Reproduction & Society: Interdisciplinary Readings
Edited by Carole Joffe & Jennifer Reich

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This excerpt from an address given by then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to the United Nations Conference on Women highlights the circumstances of women globally and the challenges to their health and well-being.

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Preface

Surrogacy, egg and sperm donation, controversies of birth control access, the right to choose one’s childbirth experience, or stories of reproductive technologies gone awry are now common discussions in news, politics, and even popular culture. Questions of the social and political—as opposed to biological—dimensions of human reproduction surround us. Scholarly studies in this arena have exploded over the last forty years or so, a development that was set in motion with the re-emergence of a woman’s movement in the United States and elsewhere, and the Roe v Wade decision legalizing abortion in 1973. Since then, a variety of forces, ranging from advances in reproductive technology, to the growing inequality in U.S. society (and how this affects people’s reproductive possibilities) have only increased this attention to reproduction. Courses in a variety of disciplines focusing on this topic have become increasingly common in universities.

This sustained attention among scholars has led to many excellent book-length examinations of particular aspects of reproduction (such as pregnancy loss, abortion, contraception, or surrogacy). Such treatments, however, do not lend themselves to adequately educating the student who needs a broader overview of the social meanings of reproduction that covers a range of sites and forms of reproductive control within its cultural and political contexts. This book fills this gap. We designed this volume to support these discussions, help students to think critically about reproduction as a social phenomenon, and provide a resource for those teaching about these issues. Reproduction and Society contains original essays that frame each section. These short introductions by the editors offer descriptive information about the scale and scope of the topic, highlight particularly important themes, and introduce the readings. These introductory essays are followed by a selection of four to seven reprints from the best work in
this field. We draw on the work of senior scholars, who have produced classics in the study of reproduction, as well as those written by younger scholars who are pushing the field forward. The authors represented in this volume are mainly drawn from the social sciences, but we also include the writings of health care professionals, lawyers, environmental scientists, psychologists, advocates and journalists-- voices which reflect the rich diversity of this field. We have assembled a text with plainly written, engaging sections that will have wide appeal to undergraduate and graduate students and others who are new to the study of reproduction.

In the main introduction, co-authored by the editors, we present an overview of the field of reproduction. We also make clear to readers our understanding of a *feminist perspective* on reproduction that considers gender to be indelibly linked to reproduction, and explain how such a perspective informs this book. We introduce readers to the historic institutional and individual biases that created anxieties about demographic changes in the U.S. and worldwide and which have led to legal and social regulation of reproduction. We discuss the fairly recently articulated goal of *reproductive justice* (as opposed to the more individualized focus on *reproductive rights*) by advocates and scholars as a vehicle for securing and defending individuals’ rights to plan and execute their reproductive lives. We explain that this book’s main focus is the United States, although in each section there is some attention to global issues, as well as to the increasingly diverse population of the U.S. We then follow this introduction with six substantive sections on various aspects of reproduction: contraception and sterilization; abortion; reproductive technologies; pregnancy and birth; groups targeted for specific reproductive policies (e.g., immigrants, incarcerated women, disabled women); and return with a concluding section on reproductive justice.
Two key ideas about reproduction run through the entire book. The first, as the title implies, is the intense interest that virtually all societies have in human reproduction, ostensibly one of the most private of all acts. We suggest that the concepts of both regulation and stratification are crucial to understanding how reproduction is transformed from a private act into a public issue. Approaching the topic in this way offers us a framework to explain to readers how societies encourage reproduction among some women, but seek to prevent it among others, as illustrated, for example, by sterilization campaigns, both past and present. We demonstrate the factors—race, class, ethnicity, disability, incarceration, income status—that make women (and sometimes men) most likely to be targeted for regulation by those in power. Indeed, we suggest that reproduction serves as a prime concrete illustration of the intersectionality that has been so widely theorized by feminist scholars.

Our view of reproductive policies as always containing both liberatory and coercive possibilities is also a major theme of this volume. Or, as we sometimes have phrased it, the “too much too little” dilemma of reproduction. For example, we argue, on the one hand, that reproductive health services are essential for women to be able to participate equally in society, and at the present moment, in both the U.S. and globally, there is “too little” access for many women to these services. Yet, at the same time, we offer examples of “too much” service being offered to certain groups in a coercive manner, e.g. the disproportionate location of family planning clinics in minority neighborhoods when the U.S. government first became involved in this service in the 1970s, the forced abortions that have long characterized policy in China, the notorious vasectomy campaign aimed at poor villagers in India in the 1970s, or sterilization abuse in the U.S.
Reproduction and Society is suitable as a main text in courses focusing on reproduction, irrespective of what departments or programs offer them. The book can also serve as a useful supplement to courses on the family, gender, health care, social problems, and sexuality. Reproduction as a field of study offers opportunities to explore significant questions of how resources are allocated, individuals are regulated, and how very much is at stake as people and communities aim to determine their own family size and reproductive experiences.