

Consenting Fathers

'Project Genesis', a new Norwegian campaign, wants to stop women being able to have abortions without the father's consent. Robert Hera, the Project's founder, is taking a case to the European Court to establish his paternal rights.

Hera's relationship broke down irretrievably when his partner was three months pregnant: she had an abortion. He wants to contest her right to make the decision alone and, having exhausted the Norwegian courts, is taking his case under Articles 2,3 and 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights to establish that the aborted foetus had a 'right to life', was 'tortured' and that as a prospective father, he has a right to 'private... and family life'.

If successful the case would make it harder for women to have legal abortions in Europe. It also raises important issues about consent. In the UK there is no legal obligation to get the spouse's consent, although DHSS guidelines state 'the consent of the partner as well as of the prospective patient should be obtained'.

Take marital rape: could a husband force his wife to give birth against her will by withholding his consent? Instead of giving medical advice, doctors could become arbiters in marital conflict.

The trend exemplified by Hera's case, against a woman's right to choose and towards a paternalist intervention, could have serious consequences for women's independence. Certainly, women's rights are under attack: especially if men are to be given sweeping legal powers to veto their partner's abortion rights by overturning their decisions.

Project Genesis assumes women cannot make judgments and that each child has two responsible parents. It raises serious issues about who controls and owns women's bodies. The organisers are planning an international conference to consider the whole issue of when life begins. •

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