

TEST-TUBE WOMEN

WHAT FUTURE FOR MOTHERHOOD?

EDITED BY RITA ARDITTI, RENATE DUELLI KLEIN AND SHELLEY MINDEN



PANDORA

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*Edited by Rita Arditti,
Renate Duelli Klein and
Shelley Minden*

P A N D O R A P R E S S

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P A N D O R A P R I

TEST-TUBE WOMEN

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Cover illustration and design by Mandy Hall, who describes herself as 'an armchair feminist trying to get out of the armchair'; and who lives in a housing co-op in North London, England, where she loves food, singing and drawing.



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INTRODUCTION

'Test tube babies,' 'frozen embryos,' 'artificial insemination,' 'sex selection,' 'surrogate motherhood,' 'prenatal screening' – these were some of the keywords that started us off, a year ago, to compile this anthology. We were curious to know the meaning of all these new technologies for a woman's decision to have a child – or to remain childfree. Will they, as Shulamith Firestone suggested in 1970 in *The Dialectic of Sex*, contribute to women's liberation and freedom? Should we as feminists endorse them? Or are they just one more way to keep women subordinated to men's control? To make us comply with yet another set of rules and regulations, all, of course, for our 'own good'? What are we to make of all these male scientists and doctors who seem so keen – and so dedicated – to, for instance, help 'infertile' women to have children of their own?

Women's power to procreate – men's attempts to remain in control over women's bodies. Of women's lives. We decided to take a close look at reproductive technologies, which we define as all forms of biomedical interventions and 'help' a woman may encounter when she considers having — or not having — a child. At first glance these technologies seem to offer women – some women, at least – freedom of choice: the choice of having a 'wanted' child, a 'normal' child (whatever that is), a child, perhaps, of the preferred sex. It might become a woman's 'choice' in the future to provide her planned child with the kind of 'superman' genes the sperm banks advertize. A surrogate mother might 'free' some of us from the burden of pregnancy and let us get on with our professional interests. And the prospect of making babies outside a woman's womb could bring with it the potential to

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free women and children from the exclusiveness of the 'sacred' mother-child bond.

We as feminists are pro-choice, of course. We support women's right to choose in all areas of our lives. But how can women choose freely in a society where the right to choose must be bought? Where people of color are systematically exploited and discriminated against and population 'control' is blatantly racist and in the service of the white minority worldwide who wants to remain in power? Where women are taught to subordinate their interests to those of men? Where a woman isn't 'real' without husband and child, and where a 'real' man treats his wife and children as property?

Each time a new technological development is hailed the same question arises: is this liberation, or oppression in a new guise? To answer this we need to know more about reproductive technologies than the newscasters tell us. Who are the developers, the promoters, the 'experts'? Who benefits – which sex, which class, which race? How much does it cost, and who is going to pay? Why is it so hard to get accurate information?

WOMEN are the targets of all this manipulation, but we are not in control; neither at the professional level as scientists or doctors, nor at the personal level as consumers. It is women who are sterilized by the thousands, made infertile by Depo-Provera or IUDs, women who are exploited as surrogate mothers. It is women who are the disappointed test-tube candidates, the unhappy biological mothers who were socially coerced into having a child, the targets of guilt hurled by anti-abortionists, the victims of back alley abortions . . . and yes, as well, the happy mothers of wanted children. At the mercy of 'benevolent' male experts. At the mercy of technologies developed by men who see women as something 'other,' 'strange,' 'not-the-norm.' Technologies that were not made by us. We doubt that they are in women's interests.

Why is it that men are so interested in tampering with women's reproductive biology? The question is intriguing. Why is the old boy's network spending millions to fund research on every aspect of the *female* reproductive system (why not the male?)? How sincere is this concern to help infertile women to *have* children?

A case in point: in vitro fertilization. Why don't the television documentaries ever tell us that only a fraction of all female infertility problems (specifically, blocked oviducts that cannot be treated surgically) can even potentially be helped by this treatment? And why do they call the babies that result from it 'test-tube babies', implying that the babies emerged from a laboratory instead of a woman's body?

Why is so little attention paid to the social and iatrogenic (medically induced) causes of infertility, and why is it so important for women to have our own 'biological' children, why this focusing on female biology as the only path to mothering?

At the same time as the new technologies make the news headlines worldwide, abortion rights – worldwide too – are under attack. In the United States, since 1976 the Hyde Amendment has restricted federal Medicaid funding for abortions. As we go to press, there are new efforts in Congress to tighten this amendment so that even when women's lives are endangered, free abortions cannot be obtained. Abortions are made less and less accessible to those most economically vulnerable: poor women, women of color and teenage women. The right of teenagers to have an abortion without parental consent is continually being threatened or denied.

The same women who are denied access to abortions are also threatened by sterilization abuse. And, in the name of 'population control,' millions of women in so-called Third World countries are injected with the contraceptive Depo-Provera, despite short and long-term side effects. 'Easy to handle,' we are told by scientists, medics, and the marketing representatives of the drug companies: 'a shot every three months will do' – and it doesn't even require the woman's consent.

So while 'man' knows how to fly to the moon and produce the nuclear bomb, we still have no safe contraceptive: the most important and needed technology for women's reproductive health. And how come contraception is still the burden of females? Apart from the condom (and vasectomy) there is no other contraceptive available for men, and this

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perpetuates the unequal responsibilities between men and women with respect to sexual intercourse.

And why, if the new technologies reflect a concern for children, are infant mortality rates so high in many parts of Western society and throughout the Third World? Among the poor, women and children suffer most; the 'feminization of poverty,' long a bitter reality in the Third World, is today hitting hard in industrialized Western societies. Why isn't more money spent to help the children already among us, the women who are mothers *now*?

Thus each new technology is born in a mire of complex social issues – issues the technologists, apparently, never stop to debate. They believe that their work is entirely objective; this conviction, in fact, is one of the cornerstones of science and technology. For every human problem there is a 'technological fix,' and the technologists guarantee that they'll find it if we don't contaminate their rational thinking with messy feelings. Technological fixes have already brought us to the point where we're wondering if the world will be around for the next generation. No matter. Scientists and technocrats still believe that a pill, a test, a computer, or whatever their next invention, can magically set us right.

But new technologies do not fall from heaven. Technology is a social institution, and its developments reflect the social and political system of which it is a part. How can a small group of white men based in industrialized countries, who support, fund, and control science and technology worldwide, convince us that they are 'objective,' that their work is politically neutral? A separation between technological developments and the world in which they are applied is unreal. It is but one world.

At this point one may ask why don't we advocate 'feminist scientists' to take an active part in developing reproductive technologies: perhaps because we feel that at this point such an attempt would be a contradiction in terms. Science, we believe, mirrors the power relations in society, and to try to add on feminist values to its current structure could only result in a superficial, if any, change. Only in a feminist society would a truly feminist science develop. So what then could we ask of feminists who work in projects

related to reproductive technologies? We think what can be done is to monitor and, if possible, expose blatant anti-woman research and actions. And above all to distribute what they learn as widely as possible to the feminist media worldwide.

When we voice doubts and remain skeptical about the new technologies, we are often thought to be siding with the conservatives. In the United States, specifically, we are seen as siding with the New Right, a wealthy coalition of groups that attack women's rights, and also support racist segregation, attacks on homosexuals, increased militarism and the suppression of trade unions. The New Right has become the champion of the most oppressive aspects of the nuclear family, and the Right to Life groups – one of its most active branches – is consistently working against all technological interference with pregnancy. They oppose in vitro fertilization and all experimentation with human eggs on the grounds that the fertilized egg is a 'person' and deserves full legal rights. They are also afraid that these technologies will destroy the 'American' family. We don't think they need to worry. The new technologies are promoted in ways that support the most conservative ideas about families. For example, in the case of in vitro fertilization, women who are eligible for the procedure have to be in a heterosexual relationship, preferably married, and must provide guarantees to the scientific fathers that they will raise their children with a father, biological or not, in residence. In vitro fertilization seems unlikely to serve the needs of single women, lesbians, poor women, etc.

As feminists, where do we stand with respect to clashes between conservative groups and biomedical research? Can we side with either group knowing that what they both share is to dismiss the *women* involved in these technologies . . . calling us 'the fetal environment'? What is the *real* message for women in all this?

When we began our research in 1982, we approached all these questions with a great deal of caution. But as we hasten to get this collection to press, we are no longer merely curious or cautious. What we have learned in the process of compiling these papers has shocked us. Profoundly. We believe these

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essays should be read as widely as possible, and *soon*. They are not the 'definitive' words on the subject, but they are a beginning of what could become an international exposure by women of the politics of reproductive technologies.

This book includes the words of women who have all been in contact with reproductive technologies in one way or another—and with the 'new' ones as well as with the 'old'—be it through choice or coercion. They all care deeply about the implications of these developments for women's economic, physical, and emotional well-being. They come from the USA, Britain, India, Australia, New Zealand and Germany.

The three of us who have worked together on this collection come from different places to this project. One of us, at 49, is the mother of a grown son, the others, at 38 and 31, have chosen to remain childfree. All of us have a background in the biological sciences. One of us is South American, one is Swiss, and one is North American, and we live in the United States and in England.

Working across the ocean has not always been easy but it has provided us with the benefit of meeting with women from different countries and cultures who are every bit as concerned about these issues as we are and who work very hard in their environments for women's well-being. Many of the authors have been working for years on the issue of reproductive technology and reproductive rights. Betty B. Hoskins and Helen B. Holmes edited a two-volume collection on this topic in 1981 (*The Custom-Made Child and Birth Control and Controlling Birth*); two others, Genoveffa Corea and Barbara Katz Rothman have forthcoming books on these topics, both due in 1984 (*The Mother Machine* and *The Products of Conception*, respectively). Some of our contributors are 'experts' in the field, others write for the first time as 'laywomen' but all of us speak out of our personal concerns and experiences.

We believe that the issues raised in this collection are important for *all* women. Because female biology is exploited in *all* spheres of *all* women's lives. Whether we want children or decide to remain childfree, or are beyond our childbearing years, and whatever is our sexual preference, we are *all* at risk of becoming *TEST-TUBE WOMEN* – at risk of being subjugated to a variety of controls: from technological

interference when we are pregnant, to legal regulations that declare the fetus and the woman bearing it to be two separate 'patients', to workplace policies that pressure women employees to become sterilized.

Despair, hopelessness, and paralysis are not, however, the message of our book. We believe that knowledge is power. Making available women's opinions, experiences and information on these pages – and they reflect many of the contradictions and difficulties of the issues – will hopefully lead women to be wary and skeptical. Maybe the next time we are faced with a male 'expert' we will pause a moment and think what it is that we ourselves want and need, rather than this person who represents the interests of a special and privileged segment of society. But individual action is not enough. We need to pool our efforts and build an international feminist network that will monitor, raise consciousness and organize around the new developments in reproductive technologies and their implications for women's lives. Hopefully this book will contribute to the creation of such a network.

Can we stop this time-bomb silently ticking into a future that – should the 'other' bomb not fall – might intensify women's oppression and increase the exploitation and domination of women to an unimaginable degree? We think there is hope. In countries all over the world, feminists are organizing against sterilization abuse, demanding the development of good contraceptives, defending a woman's choice to remain childfree, to live whatever lifestyle we choose. Without a partner if we wish so. With a man – on equal terms if we desire so. With a woman – without being harassed. Life as self-determined, full human beings.

We hope this book will contribute to women's active *resistance*. We are determined not to accept – once again – subordination on the grounds of our biology. Biology need not be destiny. Female biology, one day, might mean choice – real choice – in a world in which women's different needs, interests, and experiences are recognized and validated. Let us support each other to attain our diverse life choices, and to take the control in our own hands.

Rita Arditti
Shelley Minden

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