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Abortion in France: Private Letters and Public Debates, 1973-1975

Cynthia Cardona

The *loi Veil* that legalized abortion in 1975, marked a momentous victory for French feminists.¹ Abortion was legal for the first time since it was made punishable in the 1810 Penal Code. The preceding two years set the stage for this social and political victory but are also key because Feminist challenged women's situation in society and asserted that 'the personal is political.'² These two years saw an increase in reproductive rights organizations interested in documenting, publicizing, and preserving women's experiences and defying anti-abortion laws. Their efforts during these two critical years represented a battle over changing sexual norms and transformed what could be discussed within the context of politics. French men and women challenged attitudes about sex and sexuality, the family, the role of health professionals and medicine in the lives of women, and patriarchal structures. The feminist campaign for abortion rights argued that the 1920 law prohibiting abortion was outdated and failed to reflect the reality of women's lives and that women had a right to control their own bodies.

Founded in 1973 the *Mouvement pour la Liberté de l'Avortement et de la Contraception* (MLAC) bridged the gap between the law and the lives of women by providing women with the information they needed to prevent unwanted pregnancies and by performing safe, medical abortions despite the fact that this procedure was still illegal. The organization set up centers in major cities and along with its social purposes, promoted the liberalization of abortion law in France. Roughly 104 letters preserved in the MLAC archives testify to the radical nature of

¹ Following the parliamentary debates of November and December 1974, both the French National Assembly and Senate passed loi n°75-17 making abortion legal starting January 17, 1975.

² Claire Duchon, *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterrand*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 44.

MLAC. These letters represent women from all walks of life and with very different family situations, bound by the need for information and support as they sought to end an unwanted pregnancy. The letters show the unevenness in the way French women and men understood sex and sexuality and its place in French politics and society and provide a window into the often anxious and desperate situations that drove women to seek abortions.

The *Centre d'Archives du Feminism* at the University of Angers, France preserved the letters but they have not been used in any previous study. MLAC responded to these letters and noted the date of the response but left few clues as to what that response was or how it was received. Although 104 letters cannot provide a complete picture of abortion in France, they provide an invaluable insight into the lives of women who sought abortions during a period in which feminists were radically trying to change abortion law. These stories fit into histories of feminism, feminist organizations, and changing sexual mores in France.³

In their account of the organizations creation MLAC stated that despite having clear political goals “We encountered two levels of difficulties in implementing these [political] ideas.”⁴ Feminists in the 1970s “began to develop a new completely different theory of oppression and exploitation, which placed gender squarely in the center of their analysis.”⁵

³ Christine Bard, and Janine Mossuz-Lavau. *Le planning familial: histoire et mémoire, 1956-2006*, (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007). Claire Duchén, *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterrand*, (Boston: Routled & Kegan Paul, 1986). Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial. *Liberté, sexualités, féminisme: 50 ans de combat du Planning pour les droits des femmes*, (Paris: Découverte, 2006). Christine Bard, *Les Femmes Dans la Société Française au 20e Siècle*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2001). Sylvie Chaperon, *Les Années Beauvoir 1945-1970*, (Paris: Fayard, 2000). Janine Moussuz-Lavau, *Les Lois de L'Amour: Les Politiques de la Sexualité en France (1950-1990)*, (Paris: Documents Payot, 1991). Anne-Marie Sohn, *Chrydsides: Femmes Dans la Vie Privée (XIXe-XXe siècles)* vol. I and II, (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 1996). ---, *Du Première Baiser à L'Alcôve: La Sexualité des Français au Quotidien, 1850-1950*, (France: Aubier, 1996).

⁴ CAF, Archives du MLAC, 10AF1-9.

⁵ Duchén, *Feminism in France*, 8.

Within this new framework MLAC wanted to provide a solution that directly addressed the needs of those most affected: poor women. As a socio-political organization with clear political goals, interacting with women seeking abortions presented a new unanticipated set of problems for the organization. Among them was the difficulty in promoting their political objectives to the women they served. Part of the problem lay in MLAC militants expressing political convictions and trying to mobilize women who did not consider themselves political without manipulating them. It was a delicate balance because they were talking to women in often-precarious mental and emotional states. Militants tried to solve this problem by presenting the personal problems of women to both the larger public and women coming into MLAC centers, in the context of a larger struggle for abortion rights and female liberation. MLAC could not solve the larger problem, only they [individual women] could, by their participation in the movement.⁶ After that, it was up to the individual women to participate or not. The second problem encountered by MLAC was the tendency to feel responsible for the women seeking abortions.⁷ In the letters written to MLAC, women often describe dramatic situations. It is no wonder that those working at MLAC centers would relate and bond with these women. The extreme situations of some of these women helped reinforce the political convictions of militants. For the organization, the larger struggle required solving the legal and political situation to make abortion legal; once this happened the lives of all French women would improve, including those coming to them for help. In order for this to happen they needed to make women aware of the institutional problem and make them allies in the cause. However, the letters to MLAC reveal that things were not always clear-cut and often, the personal situation of the women

⁶ CAF, Archives du MLAC, 10AF1-9.

⁷ Ibid.

took precedence. Due to the precarious situation in which many women found themselves in, they could not publicly acknowledge their abortion or admit the need for an abortion. MLAC did not deny these women services and members of MLAC often went out of their way to help these women. However, their individual stories reinforced the idea that abortion should be a right.

An analysis of the geography and the demography of the letters shows that the stereotype of the urban, single, unmarried, young woman seeking an abortion was not always true and in fact was false for most of the women writing to MLAC. The letters sent to the main MLAC center in Paris came from all over France and indeed, from all over the world. Of the 102 with identifiable addresses eleven came directly from Paris and eight from the immediate vicinity of Paris. However, the geographical origin of the letters reveals women writing from a wide range of French towns. Most do come from medium to small towns with only a few from cities. This is not surprising considering that MLAC opened centers in most major French cities. Most of the women writing to MLAC did not state their age but of those that did six are between the ages of fifteen and twenty, sixteen were in their twenties, five were in their thirties, and three were in their forties. With these numbers it is hard to tell but based on the hints from the rest of the letters⁸ we can say that the typical woman writing to MLAC is within the twenty to forty age range and already has children. Therefore, the image of the “salope” or whore, sometimes evoked in the media was false for the women writing to MLAC.

The rapid growth of the organization and the speed at which women from all over France and its neighbors contacted MLAC shows the intense demand for the types of services that MLAC was providing, among them: on-site abortions and collective trips abroad to attain

⁸ There are letters that do not indicate age but do mention their status as student or at the early stages of their careers.

abortions. In part due to their political goals and efforts to be visible MLAC was often in the news and several letters mentioned having found the organization through an article in a magazine or newspaper. Several mention coming across a pamphlet, but word of mouth was the main method of finding MLAC. Most of the MLAC correspondence came from women who want to know the address or telephone of the nearest MLAC center to them or they want to know about the trips abroad (to London and Amsterdam) for abortions. In fact trips abroad began soon after the creation of the organization in April 1973. From the start MLAC would give out addresses in England where women with advanced pregnancies could attain legal abortions.⁹ From the month of June 1973, the first collective trips began to England and the Netherlands. At first women organized these trips themselves, not MLAC.¹⁰ In August of 1973 MLAC began sending representatives on the trips, then organized them themselves, until November 12, 1974 when they stopped due to the impending legalization of abortions.¹¹

MLAC openly practiced on-site abortions with the purpose of providing a much needed service to women and to make a public statement that abortions were common in France but unfairly targeted working-class women. On-site abortions at MLAC centers were made possible by a newly available abortion technique that became known as the Karman method. The Karman or aspiration method was used during the first weeks of pregnancy and became popular in the 1970s because of its promotion by Californian doctor, Harvey Karman. The method consisted of suctioning the contents of the uterus with a cannula and syringe.¹² This revolutionized the way abortions were performed because it was simple and easy to learn, did not require anesthesia, and

⁹ Great Britain legalized abortion in 1967.

¹⁰ Centre d'Archives du Feminism, Fonds MLAC, 10 AF 1.

¹¹ CAF, Fonds MLAC, 10 AF 1.

¹² Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, "Histoire(s) du MLAC (1973-1975)," *CLIO: Histoires, femmes et sociétés*, no. 18 (2003).

did not have to be performed in a hospital.¹³ As a result anyone could be trained to perform the method and in fact militants in the abortion movement and MLAC members were trained to perform the method. For some militants this was hugely important because it put women in full control of their bodies and did not need to involve male doctors. Female doctors were still a minority in France and as a result the more radical women within the French feminist movement argued that the medicalization of women's bodies was inconsistent with feminist goals because it continued to place men in control of women's bodies. However, for the MLAC leadership in Paris this was a secondary problem to the need for safe medical abortions.

Women in 1974 wrote to MLAC to ask about the Karman method, which suggests that despite it being new to France it was rapidly gaining traction. Six women specifically asked about the Karman method. One of the letters from Spain wrote: "A few months ago I read in a French magazine about the Karman abortion method, at present I find myself in the situation of having to abort and I write to you to see if you can direct me somewhere; I am a student, I live in Barcelona and I am a bit pressed since I had my first missed period January 1st."¹⁴ There is also a letter from a woman in Italy who wanted to travel to France to see the method performed, as very little information is available on the method, in Italy.¹⁵ While the Karman method had been developed in the 1950s it had only reached France, in a significant way, in 1972, but became popular very quickly. This is at least in part due to the intensity of the abortion campaign and the interest of feminists, the medical profession, and the public in general on information regarding abortions.

¹³ Zancarini-Fournel, "Histoire(s) du MLAC (1973-1975)."

¹⁴ CAF, Fonds MLAC, 10 AF 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

While there was a wide and intense interest on the topic of abortion, many letters showed a lack of sexual education, but also an awareness of this. Contraception had been legalized in France in 1967 but there had been no effort of the part of the French government to institutionalize a sexual education program. Feminist organizations such as the *Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial* (MFPF) and MLAC were among the few resources available to French men and women. Letters to MLAC do show an increasing awareness of new contraception techniques and a lack of access to them that led to unwanted pregnancies and a desire for abortions. A male letter writer explained his situation to MLAC:

I write to you in order to ask for some information that I hope will never be useful to me. I am twenty years old, a public school teacher for not very long, and I have had sexual relations with the young woman that will become my wife, although I was unable to persuade her to take the pill. I would therefore like to know in what measure it is possible at the moment I write to you for a young woman of eighteen, to have an abortion without medical assistance, in order to fix what is known as a 'youthful mistake'... aware of the problems that it poses for having thought about it too long, and convinced that it is a last resort rather than a panacea, I would be greatly obliged, if it would be possible to respond quickly to this correspondence. Know however that for the moment, my problem is nothing more than worries and apprehensions. However only the advice of competent people can help to clarify the situation.¹⁶

This is one of numerous letters from men and women who were sexually active, aware of at least one contraceptive method, but anticipated needing an abortion. There were also letters from women who think that they might be pregnant. One in particular wrote three letters to MLAC first asking for information on where to get an abortion, then saying she was not pregnant after all, and a third saying she was now pregnant and needed an abortion.¹⁷ There is a clear unevenness in the knowledge and use of contraception amongst French men and women.

The women who were writing to MLAC gave various reasons for why they wanted to have an abortion. They ranged from financial, medical and personal concerns. A 25 year old

¹⁶ CAF, Fonds MLAC, 10 AF 4.

¹⁷Ibid.

woman and mother of three children under the age of five, wrote to MLAC explaining: “I am pregnant again and this pregnancy is not at all welcomed.”¹⁸ She states that she was on the pill but for medical reasons stopped taking it. Her husband was a driver who worked the 3:00 am shift and needed his rest; something that a fourth child would make impossible.¹⁹

A woman in a desperate situation told MLAC that she did not know how to solve her problem. She was pregnant, without money, and wanted an abortion. She hesitated in contacting MLAC because she knew that without money she cannot do anything. She was about to start working five days after the letter was written and could pay later. In explaining her reasons she writes: “ ... Know that I am only 19 years old, that I do not have the means or the desire to raise a child, that I can not expect any help from my family and will absolutely not be marrying.”²⁰ The women who describe their situations as pressing did not do so because of personal moral beliefs. Often they did state that their families cannot know and would not help, but they did not express concern over the moral implications of an abortion. They were however worried about what those around them would think. Some women asked that a reply be written somewhere other than their own address. They also tended to be very specific with regards to the date and time that they can have an abortion, if it was to remain a secret and not interfere with work or school. One woman wrote: “I can not ask my parents for help, they are against abortion for religious reasons. What to do? I do not know. Might you have options for me? I have very limited freedom, right now I work for an uncle and can not absent myself without motive. I therefore only have the weekend of August 15 free. I am at the height of despair and wait with

¹⁸ CAF, Fonds MLAC, 10 AF 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

impatience a response from your organization. Whatever you can do for me, I thank you in advance.”²¹

While some of the women have had a limited education, a majority of them write well and use appropriate grammar and a more advanced vocabulary. Those that appear to have less education also have more questions with regards to contraception. In fact, the handful of women who were not sure if they were pregnant all wrote informally, their handwriting is harder to read, and their grammar and spelling is inconsistent.

The women writing to MLAC tended to have financial difficulties and had limited resources available to them. Feminists made a case in legal courts and in public forums that abortions were common in France and that the law unfairly targeted women without the means to pay for an illegal abortion in France or to travel abroad for a legal abortion. There were exactly the women writing to MLAC for help. For many of them, MLAC was their only source for a safe medical abortion. Their stories give a very personal dimension to a legal and political public battle.

²¹ CAF, Fonds MLAC, 10 AF 4.