

## The Boundary Between Law and Lawlessness

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Date : February 6, 2019

Karissa Haugeberg, [Women Against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century](#) (2017).

The law plays a sometimes-contradictory role in the stories of female antiabortion activists described in Karissa Haugeberg's richly researched [Women Against Abortion](#). Haugeberg meticulously studies how gender informs the work of many of the women who have dominated the antiabortion movement in recent decades. However, *Women Against Abortion* also captures the complex role played by the law in a social movement only ever partly convinced that legal strategies could deliver meaningful social change. Haugeberg's characters struggle to define a law-free space in which to fight against abortion, and some of the most skeptical find themselves drawn into policy-making. Yet legal solutions deliver far less than Haugeberg's subjects demand. Her compelling and original study suggests that even if legal strategies inevitably pull in some pro-life activists, frustration at the pace of legal change can have a profound radicalizing effect on others.

The fascinating women who populate the world of *Women Against Abortion* viewed the role of legal reform with particular skepticism. These activists struggled at times to justify their careers in the pro-life movement, especially since antiabortion groups often insisted that women should prioritize motherhood. To reconcile their work, family commitments, and ideology, the women of *Women Against Abortion* sought to carve out roles in the movement that reflected their unique experiences as women and as mothers. Rather than prioritizing litigation or legislation, the female activists Haugeberg studies worked in crisis pregnancy centers or participated in clinic blockades. With varying degrees of success, these female activists justified their work by carving out a uniquely female form of pro-life activism, one that resembled motherhood. But as Haugeberg shows, these grassroots activists often found themselves drawn to legal change.

The characters that populate Haugeberg's story may not be household names, but their stories illuminate the complex identities of pro-life women. Marjory Mecklenberg, the first of Haugeberg's subjects, turned away from legal reform after unsuccessfully working to convince her colleagues to prioritize the needs of pregnant women as well as fetal rights. Working in an organization of her own, Mecklenberg prioritized the formation of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs). While appealing to women who opposed the fetus-focused work of larger organizations, CPC work also attracted women struggling to justify work outside the home. By framing CPCs as an extension of the family, Mecklenberg and her colleagues hoped to create a space untouched by the law. However, as *Women Against Abortion* shows, Mecklenberg herself soon rationalized a focus on policy work. As part of the Reagan Administration, she helped to direct federal money away from established programs and toward abstinence-only initiatives.

Over time, CPCs became further and further entangled with the quest for legal reform. Law-oriented organizations pledged to elect presidents who would reshape the Supreme Court and uphold increasingly strict abortion restrictions. But CPC leaders fought for the election of the same conservative politicians. Republican lawmakers either earmarked funds for abstinence-only education under existing laws or created new programs to fund CPCs. While claiming to be largely above the legal fray, the law helped to fuel the expansion of CPCs.

*Women Against Abortion* shows that legal organizations also had a more complex relationship to antiabortion lawbreaking than many studies have captured. Some of the women Haugeberg studies immersed themselves in illegal—even violent activity. Shelley Shannon, the most chilling character in *Women Against Abortion*, tried to murder abortion provider Dr. George Tiller years before another extremist succeeded. In telling the stories of activists like

Shannon, Haugeberg shows that law-oriented organizations often facilitated the work of those who illegally blockaded clinics or plotted violent attacks. Individual activists moved between legal work and law-breaking. Some swore off criminal activity as they aged or had families. Others who had prioritized legislation and litigation broke the law after giving up on more conventional reform strategies. And events hosted by law-oriented organizations provided space for those who later pursued covert operations.

Indeed, activists' very commitment to a right to life had a radicalizing effect. Haugeberg describes the frustration of women like Shannon and Joan Andrews with the slow progress of legislation and litigation designed to end abortion. The idea of a constitutional and even God-given right to life resonated deeply with grassroots women in the pro-life movement, but after decades of struggle, women like Andrews concluded that the law would never truly protect fetal rights. Women's very passion about a constitutional right to life led them believe that the only way to make progress was "a guerilla war against those who would kill." The promise of constitutional change mobilized a broad range of women invested in protecting fetal life. Yet the chasm between the antiabortion movement's legal ideals and pragmatic solutions had a radicalizing effect on many activists. Haugeberg provocatively argues that the law-oriented wing of the movement helped to shape and even nourish antiabortion violence.

Historians of social movements often pit lawyers and legislators against activists invested in direct action. Haugeberg's impressive book reminds us that the story is never so simple. Legal reformers and radicals may resemble one another far more than we would have believed.

Cite as: Mary Ziegler, *The Boundary Between Law and Lawlessness*, JOTWELL (February 6, 2019) (reviewing Karissa Haugeberg, **Women Against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century** (2017)), <https://legalhist.jotwell.com/the-boundary-between-law-and-lawlessness/>.