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Abortion needs defense, not apology

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This essay, which reflects on the killing Sunday of Dr. George Tiller in Wichita, Kan., was written by staff members of Civil Liberties and Public Policy and the Population and Development programs at Hampshire College in Amherst. The authors are listed at the end.

The murder of Dr. George Tiller instills an incredible sadness and fear. We mourn the loss of our colleague; the loss of a brave doctor who refused to validate those who opposed his sense of justice; the loss of a father, a grandfather, a husband and a friend.

We are profoundly saddened that we live in a society where violence is a daily lived experience, where our family, friends and allies are afraid, where medical decisions between our health care providers and ourselves are subjected to public violence.

Fear is paralyzing and isolating during a time when we need action and each other. Now is the time to continue forward with a sense of justice, accountability, and support.

The anti-abortion movement bolsters violent language and violent organizing tactics. While this movement did not pull the trigger that murdered Dr. Tiller, it normalized the dehumanization of abortion providers, helped along by right-wing talk show hosts like Bill O'Reilly. It fostered a violent context and is shirking responsibility for supporters who have taken their call to arms literally.

Commentators on both sides have said that such violence is responding to our recent successes, part of a backlash. We don't agree. This kind of reasoning both blames the victim and accepts that violence is an inevitable response and an accepted part of our society. We are no longer talking to each other as human beings about our differences; we have taken the issue of abortion out of the context of our lives as young women, mothers, and members of our community.

President Barack Obama and his top cabinet members, including Secretary of State Clinton, perpetuate a sense of neutrality and apology around abortion that leaves abortion providers, advocates and patients vulnerable. We are calling for a new dialogue around abortion. Politicians and pundits who chime, "Safe, legal, and rare," leave abortion stigmatized and those who have abortions ostracized. Dr. Tiller said, "Women and families are intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and ethically competent to struggle with complex health issues - including abortion - and come to decisions that are appropriate for themselves."

Violence will not stop until people in power support safe and accessible health care, including abortion, while simultaneously protecting our self-determination and respect.

The need for abortion will not go away. Without access to safe abortion, women's health and lives are at risk.

While the violent murder of Dr. Tiller in his religious sanctuary is a tragedy that we are mourning, his career and his desire to provide abortion as part of comprehensive health care is not a tragedy.

Relying on increased policing and government protections can only get us so far. Now more than ever, it is our responsibility to create communities where the word abortion is not whispered, where comprehensive health care provision and coverage includes all reproductive health services, and where we are not organizing from a sense of fear but from a commitment to justice.

This essay was written by Lani Blechman, Ellen Gattozzi, Corinna Yazbek, Mia Kim Sullivan, Elizabeth Barajas-Román and Betsy Hartmann.

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