

At What Cost? The Impact of Overturning Roe v Wade: A Personal View

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I was 14 years old when I got my first period, 18 years old when I started taking birth control, 22 years old when I got my first IUD, and 28 when Roe v Wade was overturned. Ironically, I had just landed abroad in Switzerland and was on a high-speed train when I connected to the Wi-Fi and the messages started flooding in about the news. The passengers looked at me cautiously as I impulsively cursed. As I looked out at the beautiful Swiss scenery, the existential dread washed over my body and mind as I pondered all the possible implications this decision would have on women's health.

I personally know numerous women who have benefited from abortions. Young women, who were not ready to be mothers and had no intention of becoming pregnant, are many of those individuals. Each decision was unique and difficult for them to make, but ultimately it was their decision, as it should be. I vehemently believe women should have autonomy over their reproductive rights to make whatever decision they think is best for them. However, what worries me even more about the overturning of Roe v Wade is the drastic impact this will have on women's health for future generations.

I was privileged to grow up in a community where I had access to reproductive health education and birth control options, so that I could make informed decisions about my body and prevent unwanted pregnancy, evading the need for an abortion. However, I fear that this will become less common with the overturning of Roe v Wade, especially in abortion restrictive states. For example, due to strong religious practices and sexual stigma in Utah, many young adults grow up here without being educated on how pregnancy biologically occurs, let alone how to prevent it from happening.

This lack of information is a huge disservice to young adults and results in less birth control use and a higher incidence of unwanted pregnancy. Without abortion access, women may be forced to have children before they desire to, which takes a huge toll on their emotional, mental, and physical health.

The abortion debate is often approached as “pro-choice” or “pro-life,” which is an oversimplification, as decreasing abortion access has enormous ramifications for women's health. When states shutdown organizations such as Planned Parenthood, they not only eliminate access to abortion, but remove access to birth control, reproductive health education, sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing, cancer screening, vaccinations, affordable healthcare, yearly obstetrics/gynecology (OBGYN) checkups, and much more. These changes mean that unwanted pregnancies will increase due to a decrease in birth control use, reproductive health education will decrease, preventable STIs will increase, gynecological cancer incidence and mortality will increase, vaccination rates will decrease, and women's healthcare will become much more expensive and inaccessible, especially for vulnerable communities of women. Therefore, the overturning of Roe v Wade comes at a significant cost to women's health beyond the abortion discussion.

The irony of making abortions less accessible means that women will have less access to birth control options and be more likely to become pregnant, potentially needing an abortion. If we want to decrease the need for abortions, then we should be funding (not defunding) these critical organizations that provide education and access to birth control options to prevent unwanted pregnancy in the first place. Many women

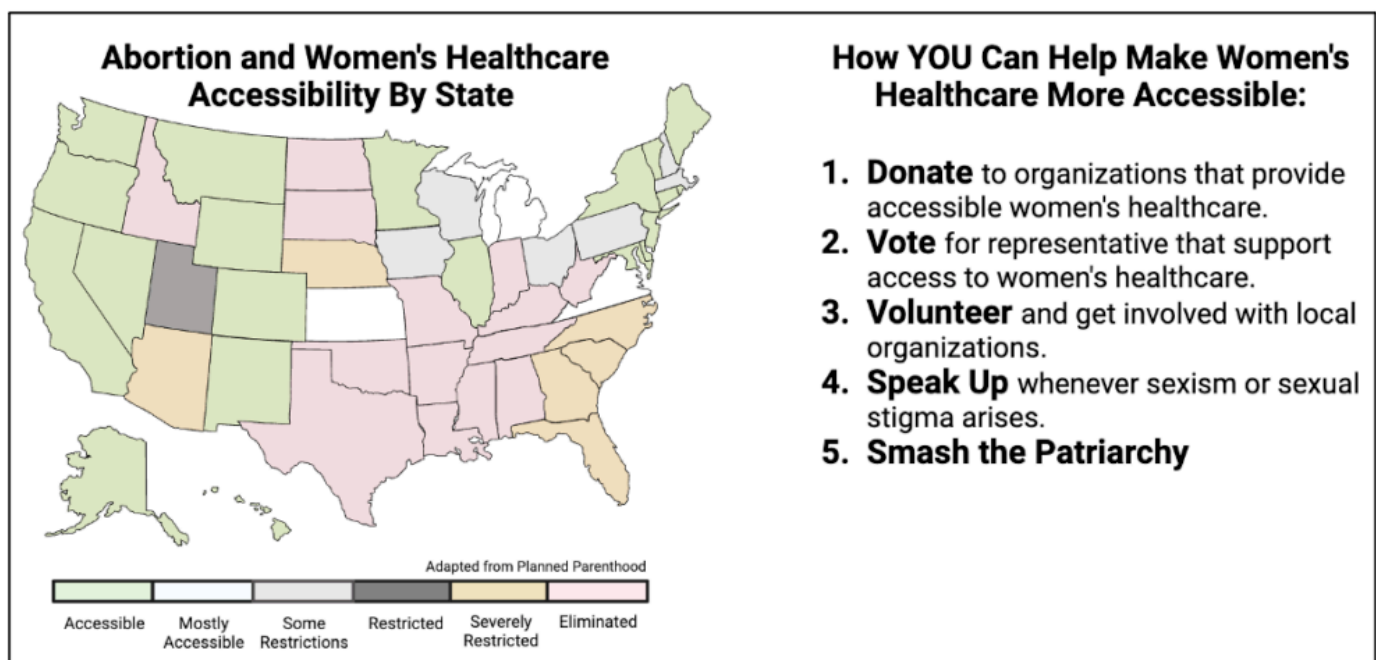
become pregnant due to a lack of education, resources, and access to affordable birth control, and yet states are cutting funding for and access to these critical organizations that offer these services. I believe that we should reframe the conversation from “pro-choice” or “pro-life” to access to women’s fundamental health-care to evade the political and religious nature of the abortion debate. If we can provide access to education, resources, and affordable birth control, then in theory we could avoid the need for most abortions in the first place and thus this abortion debate.

After I heard about the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on that train ride, I was happy to take a break from the U.S. and work abroad for the summer. When I returned to my graduate studies at the University of Utah, I realized that I couldn’t just sit back and wallow, especially living in Utah. I signed up for the STEM Ambassador program, a public engagement training program that promotes open-minded exchange between members of the public and the scientific community. As part of our training, we had the opportunity to run an outreach program with a community of our choice. I chose to run an educational series on birth control and STIs for the women at House of Hope, a nonprofit organization in downtown Salt Lake City that provides treatment for women and mothers with substance use disorders.

On March 30th, I arrived at House of Hope with feminine supplies, a \$600 donation, craft supplies, and

my presentation ready to go. In the first session, I sat in a circle with about 30 women representing a diverse array of ages and backgrounds. We got started and I was astonished by the level of engagement. The women had so many questions and valuable insight to add. It became an open dialogue in lieu of a “lecture.” We all started sharing personal stories about our experiences with certain birth control methods or STIs. It was empowering being in a room full of women who felt comfortable sharing very intimate details about their experiences. Many of them already have children, so they were a wealth of information. Collectively learning alongside one another as women made this experience impactful and special. This experience taught me the importance of getting out into the community and how impactful and empowering education can be – especially for vulnerable communities of women.

It’s easy to wallow in disgust towards this decision, like I did, but that unfortunately doesn’t make any impact. We must remain hopeful and continue fighting for women’s autonomy. It is imperative that we find ways to negate the negative implications this decision has on women’s health. Increasing funding and access to women’s health centers, increasing women in positions of power, increasing reproductive health education, and increasing access to birth control are just a few of the ways we can help ensure women’s reproductive health. Here are a few ideas on how to help (adapted from Planned Parenthood, 2023):



1. Donate to organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Utah Abortion Fund, which mail free reproductive wellness kits that include plan B, condoms, and pregnancy tests.

2. Vote for representatives that support abortion and access to women's healthcare.

3. Volunteer your time and get involved with local women's health organizations.

4. "**Speak up** whenever sexism or sexual stigma arise."

5. "Smash the Patriarchy." Be fearless in challenging the dominant patriarchal norms in our society to work towards equity and reproductive healthcare.

I envision a future where Roe v Wade will be overturned again, and women will have access to the reproductive health and education they rightfully deserve, so that they can make the best choice for their bodies.