

Reproductive Politics and Racial Control in the United States: From Slavery to the Post-Roe Era

Emma Wang

Abstract

This review article examines the historical relationship between reproductive politics, racial hierarchy, and state power in the United States. Through a historical meta-analysis spanning the Antebellum period, Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, the Cold War, and the modern post-Roe v. Wade era, this paper argues that reproductive policy has consistently functioned as a mechanism of racial, political, and patriarchal control. The study focuses particularly on the unequal treatment of women of color compared to white women in reproductive healthcare, abortion access, sterilization practices, and population regulation. Drawing upon the scholarship and interview insights of historian Rickie Solinger, this article analyzes how reproductive control evolved from the forced reproduction of enslaved Black women to eugenic sterilization campaigns targeting marginalized communities and contemporary abortion restrictions disproportionately affecting low-income women and women of color. Ultimately, the paper argues that reproductive justice requires recognition of women's autonomy, dignity, and equal access to healthcare regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

Introduction

Women across the United States continue to face significant barriers to reproductive healthcare access. Following the reversal of Roe v. Wade, abortion became banned or heavily restricted in numerous states, forcing many women to travel long distances across state borders in order to obtain medical care. These developments reveal how reproductive politics remain

deeply embedded within broader systems of racial inequality, economic disparity, and political power. The contemporary political landscape surrounding abortion cannot be understood in isolation from American history. The foundations of reproductive control in the United States were established long before modern abortion debates emerged. From slavery to the present day, women's reproductive capacities have repeatedly been regulated according to racialized and patriarchal interests.

Historical Foundations of Reproductive Politics

The origins of reproductive politics in the United States are closely tied to slavery and racial capitalism. Following the end of the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved women became essential to the economic survival of plantation systems because they produced future generations of enslaved laborers. Black women's reproductive capacities were therefore treated as forms of economic production rather than expressions of personal autonomy. Virginia's 1662 law, "An Act Defining the Status of Mulatto Bastards," declared that children inherited the status of their mother. This ensured that children born to enslaved women remained enslaved regardless of the father's identity. The law effectively incentivized the sexual exploitation of Black women while protecting white male slaveholders from legal accountability.

The Criminalization of Abortion

During the nineteenth century, declining birth rates among white women generated anxiety among political and medical elites. Abortion and contraception were relatively common among wealthy white women during this period, contributing to concerns that white population growth was slowing while Black birth rates remained comparatively high. As a result, abortion became increasingly criminalized. Legislators framed abortion not simply as a moral issue, but as a threat to the nation's racial future. The Comstock Act of 1873 further restricted access to reproductive healthcare by prohibiting the mailing of contraceptives and abortion-related materials.

Eugenics and Population Control

In the early twentieth century, reproductive politics became intertwined with the eugenics movement. Eugenicists argued that certain populations—including immigrants, disabled individuals, poor women, and racial minorities—were biologically unfit for reproduction. The Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* (1927) legitimized forced sterilization practices, with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. infamously declaring that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.” Women of color were disproportionately targeted by sterilization programs throughout the twentieth century. Native American women, Black women, and Latina women were frequently sterilized without informed consent, while white middle-class women often faced barriers when requesting sterilization voluntarily.

The Hyde Amendment and Unequal Access

Although *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion nationwide in 1973, access remained deeply unequal. The Hyde Amendment of 1976 prohibited federal Medicaid funding for abortion except in limited circumstances. As a result, low-income women—particularly women of color—faced significant financial barriers to reproductive healthcare. The federal government simultaneously continued to fund sterilization procedures for poor women, illustrating the contradiction at the center of reproductive politics.

Modern Abortion Politics

From the Reagan era to the present, abortion became a central issue within conservative political movements. Anti-abortion rhetoric was increasingly tied to broader anxieties surrounding demographic change, declining white birth rates, and traditional family structures. Reproductive rights became politicized as tools for mobilizing voters rather than addressing the healthcare realities faced by women.

Discussion and Limitations

This review article highlights the importance of examining reproductive politics through the lens of race, class, and gender. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. Historical records concerning enslaved women and marginalized communities are often incomplete or biased due to systemic exclusion from institutional documentation. Future research should incorporate greater representation of Asian American, Latina, Native American, and disabled women's experiences in order to develop a more inclusive understanding of reproductive justice.

Conclusion

The modern debate surrounding abortion is often reduced to the binary of “pro-choice” versus “pro-life.” However, this framework fails to address the historical realities faced by poor women, women of color, and other marginalized communities. Throughout American history, reproductive policy has repeatedly functioned as a mechanism for preserving racial hierarchy, economic exploitation, and patriarchal authority. Reproductive justice therefore requires recognition of every woman's humanity, dignity, and right to bodily autonomy.

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