

## Men Aren't Quite Sure How to Be Abortion-Rights Activists

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[Family](#).

Does a movement that proclaims a deep belief in women's autonomy have a place for male voices?

By [Ashley Fetters](#)



Lawrence Bryant / Reuters

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On a Wednesday night in late May, 44-year-old Matt Garbett of Atlanta attended a meeting held by NARAL Pro-Choice America, a prominent abortion-rights group, at the urging of a female friend who is active in the local chapter. A few weeks earlier, both Georgia and Alabama had taken measures to restrict access to abortion.

Garbett had always believed that Americans should have the right to get an abortion, and he'd always voted that way—and until that night, he said, he'd thought that was enough. But what Garbett saw at that meeting startled him. In a “completely packed” room, full of what he estimated to be 80 people, only three were men. Garbett didn't feel out of place, however; instead, he was “absolutely embraced and welcome,” he told me. “I was, oddly, *overly* thanked [for being there]. The next day, Garbett [voiced his bewilderment](#) in a thread on Twitter. “Last night I attended my first @NARALGA meeting,” he began. “My biggest takeaway: Men... we are not showing up.”

For decades, abortion has been slotted into the category of “women's issues,” next to other pregnancy-adjacent topics such as contraception access and paid parental leave. Additionally, some abortion rights advocates haven't *wanted* men to be particularly involved: A movement focused on women's autonomy will necessarily prioritize women's voices. But most pregnancies require a man's active participation—so it stands to reason that men have a place in the abortion conversation. As the future of abortion becomes more uncertain, some abortion-rights advocates and groups are actively calling for men to join their fight. Where people disagree is over just what men's place is in the broader debate—and how large it should be.

In the anti-abortion movement, men feature prominently. Some anti-abortion groups, such as the Family Research Council, the Life Issues Institute, and the Charlotte Lozier Institute, have male presidents; the National Right to Life Committee, which bills itself as the oldest and largest anti-abortion organization, grew out of the all-male United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the late 1960s. Every year, men are robustly represented at the March for Life, both in men-only groups and in mixed-gender coalitions.

But in the abortion-rights movement, men are far less visible. Part of that may be because of men's complicated role in abortion rights historically. As Alesha Doan, a public-affairs professor at the University of Kansas as well as a co-author of *Abortion Regret: The New Attack on Reproductive Freedom* and the author of *Opposition and Intimidation: The Abortion Wars and Strategies of Political Harassment*, pointed out in an interview, abortion was largely available throughout the 19th century in the United States. "It was men, male physicians, who spearheaded the several-decade campaign to pass laws that essentially criminalized abortion," she said, starting in the mid-19th century. By 1910, [nearly every state had anti-abortion laws](#), but illegal abortion occurred "at a fairly high rate," Doan said. By the 1950s, physicians—still overwhelmingly male—began to push to decriminalize abortion, so that doctors could safely practice it. Their efforts resulted in a patchwork of laws at different levels of government that regulated who could get abortions and when, made in cooperation with politicians (also overwhelmingly male).

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Doan noted that in the years before the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, there certainly were women opposing abortion—but legislators and doctors, both predominantly male professions at the time, were still the ones making the laws and enforcing them. "Again, you had men as the gatekeepers, able to decide who got to have an abortion and whose reasoning was compelling and whose was not," she told me. When a large part of the feminist movement joined the fight to preserve abortion rights, Doan said, is when abortion began to be popularly framed as an issue of women's autonomy versus the (largely male) forces that sought to undermine it.

According to Doan, men figure more visibly on the anti-abortion side of the debate because it is typically aligned with conservative and "traditional" values, especially concerning families and households. These ideals emphasize the father's role as head of the family, so for men who believe in them, the anti-abortion cause "very much has to do with reclaiming masculinity, restoring men to their role as protectors and providers," she said. "Anti-abortion activists [tend to] see abortion as one of the key factors that allows men to be unmanly, to run away from their role of being responsible for the family ... It's, *We're here to protect the unborn, and to protect women from the alleged harms or coercion of abortion.*"

Marjorie Dannenfelser, the president of the Susan B. Anthony List, an organization that supports anti-abortion female politicians, emphasized to me that women do have different and often much more personal perspectives on pregnancy from men. This is one reason she believes it's important for groups like the Susan B. Anthony List to have female leadership. "Women are uniquely situated to talk about this issue, because we *have* babies," she said.

Still, she also sees men as important allies. “You don’t have to earn your right to speak out on a great human-rights battle,” she told me. The entire abortion debate “comes down to one fundamental question about whether this is another human or not,” she said, “and if it *is* another human, then we have a serious, serious problem on our hands, and everyone should speak to it.” If an abortion were truly just a simple medical procedure that only women and people with uteruses could need, like a hysterectomy, “sure, men could be supportive. There wouldn’t be this huge controversy over who gets to talk and who doesn’t,” she added. (A representative for the National Right to Life Committee offered a similar sentiment: “We welcome men into the conversation because we see this as a human-rights issue.”)

Dannenfelser also said she finds the idea that abortion is an issue men should weigh in on only with their votes or donations “insulting.” “*We want your money, we want your emotional support. But especially your money, and then just shut up and go away.* I think a lot of women have been on the other side of that attitude,” she said, “and I reject it wherever I see it.” Ultimately, men and women can serve the anti-abortion cause in “complementary” ways, Dannenfelser told me. “More support is better, from both [men and women].”

Abortion-rights activists, meanwhile, have recently been calling for a level of male involvement similar to that of the anti-abortion movement—and expressing dismay at the lack of male voices speaking out about how abortion has affected their lives. Last month, *Jezebel* published an essay titled “[How Do We Make Cis Men Give a Shit About Abortion?](#)” The *New York Times* opinion section ran [a column](#) urging men to think about their own precarious legal situation in an unwanted pregnancy should abortion become illegal. Alison McQuade, a social-media consultant based in Washington, D.C., [tweeted in May](#), “Men are so eager to join in the ‘WE are pregnant!’ and ‘WE are having a baby!’ party, but suddenly become deafeningly silent when it’s ‘WE had an abortion.’” In an essay for *The Bitter Southerner* titled “[Southern Men: Where Y’all At?](#),” the Atlanta-based writer Gray Chapman called for men to join the battle to preserve abortion rights in Georgia, because abortion, or the lack of access to it, could have significant repercussions in their lives too:

One in four American women will have an abortion by age 45, which means most of y’all know and love more than a few women whose lives today are possible *only* thanks to the freedom they had to make choices about their own reproductive futures. It’s likely, too, that a woman’s abortion has helped make possible your own lives and livelihoods as you know them today.

Many men, Chapman went on, “say they’re hesitant or just plain scared to speak up about this stuff. They feel it’s not their place to say anything, or worse, that they’ll say the wrong thing. That’s understandable, albeit sort of a cop-out.”

Indeed, when Matt Garbett concluded his Twitter thread about the lack of men’s participation in support of abortion rights, men responded to his call with concerns about whether he would be welcome in such a heavily female environment. “Admittedly,” [one tweeted](#), “I don’t know where I would be the most useful nor do [I] want my presence at events to be [a] problem for others,” he wrote. So rather than attend rallies or participate in organized efforts, he wrote, he simply donates money to the cause.

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Amelia Bonow—a co-founder of [Shout Your Abortion](#), which encourages people to talk about their pregnancy termination with the goal of normalizing and humanizing the practice—has been thinking about men’s role in the abortion conversation a lot lately. After nearly four years of facilitating ways for people who have had abortions to share their stories publicly, Shout Your Abortion “has shifted,” she told me. This summer, the organization will release a video series in which men speak candidly about their personal experiences with and thoughts about abortion, part of a deliberate attempt by the organization to include more men’s voices.

Bonow acknowledged that the construct of abortion as an expression of a woman’s right to bodily autonomy can make it seem like a topic only women are fit to address. The aesthetic of Planned Parenthood’s marketing, for example—with its heavy use of the color pink—seems to telegraph that. And it hasn’t helped, Bonow added, that some supporters of abortion rights have [all but insisted](#) that the abortion-rights movement be a no-men zone.

“I’ve seen all these signs that are like, you know, *No uterus, no opinion*,” she said. “I think that’s a reductive, gendered framing that makes it seem like we’re the only ones allowed to talk about it. I think that approach has spooked some men out of the conversation who we really need to be a part of it.” Every day on social media, she said, she sees progressive men in media and politics weigh in on “every progressive issue” except abortion, even though abortion is tied up in some of those issues, too. “Anyone who cares about economic justice, racial justice, human rights,” she said, “abortion access is your issue.”

Doan, the University of Kansas professor, compares the fight to preserve abortion rights to the fight against racism, or the fight for LGBTQ rights—in which the importance of support from outside the marginalized groups in question, or “allyship,” is routinely highlighted. “I think [abortion] has been defined as exclusively a women’s-rights issue that therefore has to only be dealt with by women,” Doan said. “It’s a faulty way of thinking, much the same way as when we talk about racism and then ask people and communities of color to solve the problem themselves.”

Now is a pivotal moment in the abortion debate, given Georgia’s and Alabama’s recent bills, and an emerging emphasis on abortion as [a key issue in the 2020 presidential election](#). And because political activism is often a strength-in-numbers endeavor, if abortion-rights groups that are majority-women can appeal to more men—half of the population—they could massively boost their influence.

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In the weeks since attending his first NARAL meeting, Matt Garbett has been actively recruiting men to participate in abortion-rights events with him. Something that’s been on his mind a lot lately is how men’s participation in the abortion-rights movement could be helpful in situations where men’s voices are taken more seriously than women’s. “The men who don’t get it, unfortunately, need to hear from other men,” he said. After that first meeting, Garbett tweeted a pledge to bring 10 more men with him to the next one.

The recruitment, of course, has been a learning experience. Many men, Garbett has found, are sensitive to the sentiment that abortion is a “women’s issue,” and to the role men have played in restricting abortion rights—perhaps too sensitive. “I was talking to other men about why they haven’t been showing up, and that’s been part of the consensus: We feel like we’ve been giving our tacit approval, but guys have felt a little bit nervous about going to the meetings,” he said. “I think a lot of guys, who are very supportive and [are] allies, [nonetheless] feel like if we show up to these meetings, then it will look like the men are trying to take control.”

At the same time, Garbett told me, as someone who has been active in local politics for most of his adult life, participating while refraining from trying to take control has been something of a challenge. Playing a supporting role under female leadership has taken some adjustment, he said, and he’s still learning how to show up to listen rather than show up to speak.

“I am used to being the person in front of the room,” he admitted. “That’s the thing that we have to recognize: Forcibly putting yourself, as a man, into a position completely supportive of women is necessary for the movement.”

## About the Author

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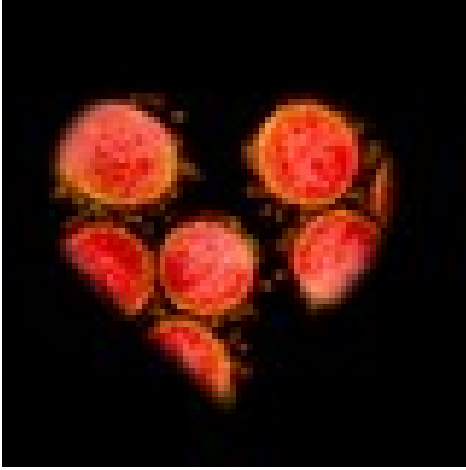


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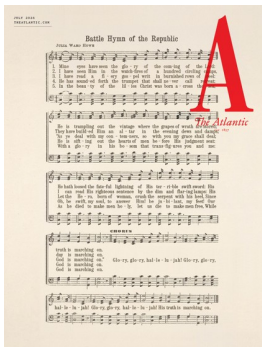
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