what we should have built earlier: a true multiracial reproductive rights movement that is willing to take on the powers that be both electorally and through the organization of mass demonstrations that link our issues to the issues of other peoples in our society and the world.

Thank you very very much for inviting me here tonight.