

CCRF California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom

A Woman Knows Best:
A Framework for Reproductive Rights

**An Introductory Movie and Advocate Toolkit
by the California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom**



* www.awomanknowsbest.org *

The Toolkit:

- The Vision and Values Statement
- The Vision and Values Statement Unpacked
- Why this Framework and How We Got Here
- Talking Points for Responding to Frequently Asked Questions
- Ten Ways to Apply the Framework

Other Resources Included:

- An HTML Version of the Introductory Movie
- A Shockwave File of the Movie (for display online)
- A Powerpoint Training on Using the Framework

*All these materials are also available online at
www.awomanknows.org
and by request from requests@awomanknows.org*

**A Woman Knows Best:
The Vision and Values Statement of
The California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom**

A woman knows what's best for herself and her family.

CCRF understands that women's strength is rooted in their access to education, financial security, safety from violence and the authority to make responsible personal and family decisions.

From puberty through retirement and beyond, women have different and unique personal health needs. For more than 30 years CCRF has consistently advocated for policies to meet those unique needs.

CCRF is a coalition of more than 40 organizations dedicated to ensuring that every woman has the community support and access to make informed personal decisions about her physical and sexual health and well-being, including comprehensive health care, healthy pregnancies, and safely preventing and ending pregnancies.

CCRF believes that a democratic society has the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the health and safety of its people.

The “A Woman Knows Best” Framework for Reproductive Rights:

The Vision and Values Statement Unpacked

By The California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom

Overview

In recent years, reproductive rights advocates have recognized the need to reframe “choice” in order to resonate better with young women, women of color and other important stakeholders who have traditionally felt disconnected or disenfranchised from the reproductive rights movement.

To address this challenge, the California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom for the past three years has done extensive research, including conducting eight focus groups with women under 40 from different ethnic, political and geographic backgrounds across the state. Our goal was to develop a new, alternative framework for reproductive rights that would be inclusive and relevant to what women themselves told us matters most to them in their lives. Below we present the framework and provide a detailed rationale for the *why’s* behind each message.

We encourage reproductive rights advocates to use this framework to broaden popular support for women’s reproductive rights and health.

A Woman Knows Best

1. “A woman knows what’s best for herself and her family.”

- A woman’s strength: The most powerful theme that emerged from our public opinion research was the emphasis women place on having *control* and *power* over their own lives. Women think of themselves as independent, strong, tough, and determined. They feel confident in their decisions and want the opportunity to make decisions that impact their lives.

Most of the women we spoke with say that women have more power than men when it comes to health issues or issues involving children because they have the responsibility for their families’ health as well as their own. They also believe the decision to have children is a personal decision for each woman and each family. They do not think society should have a say in this decision-making process.

- “Knowledge” in place of “choice”: While most women support a woman’s right to choose, the term “pro-choice” has limitations. Although for some women, choice is a positive and emotional phrase, some perceive it as too “political” while others see the term as impersonal (“Seems like no feelings or emotions are attached to it” was one woman’s response). Others find “choice” inadequate to describe a decision often made out of necessity.

Like “choice,” the new framework is grounded in a woman’s strength and authority. The key difference, however, is that, in the new frame, that strength is more firmly rooted within existing and deeply held values and assumptions about *why* a woman has authority and control over health decisions for herself and her family. It’s what women themselves say is their experience. And it appeals to folk wisdom about the nurturing aspects of the feminine (as in “mother knows best”). By placing the emphasis on “knowledge” over “choice,” we place the emphasis on women’s experience and wisdom, rather than on *the act of choosing*.

- Reclaim “family values”: Opponents of reproductive rights have been skilled at using so-called family values to validate their cause. Now it’s our turn. “Women know best” stems organically from society’s deeply held trust in the maternal and the wisdom and responsibility that comes with it. Women make decisions based on caring for their families and in the interest of their families.

2. “Women’s strength is rooted in their access to education, financial security, safety from violence and the authority to make responsible personal and family decisions.”

The women in our focus groups, like all women, have a lot going on in their lives. Before we can begin to talk about reproductive rights and health, we have to meet them where they are and speak to what they say are their life priorities. In other words, women don’t live their lives in “issue silos.” This message couches reproductive rights within a *holistic* understanding of women’s lives and the things they say matter to them most.

While the women we talked to overall feel that women should have the right to choose, they emphasized that it is a very serious and difficult decision that not all women make responsibly. This message addresses this concern by reinforcing the forces in a woman’s life that enable her to make decisions responsibly. It also positions decisions about whether or not to have children within the context of other personal and family concerns and responsibilities. Women identified the following as their top four life priorities:

1. Education: viewed as the critical stepping stone for their lives and their children’s lives.
2. Security: evokes money, health, career, feeling safe, peace of mind, stability.
3. Family: evokes extremely positive images of health, love, communication, support, and children.
4. Personal decision-making also resonated strongly, conjuring positive associations: “deciding for yourself”; “weighing my options and then choosing a course”; and “in control about every aspect of my life.”

3. “From puberty through retirement and beyond, women have different and unique personal health needs. Policies must be crafted to meet those unique needs.”

This message provides further supporting justification for the primary message that “women know best.” We know best for ourselves because a woman’s life is layered and complex in ways only she knows and understands.

This message also serves to contextualize, rather than isolate, the decision over when and when not to have children within a broad range of health decisions that can occur over a woman’s lifetime. This is in line with how women told us they perceive the issue.

4. “Every woman should have community support and access to make informed personal decisions about her physical and sexual health and well-being, including comprehensive health care, healthy pregnancies, and safely preventing and ending pregnancies.”

Note the emphasis on *overall* health, safety and well-being instead of on the narrow right to an abortion. This message re-contextualizes choice to reflect how women told us they view the decision – NOT as an isolated incident but one they make while weighing a host of other life factors including their health, their family, their community and their faith. Also, it’s not enough to talk about having choice; we must frame this issue in the broader context of healthcare overall and other pregnancy-related concerns, beyond just abortion, that are high priorities for women.

This message acknowledges that legal protection for abortion means very little unless there is community support for women to act on their decisions without fear and without having to face significant barriers. Women need to be able to rely on their communities to support them whether or not they decide to have children. Women need more than the right to reproductive services: they need easy access to health facilities in their communities.

5. “A democratic society has the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the health and safety of its people.”

This message speaks to the desired role of government and society to support women in their decision-making about their own health and the health of their families. Good government is positioned much like a good parent: nurturing and protective, but also trusting in good faith and respectful of independent, thoughtful decision-making by its people.

The role of government and society is threefold:

1. Respect: The kind of government and society we want empowers people to make decisions on their own. It does not dictate these decisions, nor does it interfere with our right to make decisions for ourselves. “Respect” covers much of the same ground as “privacy,” with an important distinction: Rather than focus on the

combative relationship between government and women over women's bodies, the issue is reframed to focus on the healthy relationship between citizens of society and their government when both entities are abiding by the principles we value in a democracy.

2. Protect: Government and society has an obligation to protect the health and safety of its people. Women told us they view a woman's decision about when or when not to have children as fully in line with women's equality and human rights. Government must safeguard those rights. The language here reflects these positive associations.
3. Fulfill: "Fulfill" is the "action push" on the government to proactively do its part to ensure people's health by creating the conditions under which people's decisions about their health are supported. It is also the action push on us as people who value the principles of a democratic society. We must work to build a society in which women have the respect, support, and access they need to make personal, responsible decisions for themselves and their families.

The “A Woman Knows Best” Framework for Reproductive Rights:

Why This Framework and How We Got Here Responses to Frequently Asked Questions

By the California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom

CCRF began developing the “A Woman Knows Best” framework with the aim of gaining new supporters and expanding the reproductive freedom movement. The experience of many of our members told us that the existing conceptual framework of the pro-choice movement wasn’t working to motivate the next generation of potential supporters, especially young women and women of color. Our goal was to develop a new, alternative framework about reproductive health and rights that would be inclusive and relevant to what women themselves told us matters most to them.

By “framework” we mean a conceptual structure for how we think about issues. In other words, a statement that taps the universe of values, associations and other powerful and pre-existing ideas that people use to understand the world. Effective frameworks or “frames” are those that enable advocates to set the terms of the debate. With the right persuasive frame, we can open the door to new constituents, influence decision-makers and advance our cause.

To develop this new framework, we began by conducting a literature review of the field as well as interviews with colleagues, peers, friends and family. In particular, we conducted interviews with women of color leaders, both within and beyond California, to discuss the language and themes they use when they talk to their members and constituents about reproductive health and rights. Next, in 2004 we conducted a series of focus groups with young women and women of color in California. This research strengthened our conviction that a new frame for “choice” was necessary. Based on our research findings, we have developed a new approach for talking about reproductive freedom that:

- Reframes reproductive freedom and sexual health in ways that meet women where they are on the issues and reflects their lives.
- Speaks more directly to the concerns and experience of women of color and young women.
- Reframes reproductive freedom as essential to advancing human rights and social justice, not just a “women’s issue” or personal privacy issue.

Below is our effort to help clarify how we developed the “A Woman Knows Best” frame and our suggestions for how organizers can use the frame to advance their own work in women’s health, social justice and other related fields.

1. How were focus group participants chosen? Is this frame designed to engage particular communities more than others? If so, why?

Our driving motive in creating this framework was to provide reproductive rights advocates with a new conceptual tool to help them make their issue resonate with people and communities who are potential supporters but who still consider themselves “in the middle” on matters of reproductive choice.

Focus group participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- They belonged to the “muddled middle” on abortion access, with views ranging from pro-legalizing abortion with regulations to anti-legalization with some exceptions.
- They were members of communities of color (African American, Asian American and Latina).
- They were under the age of 40.
- As a group, they represented a range of educational backgrounds, family structures and political party affiliations.
- They were representative of their communities insofar as they were not professional organizers or activists.
- They lived in the Oakland, Los Angeles, or Fresno areas.

While the frame was developed based on our analysis of this targeted demographic’s viewpoints on reproductive rights, health and other related issues, it is also designed to resonate with the broadest group of women possible.

2. If we use this framework, do we have to stick to the script, so to speak?

We offer this frame to advocates of reproductive rights, women’s health, social justice and others as a conceptual tool, not to set the agenda for any movement. In this spirit, the frame and its messages are “open-source”: we invite people who find it useful to adapt it as they see fit to serve organizational or movement-building goals. We hope that the frame will serve as a springboard for conversation, innovation and progress toward social change.

3. The frame is long. How do we introduce people to it if we only have one sound byte to do so?

We presented the frame with supporting language to provide you the back-up rationale for the central, take-away message: “Women know what’s best for themselves and their families.” That singular phrase is meant to work as a sound byte. All other supporting messages flow from that central tenet, and are anchored to the sentiment we heard over and over in focus groups: women think of themselves as independent, strong, tough, and determined, and want to be treated that way.

4. Does this framework for talking to men?

While the frame was created with women in mind as the primary target audience, it can certainly also speak to men. The frame asks men to recognize the knowledge and decision-making power of the women in their families and society. It calls on men to support, respect, and help fulfill women's needs and abilities – as mothers, partners, and daughters – to make responsible personal decisions.

5. How are you disseminating the framework?

The framework and an accompanying “training kit” are available online at the CCRF home page, www.cacrf.org. CCRF members are also introducing the frame to reproductive rights advocates, women's organizations, social justice organizations and others at conferences and speaking engagements, through our email networks and other community-based venues.

Through this initial outreach, we expect that the frame will catch on and travel, as people pass it to friends and colleagues, and we are still considering plans for a broader campaign.

6. This framework seems like its own thing. How can we use it for specific campaigns so it doesn't distract from our campaign goals?

The framework is meant as a conceptual tool and a broad umbrella to guide discussions about reproductive rights issues so you meet people – specifically people who are in the middle – where they are.

When you speak to people from within a frame they are more likely to identify with, they are more likely to listen to what you have to say about specific issues. In this regard, the frame is not meant to stand alone as its own issue, but should act as a guide to help you hone your argument in support of specific reproductive rights issues and campaigns, whether it has to do with access to contraceptives, choice, parental notification, or other issues that matter to women. or example:

- An advocate working on behalf of broader healthcare issues for women of color could leverage the framework to put the patient in a more central and empowering place when it comes to decisions made about her health.
- An advocate for girls' rights can use the frame to advance the notion that policies aimed at governing how girls live their lives should take into account each girl's power over her destiny, whether it's about her health or her future prospects in life.
- A community activist working on a living wage campaign can use the framework to talk about how affordable and accessible healthcare is an essential piece of her economic justice effort.

7. How can I make practical use of this new framework to build coalitions?

The “A Woman Knows Best” frame was explicitly created to speak to a broad yet uniting set of values as they relate to a range of issues including reproductive rights, women’s rights, economic justice, human rights, healthcare access, and other social justice issues. The hope is that organizers and advocates can use the frame to identify common areas of interest to build their base and move decision-makers.

Using the framework in your communications and campaign materials can help you position yourself as a natural partner to other groups or deepen your alliances with groups you already work with. Adapting things like press releases, campaign platforms, letters to constituents, and even mission statements using “A Woman Knows Best” can help you make common cause with other organizations. You could also use the frame to reach out and forge new alliances. For example, you could:

- Approach another group about to issuing a joint statements on an issue that you both care about, and use the new framework to shape the statement;
- Co-author editorials or letters to the editor that use the new framework;
- Feature the frame and some of the other groups that use it in your organization’s newsletter; and
- Share the framework and training materials with other groups with a note about how to bring out the connections between your different fields.

8. What does the new framework mean for the women’s movement, more broadly?

The women’s movement, with the reproductive rights movement, is evolving in its effort to be more inclusive and responsive to the concerns of women from diverse backgrounds, of all ages. We hope this framework can be a useful tool for women advocates working on all issues to find common cause in each other’s work. We also hope this framework can help bridge the common interests of the human rights and women’s movements by articulating shared goals and concerns.

Together, we can grow and expand an active constituency to take action and build a stronger, more vigorous base of support for the issues that women say matter to them most.

The “A Woman Knows Best” Framework for Reproductive Rights: Talking Points for Responding to Frequently Asked Questions

By the California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom

Suggested Answers to Likely Questions From Allies:

1. Why shy away from the word ‘abortion’? We should take the issue head on.

We are meeting women where they’re at. When we talked to women about choice and abortion, they told us that they don’t view the issue in isolation but rather in the context of other health and life priorities. In that context, abortion is not always a “choice”: it is often a necessity. Also, to many, the word “abortion” connotes that a desired mission has failed, which is not an ideal frame.

“Safely preventing and ending pregnancies” is a more inclusive and accurate reflection of how women approach these difficult decisions. “Choice” alone does not do enough to connect with women where they are. “Choice” is also seen to underplay the difficulty of the decision. Women have different needs at different stages of their lives and make their decisions accordingly. This is new terminology, yes, but we’ve found that it resonates better with women’s own lives and experiences.

2. Isn’t the issue really about a woman’s right to choose and society’s obligation to protect that right?

Yes, fundamentally it’s about a woman’s right to make personal, responsible decisions for herself. But in our research talking directly with women, we found that many of them found the traditional pro-choice rhetoric to be too impersonal and “political.” It simply didn’t speak to their lives and experiences.

Our new messaging is an effort to bridge that divide. The new frame remains firmly grounded in a woman’s strength and authority to make personal decisions. But we’ve placed the emphasis on women’s wisdom (“a woman knows best about what’s right for her health and her family’s health”) rather than on the act of choosing itself.

This is about society’s obligation to protect, respect, and fulfill women’s decisions. We don’t want the government or society to simply leave women alone. We want our government and our society to assist women with real options and to deliver what women know they need.

3. Isn't the problem that people don't trust women to make choices in the first place – therefore, why would people believe that women know best?

Society trusts women to make responsible decisions for themselves and their families. Women are often the primary decision-makers when it comes to their family's health and well-being. Women make decisions about their family's childcare, schooling, nutrition, safety, and more. Our frame simply reinforces this existing belief and value in women's responsible decision-making and applies it to the issue of reproductive health and rights.

4. Why shy away from the privacy argument? Isn't it enough to say that women have the right to make their own choices, good or bad, about their own bodies?

We are actually *expanding* on that right by saying society should do more than respect women's privacy. Privacy is important, but privacy alone is not enough. Society must also give women support and access to the care and services they need to protect their health and make responsible decisions for their families.

Privacy, support, and access have to go together. Society must ensure that women of all ages can talk with doctors, make decisions, and receive services for themselves and their families with complete safety and confidentiality.

5. By saying "women know best," aren't you just falling back on, and even reinforcing, gender stereotypes?

It is simply a fact that, in our society, women are traditionally the ones entrusted with making responsible decisions about their health and the health of their families. In all kinds of families and in a variety of roles – as mother, daughter, sister, partner, aunt, grandmother, and more – women are responsible for making many personal and family decisions, sometimes with support from others and sometimes on their own. Our frame reflects the importance women have in their families' lives and reinforces their wisdom and responsibility in making decisions about health, safety, finances and other central family issues.

6. With this new frame, aren't you retreating from the progress we've made on this issue for the past few decades using powerful arguments for choice and privacy?

We fully stand behind a woman's right to choose. The distinction here is that we are *reframing* this right in a new way that we've learned will resonate more with women of color, young women and others who have

traditionally felt disconnected from the choice movement. This involves including reproductive rights and health within a more holistic view of women's health to better connect with women's lives.

Suggested Answers to Likely Questions From Opponents:

1. You can try to couch your argument in a broader discussion about women's health, but isn't this really all about abortion?

We're talking about women's health and the full range of care and services that women need. Women need different things at different stages of their lives, from puberty through menopause and beyond. We can't just talk about "abortion" because it never happens in isolation.

2. Isn't abortion murder? Doesn't government have to respect and care for all its people – including the unborn?

In our society, women are often the ones entrusted with making responsible decisions about their health and the health of their families. If we really care about women and their families, the best thing we can do is respect and fulfill the decisions women make.

3. Abortion is wrong: life is holy and begins at conception.

I respect your opinion. But we're fortunate to live in a country that recognizes and respects a broad spectrum of religious and ethical beliefs. In a democratic society, everyone has different, and equally sincerely held, religious beliefs and ethical values. Our values come from ourselves and our families. It is government and society's role to protect, respect, and fulfill every family's ability to make decisions based on their own beliefs and values.

4. How can you say that a woman knows best? Shouldn't the father of the child have a say in this? What about other family members, doctors or priests?

In a perfect world, women would always have supportive and trusted people in their lives with whom they could consult in making these important decisions. But we all know that the world isn't perfect, and for her own sake as well as her family's, women need the power to make personal, responsible decisions about their own health.

Similarly, not every woman has the freedom to consult her doctor, family, or other advisors about this difficult issue. She may have to make a thoughtful, responsible decision on her own. We want to protect and respect that decision.

5. If women really knew best, abortions wouldn't happen because she wouldn't have gotten pregnant in the first place.

In an ideal world, no one would get pregnant who didn't plan on having a child. But we live in an imperfect world where unplanned things happen, and women need to be able to make personal, responsible decisions for themselves.

6. What if she's a minor? Don't parents know what's best for their child?

In an ideal world, daughters and young women would feel comfortable and safe talking to parents about these difficult decisions. But for some young women, this just isn't possible. For their own safety, young women need to have access to safe, professional advice and care in order to make personal, responsible decisions about their own health.

Bringing the Message Home: Ten Ways for CCRF Members to Apply the “A Woman Knows Best” Framework

The California Coalition for Reproductive Freedom developed the “A Woman Knows Best” framework on reproductive rights to expand the movement and build bridges across related health and social justice issues.

CCRF encourages reproductive rights advocates and allies to use the frame as a resource to adapt, use, and share. Below are some practical, hands-on ways that you can put the framework to work to advance your own outreach and advocacy goals.

1. Do proactive outreach to **constituencies** whose active support you don’t already have. For example, you can use the framework to make the case for reproductive freedom with young women, women of color and social justice advocates who may not have responded to traditional messages about “choice.”
2. Offer a **workshop** about the framework at a conference sponsored by your organization or another group, or for your internal staff. Presenting the framework in these settings is a great way to actively engage and train your staff or allies and to brainstorm ways to put the frame to use in service of your goals.
3. Share the framework with **other organizations**, including groups you may not currently work with. The frame is a statement of shared purpose that can help you build bridges to other issue movements by articulating common ground you may share and by sharing intellectual resources. In particular, you might look to human rights or economic justice advocates.
4. Share the Web ad with **your networks** of members, supporters, and donors. This can re-activate your conversations with them and engage them more deeply with your cause by reasserting your driving values.
5. Put a **link to the Web ad on your homepage**. Disseminating the Web ad can help generate buzz and enthusiasm for a fresh and more inclusive approach for talking about reproductive rights and freedom.
6. Devote a story in your **organizational newsletter** to the framework and the Web ad so your staff and members are on top of recent innovations in the reproductive rights movement. Provide your own analysis for what it means for your issue and the work you do.
7. **Customize the Web ad** by adding your organization’s logo and writing up a brief example or case study about using the frame to talk about the issue or issues you

focus on. You can incorporate the customized version into a training, Web site, presentation to funders, or anything else.

8. Revise your **boilerplate communications documents** – your press packet, mission statement, etc. – with the “A Woman Knows Best” framework in mind. This may seem like a dramatic undertaking. But, at minimum, we recommend using the frame as a lens through which to rethink whether your communications are successfully reaching audiences that may be important to you – women of color, young women, and potential allies across different issue movements.
9. Integrate the frame into **an op-ed piece** about your issue so you connect with as broad an audience as possible. The number one rule of op-eds still applies: respond to a timely event in the news cycle. But use the frame as a running argument to bring people over to your point of view.
10. Introduce the framework to **your funders** as a tool you’re using in your communications and outreach efforts as a way to re-energize them about the work you do and to position your organization as an “early adopter” and thought leader in your field.