PRODUCING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

With events and movements such as #MeToo, the Gender Equality UN Sustainable Development Goal, the Irish and Chilean abortion policy changes, and the worldwide Women’s March movement, women’s rights are at the top of the global public agenda. Yet, countries around the world continue to debate if and how women should have access to reproductive rights, and specifically abortion. This book provides the most comprehensive comparative review of this topic to date. How are reproductive rights produced? This book analyzes three spheres of influence on abortion policymaking: civil society, national government, and international bodies. It engages scholars as well as undergraduate and graduate students in social sciences, law, gender studies, and development and sustainability studies. With insights into the influence of intergovernmental bodies, international health organizations, state-level political representatives, and religious civil society players, this book will be of interest to policymakers, organizations, and individuals concerned with influencing reproductive policy.

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DETERMINING ABORTION POLICY WORLDWIDE

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Udi dedicates this book to his beloved wife, Michal.
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Preface

Women’s reproductive needs have existed since the dawn of history. Indeed, abortion appears in artwork in Angkor Wat and in the text of Assyrian Law. Likewise, references to abortion procedures are found in the “Egyptian Ebers Papyrus (1550 BC), the Latin works of Pliny the Elder (23 to 79 AD) and Dioscofides (De materia medica, c. 58 to 64 AD), and the Greek writings of Soranus (Gynecology, c. 100 AD)” (Potts and Campbell, 2002). Today, societies across the globe continue to debate questions of reproductive policy and rights, in some cases even if and how they should exist. In the modern state system, these debates manifest as political and policy questions, as the state is given the responsibility to decide what is, and what is not, a woman’s right.

As medicine and technology advanced, the question of if and how women should have access to abortion became more pressing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With such changes, abortion became a more relevant option and the dangers of unregulated abortion procedures starker. It is in this context that states began to feel the need to formulate policy on this issue. Rather than provide a comprehensive historical review of abortions, our goal in this book is to focus on policymaking in this area, particularly in recent decades. We are less interested in the evolution of medical technology and more concerned with the involvement of state governments in policymaking in this context and the panoply of influences on those governments.

Since abortion entered the modern political agenda, the policy and political landscapes have been ever shifting. In the United Kingdom, the Infant Life (Preservation) Act of 1929, an Act of Parliament, amended the Offences against the Person Act 1861 and allowed abortion to save the life of the mother. The Soviet Union became the first European government to legalize abortion in the Decree on Abortion in 1920, with far-reaching policy consequences. It recriminalized the procedure later on (Avdeev, Blum, & Troitskaya, 1995).
Preface

The Decree set “to permit such operations to be made freely and without any charge in Soviet hospitals, where conditions are assured of minimizing the harm of the operation” (Semashko, 1924, p. 24).

Cases such as these, from the early and mid-twentieth century, while important in their own right, are at best precursors for the swirl of political activity surrounding abortion issues in the historical period we focus on in this book. Today we live in a conspicuously different era. New players, technologies, and global networks redefine how we talk about abortion and who determines the boundaries of the discussion. It is in such an era – with currents that go deeper than national governments and well beyond the territory of any particular state – that we find such a political climate. This climate leads to the solidification of webs of organizations, political norms, and policy practices that span multiple spheres including the international system, the state sphere, and civil society.

Such a climate has produced momentous political battles over the question of abortion. These battles continue to play out and today they find additional stages in social networks and new media. Likewise, it is in such an era that global phenomena such as International Safe Abortion Day, recognized in dozens of countries around the world, transpire. It is in this context that we embark on a course to re-examine how abortion rights are shaped in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

We develop an analytical framework that accounts for this new era by focusing on international, national, and civil society effects on abortion policy. Such a framework is powerful in its ability to shed new light on abortion policy in a comparative perspective. While the structure of this book dictates that these spheres are mostly analyzed separately, we dedicate the concluding sections to recognizing their interconnectedness and interdependence. In the book’s final sections, accordingly, we put those three spheres back together as we focus on agents, institutions, and norms that travel among them to influence the production of reproductive rights.

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