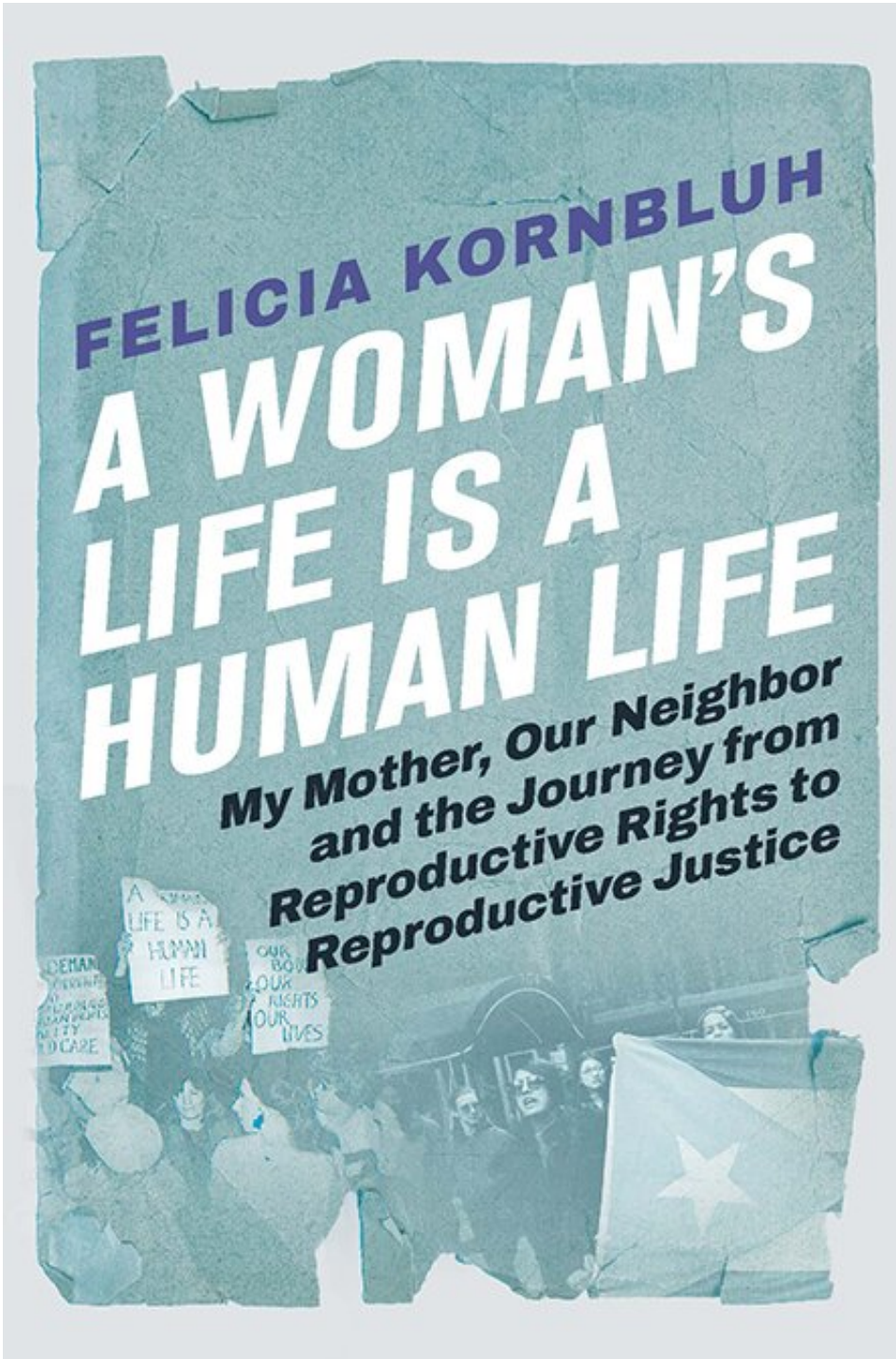


Learning from the past, fighting for the future: A history of reproductive rights

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Credit: University of Vermont

As professor of history and of gender, sexuality, and women's studies at

the University of Vermont, Dr. Felicia Kornbluh knows a great deal about the history of reproductive rights in America. But when she discovered that her mother, Beatrice Kornbluh Braun, drafted a law in 1968 that led to New York State decriminalizing abortion, she was both surprised and inspired.

This revelation, which came just before her mother passed away, motivated Kornbluh, who also has an affiliation in Jewish studies, to write "A Woman's Life is a Human Life: My Mother, Our Neighbor and the Journey from Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice" (Grove Press; January 2023).

The book details the history of the push, led by New York women and a few male legislators and advocates, for access to safe, legal, and relatively affordable abortion services and against sterilization abuse in the 1960s and 1970s. It ends by chronicling the history of the national movement for reproductive rights through the present time, complete with Kornbluh's guides for the advocacy and activism we need today.

The original focus of the project, Kornbluh reflected, was on the relationship between reproductive rights and reproductive justice—in other words, on tensions among the diverse groups that have fought for abortion access and made other reproductive health care demands. This is still a key thread of the book's narrative, but recent events also drove the author to change her emphasis.

"I think it shifted in an important way as it became clearer that something like the *Dobbs v. Jackson* opinion [the recent Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*] was coming down the pike," Kornbluh says. "So, the book was no longer just about the tension between two wings of the feminist movement. It was about how people in the past achieved enormous victories when they were faced with incredible opposition and a legal situation that seemed overwhelming."

The activists' tenacity is the number-one thing that Kornbluh says she took away from researching and writing about this movement. "They tried everything: the [federal courts](#), the legislature, grassroots action, lobbying, [public education](#), the clergy," she says.

As she delved into the project, Kornbluh discovered a second personal connection to this part of history. "My family's next-door neighbor for about a decade in New York City was this amazing Puerto Rican doctor named Helen Rodríguez-Trías," she says. A leading pediatrician and public-health expert, Rodríguez-Trías cofounded the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA).

"CESA was the first group in U.S. history that was dedicated to fighting coercive or abusive sterilization in which mostly women of color and working-class women were influenced into having unnecessary sterilization surgeries," Kornbluh explains. Later CESA blended into the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA).

The title of Kornbluh's new book, "A Woman's Life is a Human Life," is a slogan that was created by Maxine Wolfe, a member of CARASA. "To her and some of the other people in CARASA," Kornbluh says, "it was very important to counter the idea that the only human life that mattered was the life of the fetus or the embryo. A woman's life is ALSO a human life—and I think they would say that, when there's conflict, that life should trump the nascent life in the uterus."

Kornbluh says she unexpectedly became passionate about the role of religion in the movement while working on the project. "Usually when we talk about people of faith and religious traditions around the issue of abortion," she says, "we only focus on the anti-abortion or pro-life side of things. But I found that there's a much richer and more complicated story. A whole range of people of faith were involved in this issue from

a variety of different perspectives, including many Jewish women like my mother."

The Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, which was the most important national referral network for people to find safe (if often illegal) abortion services before *Roe v. Wade*, was created in large part by liberal Protestants. "Many of these clergy members, both Protestants and Jews, had been involved in the Black Civil Rights movement and then shifted over to the abortion movement. I was very moved by that."

Kornbluh cautions that we can also learn a lot from mistakes made in this movement. "I don't want to make it sound like the people I'm writing about were perfect," she says. "I also tell stories about some of their lapses or errors around issues of race and what's called 'population control.' I think it's worthwhile to spend some time confronting some of these problematic aspects."

Many times in the last five years Kornbluh has felt that her mother, in a sense, gave her the book. "She had organized her papers with my older sister's help over the last several years of her life and had written, 'This is for Felicia' on some things, including a letter in which she indicated that she had had a D&C [dilation and curettage procedure, used in cases of abortion and miscarriage], which I think was probably an abortion," she says.

There were many moments like that, ones in which Kornbluh felt her mother was directing her toward the project. "She knew that I was a women's historian and a historian of law and public policy in the modern United States, and she never insisted that I wrap my head around her role in the history that I teach and write about. But I think she did ultimately want me to know that she had done this significant thing."

Kornbluh sees the kind of grassroots activism employed by these early

[reproductive rights](#) activists still in use today, but notes that there's more that can be done. "CARASA," the organization that first joined the issue of abortion access with that of sterilization abuse, "also wanted national health care for everyone and childcare that would offer a wider range of options," she says. "They wanted decent wages and protection for women workers, for all workers.

And CESA," the earlier organization that Rodríguez-Trías helped lead, "was fighting for independence for Puerto Rico while they were fighting against Puerto Ricans being pressured into sterilization surgeries. I think there's a lot we can learn from the breadth of their vision."

The current level of polarization in the United States might make it seem almost impossible to achieve the kinds of successes chronicled in "A Woman's Life is a Human Life." But Kornbluh believes people can learn from the history presented in the book and use it as a guide to change.

"We can learn a lot from their toughness," she says of all the people she writes about in the book. And maybe we aren't as different from them as we might think. "In recent electoral politics," Kornbluh reflects, "people who were inspired by these issues have been really out there, not leaving anything on the field, and I love them for that."

Provided by University of Vermont

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