

Robert Edwards, Virginia Ironside, and the Unnecessary Opposition of Rights

As people committed to both disability rights and reproductive rights, we believe that respecting women and families in their reproductive decisions requires simultaneously challenging discriminatory attitudes toward people with disabilities. We refuse to accept the bifurcation of women's rights from disability rights, or the belief that protecting reproductive rights requires accepting ableist assumptions about the supposed tragedy of disability. On the contrary, we assert that reproductive rights includes attention to disability rights, and that disability rights requires attention to human rights, including reproductive rights.

We offer the following statement in response to two recent events that promote eugenic reproductive decision-making, and that further stigmatize disabled people by presenting disability exclusively in terms of suffering and hardship. Although seemingly disparate events, they share the presumption that disability renders a life not worth living and that people with disabilities are a burden on society. Moreover, they seem to imply that the only appropriate response to disability is elimination, thereby limiting women's reproductive choices; they suggest that all women must either abort fetuses with disabilities or use IVF to de-select for disability.

The awarding of the 2010 Nobel Prize for medicine to Dr. Robert Edwards demands a more considered response. He has made no secret about promoting reproductive technologies to prevent the birth of disabled children, arguing that it would be a "sin of parents to have a child that carries the heavy burden of genetic disease. We are entering a world where we have to consider the quality of our children." We protest any recognition of Dr. Edwards that also fails to acknowledge his discriminatory statements, and we dispute the notion that his political views should be isolated from his medical accomplishments. It is precisely this separation that pits reproductive rights against disability rights.

Edwards' work has assisted in the birth of four million babies worldwide and has helped single people, people struggling with infertility, and gays, lesbians and transgender people to have biologically related children. However, we can celebrate Edwards' accomplishments and also call out his controversial advocacy against disability. In the same way that most of the articles celebrating his achievements acknowledge the religious and ethical controversies of his techniques, we can recognize his problematic disparagement of disability. The role he has played in increasing the reproductive options for women and families does not need to be justified or substantiated by arguing for an elimination of disability. It can be marked as an important reproductive option and means of creating families without denigrating disability or people with disabilities.

We also protest any use of disability by anti-abortionists in their criticism of Edwards and his work in developing assisted reproductive technologies. Many people with disabilities have used such technologies in creating their own families and recognize that IVF has made their families possible. Although we share the concern that women and families do not always have the information they need to make reproductive decisions about disability, and that stereotypes about disability persist, we do not think the response to that situation is to oppose assisted reproductive technologies or limit women's rights.

The recent statements by British advice columnist Virginia Ironside about the “suffering” of disabled children similarly require a challenge from disability and reproductive rights supporters. In arguing for the right to abortion, Ironside stated that knowingly giving birth to a child with disabilities is cruel, and that in such cases abortion is the “moral and unselfish” response. She added that if she had a sick or disabled child, she would not hesitate to “put a pillow over its face,” as would “any loving mother.” Although Ironside’s comments about infanticide have been rightly condemned, her assertion that abortion is the only proper response to disability has prompted little controversy, as has her assumption that advocacy for abortion rights requires accepting the construction of disability as unrelenting tragedy. As reproductive rights advocates who are committed to disability rights, we refuse to accept the rhetorical use of disability as an argument for abortion rights. Reproductive rights demands not only access to abortion but also the right to have children, including children with disabilities, access to information about parenting, and the social and economic supports to parent all children with dignity.

In other words, we hold both disability rights and reproductive rights together, refusing arguments for women’s reproductive autonomy that deny disability rights, and refusing arguments for the human rights of people with disabilities that deny the right of women and families to make the best reproductive decisions for themselves.

Although our statement is motivated by these events, we recognize that these are only the most recent manifestations of long-standing prejudices against people with disabilities and of the use of disability stereotypes to undermine women’s and families’ reproductive autonomy and access to abortion. We hope, with this statement, to support other activists and scholars who are equally committed to both reproductive rights and disability rights. We hope that as advocates in movements that share similar values around civil and human rights we can continue to speak out against the use of reproductive rights to undermine disability rights and the use of disability rights to undermine reproductive rights. Reproductive rights and disability rights are intertwined.

In solidarity,

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