



### Discussion Questions

#### *Reproductive Rights: Who Decides?*

This book has described the history of reproductive rights and the legal, religious and moral dilemmas women and men have faced for thousands of years in determining the size of their families. Throughout the centuries, the US and state governments have sought to legislate access to birth control, sex education and abortion. Yet despite these laws, advocates like Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett fought back. By 1972 all US citizens had legal access to birth control. And in the landmark decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the US Supreme Court ruled that women had a constitutional right to end pregnancy. However, disputes over reproductive rights and women's reproductive health care continue to roil the nation.

Working with classmates, teachers and/or librarians, review the following questions. They are all related to the facts and situations you've read about in the book. Discuss the questions together and write down the answers you came up with. Include disagreements. Wrap up the activity by discussing the process. Was it easy or hard to answer these questions? Did your group generally agree or disagree on answers? Why or why not? How might your experience with this activity be similar to what earlier generations faced? How might it be similar to what people are grappling with today?

## CHAPTER ONE

1. Think about the ways in which the ancient Egyptians and other peoples tried to control human reproduction. How are these methods similar to those people use today? Do you agree with medical historian Norman E. Himes that birth control “fulfills some fundamental human need” that “dates from pre-history”? (Page 9.) Why or why not?
2. How did women’s experiences in Colonial America and during the American Revolution help to transform the way people thought about reproduction? Do you think that granting women more equality in marriage affected their desire to control the size of their families?

## CHAPTER TWO

1. How did the growing public awareness of reproductive control in the nineteenth century counter the pressure most white women felt to conform to Victorian notions of the “ideal woman”? How was this experience different for black women? Slave women?
2. Social purists pointed to the so-called “domino effect” of contraception to explain the rise in abortions by the mid-1800s. Do you agree with the social purists that “access to contraception led to more sex for pleasure (as opposed to procreation), which led to more abortions if contraception failed”? (Page 35.) In the twenty-first century, many people still believe in the domino effect. What do you think?
3. How did the American Medical Association influence the abortion debate? Do you think that physicians in the twenty-first century have a similar impact?

## CHAPTER THREE

1. How did Anthony Comstock and the enactment of the Comstock Act in 1873 force reproductive control into hiding? How did the law affect women of different economic means? How did all women, whether poor, well-off, black or white, deal with ending pregnancy? Do you think outlawing contraception and abortion in the twenty-first century would have similar effects?

## CHAPTER FOUR

1. How were reproductive rights stymied in the twentieth century? How did advocates like Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett help to eventually gut the Comstock Act? In general, which advocacy style do you think can achieve better results, Sanger’s tactic of flaunting the law or Dennett’s belief in conciliation?
2. What role did the Catholic Church play in the issue of access to birth control? Do you think the Catholic Church continues to influence the contraception and abortion debate in the twenty-first century? Do you agree or disagree with the role religion plays in reproductive rights?

2. By the mid-1900s, all women who became pregnant outside of marriage were considered “deviants.” (Page 66.) Discuss how racial politics distinguished between single black mothers and single white mothers. To what extent do you think these same prejudices exist in the twenty-first century?

## CHAPTER FIVE

1. Do you think the availability of the Pill increased sexual promiscuity and created a domino effect? In general, what do you think are the negatives and positives of developing more effective birth control?

2. By 1972, the US Supreme Court legalized contraception in *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Eisenstadt v. Baird*. Do you think the development of the Pill and the women’s movement affected the outcome of these cases, and if yes, how?

## CHAPTER SIX

1. Why did advocates push for legalized abortion? What were some of the concerns sweeping across the nation?

2. Sarah Weddington, one of the lead attorneys advocating for legalized abortion, stated after *Roe v. Wade*, “There was a basic question underlying the specific issue of abortion: Who is to control and define the lives of women? And our answer was: Not the government!” (Page 89.) Do you agree or disagree?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Do you agree or disagree with the legal challenges to abortion in the years since *Roe v. Wade*? Do you think that Affordable Care Act should cover all forms of contraception, including emergency contraception?

2. Many states have sought to restrict access to abortion by passing laws designed to force clinics to close and to persuade women not to have an abortion. For example, many states require ultrasounds for women before undergoing an abortion and mandate 24-48 hour waiting periods. Do you agree or disagree with these tactics?

3. In the US the Federal Drug Administration regulates many health procedures and medications for safety. In general, though, patients in conjunction with their physicians make individual choices for their care. Do you think women's reproductive choices are different than other health-related issues? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

1. Read the arguments for and against abortion. How does your point of view fit in with the Gallup Polls on abortion? Do you think some of the reasons women give for abortions are more valid than others?

2. Do you think the advocacy groups on both sides of the abortion debate have been effective? Why or why not?
3. What is “reproductive justice”? Discuss why you think the US has ratified several international treaties that ensure reproductive freedom as a matter of basic human rights.
4. In what ways does racism affect a woman’s access to birth control? Is it easier or harder for poor women to access reproductive health care? Why? What about sexism? What role do political leaders and social norms play in determining how women and their families think and act on birth control issues? Does it make a difference whether Democrats or Republicans are in office? What differences do you see in the way different politicians, judges and presidents think about birth control and reproductive rights?

## CHAPTER NINE

1. How do new reproductive technologies, such as sex selection techniques and surrogacy, affect reproductive rights issues in the US and abroad?  
Discuss whether or not you are in favor of selecting a child’s sex or traits.  
How do sex education and reproductive rights in developing countries affect maternal mortality rates?
2. Why do you think some developing countries are faring better than others in curtailing high rates of maternal mortality?
3. Are you in favor of sex education in schools? Why or why not?