

Description

Protecting Abortion Rights: It’s Not Just a US Problem



Midwife Amity Reed (who is a dual US/UK

citizen) explains the recent controversy in the United States around abortion and the impending repeal of Roe v Wade. She also discusses why this is of concern to everyone who supports reproductive choice and how midwives can play a key role in speaking out against abortion bans.

Abortion has been a hot topic for a very long time, but recent events in the United States have brought the issue to the top of the news agenda once again.

Background

On Tuesday, May 3, the world awoke to a breaking story: a document leaked to the press revealed that the Supreme Court of the United States (which has a conservative majority after two appointments made by former President Donald Trump) were soon going to make public their ruling on a case in which the tenets of Roe v Wade, the landmark case that made abortion a federally-protected right for American women in 1973, will be overturned. When that happens, abortion access will be left to individual states to decide. More than half of the 50 states either already have abortion bans that will go into effect the moment Roe is overturned or have expressed an intent to ban or severely restrict abortion once they are able to make and enforce their own laws on the matter.

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Though the leaked document is only a draft opinion and has not yet come into effect, it gives a clear indication of how the Supreme Court is leaning on the issue. The actual ruling, which is when any change in the law will become official, could be announced between now and the end of the current judicial session, which adjourns in late June or early July. Though we knew this day would come, there was always hope that it wouldn't, that our society hasn't regressed so far that it would allow this injustice to actually happen. That small sliver of hope is now gone. This is happening. Abortion rights are being rolled back to before the hard-won gains of second-wave feminism.

Personal impact

My concern is so great not only because I'm an American woman living in the UK, but because I'm a midwife. And as we all know, midwives don't only support those who wish to be pregnant; we work in all areas of reproductive and sexual health care, which includes abortion services. I have worked in abortion care myself and have seen with my own eyes how vitally important a service it is and how essential it is to our bodily autonomy and human rights. I've listened to women and pregnant people's stories, held their hands and been there for them through all the emotions that can come with a decision to terminate a pregnancy: relief, sadness, disappointment, pain, and most frequently, hope for the future. All their situations and feelings were different but all of them were grateful to have the choice and to receive the support and services they needed at that moment and at that point in their lives.

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In the days after the news broke on the impending Supreme Court ruling, I cycled through many emotions myself, alternating between sadness, disbelief, terror and rage. I received mournful messages from many of my family and friends in the US and my heart ached for them, and for all the people who will be affected by this, as I watch them grapple with what this means for them, their children and the future of the nation they call home. Even though I no longer live there and probably never will again, I still care very deeply about what happens in America. Just because I have the privilege of living in a country that is not quite so polarised on abortion, does not mean that what happens in the US doesn't affect those of us living here, or that there is nothing we can or should do. An attack of this magnitude on reproductive rights is an attack on all of us; yes, even here in the UK.

The bigger picture

When democracy and human rights are diminished in one country, they are diminished everywhere, especially when it's coming from a country as powerful and influential as the United States. Religious fundamentalism and regressive policies in one place embolden those who would seek to enforce similar rules upon their own communities. There have been warnings, both recently and in the past, that the anti-choice movement in the UK and other parts of Europe are

increasingly taking inspiration from the US by using intimidation and shaming tactics such as encouraging protestors to harass people visiting sexual-health clinics, along with the staff who work there. All of this adds fuel to the flames of misogyny and sexism that burn worldwide, harming millions of women and girls, and indeed anyone with a uterus whose health and human rights are threatened right now.

The US is not alone in this, of course. Worldwide, 41 percent of women live in places where abortion is completely illegal or severely restricted, and more than 23,000 die each year from unsafe procedures, with many tens of thousands more experiencing complications that have lifelong health consequences. Indeed, it was only in 2018 that Ireland legalised abortion up to 12 weeks and services there are still sporadic and difficult to access for many. And it was only in 2021 that President Joe Biden reversed a ban initially implemented in 1984 (frequently referred to as the Mexico City Policy), which prevented federal funds being sent to international aid organisations that provide abortions, abortion counselling or advocate for abortion rights. Once again, the most marginalised and underserved people will be those most severely impacted by these policies.

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Midwives' role

Midwives in the UK can be an instrumental part of the reproductive justice movement by reminding the public, and ourselves, that we are 'with woman' no matter what. We can let them know that midwifery is not just about birth and babies, but about choice, rights and autonomy. We can use our voices and our actions to advocate for those who want to carry their pregnancies to term, as well as for those who don't. Midwives don't discriminate, we support. Now is the time to say it loud and clear, to ensure that those in power know we will remain vocal and vigilant over our own rights, and the rights of others around the world.

I stand with the pro-choice movement in the United States, and I hope you will too.

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