December 11, 1969

ABORTION AND POPULATION CONTROL

HON. SHIRLEY CHISHOLM
OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, December 10, 1969

Mrs. CHISHOLM, Mr. Speaker, yesterday I gave the following speech before the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare's Subcommittee on Health as part of their hearings on population control.

I am including these remarks in the Congressional Record to serve as a reference for any of the Members or private citizens who might be interested in the issue:

STATEMENT BY MRS. CHISHOLM

For quite some time now I have been an ardent advocate of family planning. It seems to me quite obvious that whenever it is possible to do so, the limitation of the number of births should be accomplished by the utilization of contraceptive devices as a desirable method.

However, it is apparent that based on population growth statistics and the writings of many eminent demographers and scientists that the issue of overpopulation has become a most pressing one. A number of writers predict that as early as 1990 we will witness world famines whose primary cause will be linked directly to population growth.

Lawrence Lader, now executive director of the national association to repeal abortion laws has written that "Beyond the problem of economics and food supply, the brutal reality is that the world will eventually run out of space to hold a population that keeps doubling at the present rate. General Eisenhower, an opponent of family planning aid during his Presidency, has said to this today: '...since the Earth is finite in area and physical resources, it is clear that unless something is done to bring an essential equilibrium between human requirements and available supplies, there is going to be in some regions not only a series of explosions but a lowering of standards for all people, including our own.'"

I am equally aware that there are many political, legal, social, moral and economic issues involved in Government-sponsored birth control programs and policies and that there are and will appear before this committee eminently more qualified and adept people than I to discuss those issues.

Therefore, I will address myself solely to some of those issues that surround the most widely used method of birth control in the world today—abortion.

Alice S. Rossi, in an excellent article in the July-August 1969 issue of Dissent made this most cogent comment about the word "abortion":

"Free associations to the word "abortion" would probably yield a fantastic array of emotional responses: pain, relief, murder, crime, fear, freedom, genocide, guilt, etc. Which of these associations people have no doubt reflects their age, marital status, religion or nationality. To a forty-four-year-old Japanese or Hungarian woman, the primary response might be "freedom" and "relief"; to an unmarried American college girl, "fear" and "pain"; to a Catholic priest, "murder" and "sin"; to some black militants, "genocide".

There are many ways to avoid the negative associations and connotations that surround the word. We could, for example, borrow the term advanced by the British when they recently rewrote their laws—"pregnancy termination".

I believe that that would get us closer to the heart of the issue but it would still not be close enough.

Not close enough because the basic issue—and the only real alternatives for the pregnant woman who does not want the child—is abortion or compulsory pregnancy. If we view the issue in this perspective we are at what one might call "ground zero".

Does our Government or any other government have the right by which to force a woman to have a child that she does not want? In Hungary, Gyorgy Peters, the chief government statistician, has answered (presumably wishing backing from higher officials) with an emphatic "no"! He reportedly has said "the introduction of regulations with which the state would interfere with the freedom of the parents contradicts our political and moral concepts." What then must we, as representatives of a democracy, answer to the question?

The majority of family planning advocates would be aghast if our Government were to suggest laws requiring the use of any contraceptive, or, as in a recent case in California, legal sterilization.

Yet it has been Government policy in this country that compels pregnant women to carry a full-term pregnancy, often against the wishes of both parents.

Dr. Garrett Hardin has, perhaps rightly, equated this situation with compulsory servitude and has said "when we recognize that these (abortion or compulsory pregnancy) are the real operational alternatives for the pregnant woman, the false problems created by the pseudo-alternatives disappear."

Gentlemen, if I may, I would like to now discuss some of the statistics that are pertinent to this number one method of birth control.

One: The safest method of contraception now known, if one accepts total abstinence, is supposedly the pill. But certain statistics
show that even when the pill is used properly, the failure rate is approximately one percent. Consequently, if all fertile women in the United States were using this method properly, it would still be some 250,000 unwanted births.

Two: At present there are approximately 245,000 illegitimate births in the United States each year.

We cannot deny that all of the illegitimate children born each year are either unwanted or unwanted but what is often missed is that 30 percent of all illegitimate births are to young girls under 16 years of age. What is being done to these young laddies and their children?

Society's attitude seems to be "you've had your fun and now you're going to pay for it." But what is so immoral, granting an individual, basic right or forcing a young girl—somes as young as 14 or 15—to accept the responsibility of motherhood without the means, rights and the opportunities? What are we doing to the mother? What are we doing to the child?

There is also the fact that if a white girl gives up her child for adoption there is a good chance that it will be adopted. This is not the case for black and other minority-group children. When they are given up they spend most of their childhood in foster homes. This is, I believe, one of the prime reasons that so many black girls choose to keep their babies.

That is only a small part of the moral cost that we pay for maintaining our present attitudes. There is another reason that might appeal to you gentlemen more.

Compulsory pregnancy costs money. For a moment I would like to continue to concentrate on the issue of illegitimate births. But I am suggesting that we move away from the concept of a class-conscious, fee based policy to a basic consumer service that is equal and accessible to all. We can make health care as available and accessible to the poor, black and brown, as it is to the rich. I believe that this is one of the soundest routes to economic and national security.

The number of illegitimate children on AFDC has been rising steadily. As of 1967 there were 232,000 illegitimate children in the United States. The number of children on the AFDC rolls was 100,000 and the number of illegitimate children under 18 was over 70,000 unwed mothers receiving aid for dependent children.

The AFDC payments range from $10.58 per recipient in Mississippi to $40.65 in New Jersey. The national average per recipient is $44.11. The other side of the picture is that of the children and the ones who find it most difficult to get off the Public Assistance rolls.

I do not want you to deal with illegitimates today, I have done it purposely because people tend to be squeamish and don't want to deal with the matter. I believe that we did discuss it and many of the subjects that surround the abortion issue and come to grips with them. I do not believe in either surgically or otherwise killing the innocent.

I would like to make one final point about illegitimacy. I know that you are all thinking about the immorality of women receiving AFDC. As I understand it, the largest increase in AFDC recipients has come from those women who are now receiving public assistance but from whom women who need that AFDC is the only answer to the problem of compulsory births that face them. Before you condemn their immorality consider that there is two sides to the coin and be fair in your analysis. As we as elected officials represent is the other side of the coin.

Three: one can hardly discuss the issue of abortion by pointing out the inadequacy of the pill or the number of illegitimate births while ignoring legitimate but unwanted births. How many illegitimate births is more immoral.

A recent survey by Dr. Charles Westoff of Princeton University's office of population research shows that approximately 1,000,000 illegitimate births in the United States are unwanted by either the husband or the wife. An in-depth study also revealed that if all economic groups the poor were most anxious about this issue. Among the poor (a classification where 45 percent of all legitimate births were unwanted). The principal reason seems to be either financial or financially related e.g., crowded housing.

The plethora of studies, committees and commissions on poverty and its causes have raised the question of what is the correlation between family size and the ability of the family to break the poverty cycle. It is further clear that with the present economic groups that the poor, black and brown and other minority-group children when in turn with 1966 were members of families with five children or more under 18; more than one-half of all families with four or more children live in poverty. Approximately half of the children under 18 were held in families with three children or less.

I do not want you to think however that I am asking you to consider this aspect of family planning solely as an element of what was known as the "war on poverty." If this were the sole reason for legislating a full scale war on the poor themselves.

No, I am suggesting that we move away from a concept of a class-conscious, fee based policy. I am asking that all of those family planning services available to the middle-class, rich and white be made available and accessible to the poor, black and brown. The primary one which is not available at present, under safe and sanitary conditions, that is the problem and abortion is, as I noted, the number one method of birth control.

The number one reason why so many illegitimate births are occurring is that the service is not equally available, under safe and sanitary conditions, for at least minority-group poor women. In New York City, for example, well over 90% of all therapeutic abortions are performed on white women, while less than 1% are performed on black women, according to the association for the study of abortion.

In January of this year an article in the Scientific American estimated that the ratio of therapeutic abortions per 1000 deliveries in this country was 2.0 for white women, 3.0 for black women and 1.0 for Puerto Rican women.

One must also note that in New York City in 1950-1962 the abortion ratio in municipal hospitals was only .1 per 1000 live births. Plainly and simply, this shows that legal abortion is not available to the minority-group poor, in New York City at least.

There is also the financial burden that even legal abortion can and does impose. The cost of a legal abortion, mainly because people tend to be squeamish and don't want to deal with the matter. I believe that we did discuss it and many of the subjects that surround the abortion issue and come to grips with them. I do not believe in either surgically or otherwise killing the innocent.

I would like to make one final point about illegitimacy. I know that you are all thinking about the immorality of women receiving AFDC. As I understand it, the largest increase in AFDC recipients has come from those women who are now receiving public assistance but from whom women who need
Gentlemen, let us look briefly at some of the countries where the compulsory pregnancy laws have been weakened or, if you prefer, where abortion laws have been liberalized:

Experience in Sweden and Denmark have shown that as legal abortions increased the death rate associated with it decreased.

In Hungary there were 167,000 legal abortions as against 146,000 live births. Similarly Czechoslovakia's birthrate has been reduced but not as drastically at Hungary's.

Romania, after substituting a more restrictive law in 1966, discovered that their birth rate almost tripled in one year, the previous rate being 13.7 per 1,000.

It would seem that the absence of compulsory pregnancy laws alone can contribute a great deal to the control of the population growth, especially when one considers that at least the eastern bloc countries mentioned do not widely practice the more modern methods of contraception.

Of course no discussion of abortion would be complete without discussing the politically volatile issue of religious and moral concepts.

Since we are already outside of the country, let's stay there momentarily to quickly inspect the abortion rates of a few countries with large Catholic populations:

The illegal abortion rate in Uruguay is almost two and one-half times the number of annual live births.

In Roman Catholic Chile, 27 percent of the women reported that they had had abortions at one time or another.

In Roman Catholic France, the annual number of abortions equals the annual number of live births.

Coming back to this country we find that in a poll conducted in 1967, no less than 73 percent of the Catholics polled favored abortion reform, as did 85 percent of the Protestants and 98 percent of the Jewish.

No lesser a Catholic luminary than Cardinal Cushing of Boston was quoted as having said: "It does not seem reasonable to me to forbid in civil law a practice that can be considered a matter of private morality."

He was of course speaking of the less traditional methods of birth control, contraceptives, but it is my belief that logical extension to abortion is now in order. That is especially true if he did, in fact, mean "A practice that can be considered a matter of private morality."

Outlawing compulsory pregnancy laws, which some of you might still prefer to call legalizing abortion, would not be forcing any doctor or hospital to perform abortions against their beliefs. By outlawing these laws we would instead be honoring the basic and individual right of a woman to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

There are literally reams of other statistics that I might present to you gentlemen today in support of the repeal of the present compulsory pregnancy laws. However, time will not allow me to nor am I sure that it would accomplish more than muddying up the waters.

The basic underlying question in any discussion of compulsory pregnancy laws (which I choose, to use rather than the term abortion laws) is this: What about a woman who is pregnant against her will do and what should the professional and public response toward her be if she chooses to terminate the pregnancy?

If the underlying thesis of family planning is to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, is it not illogical then to continue to force women with unwanted pregnancies to have the child? I think that it is!