



Keep your hands off Women's Bodies. Source: Kaitly Williams, Washington Post, 2021

# 'Their Bodies, Their Voices'

*Listen To the Stories of Women to  
Understand How Important Abortion Rights Are*



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## Introduction

The choice to get an abortion is a woman's personal decision. Yet, abortion remains an issue that provokes moral outrage and political polarisation. Even with *Roe v. Wade* (1973), American women's choice for abortion is only possible in the first trimester. Once a foetus is considered viable, the state can interfere and set limitations based on its beliefs in the second and final trimester. Therefore, despite *Roe v. Wade* guaranteeing women the right to choose, states like Arkansas (banning abortion after twelve weeks) or Texas (restricting the supply of abortions) take steps to restrict abortion. Since 2011, at least 424 restrictive abortion policies have been implemented (Redd et al., 2022). According to the leaked opinion draft, in June, the Supreme Court is set to overturn *Roe v. Wade* which gave women partial body autonomy in the first three months of a pregnancy. Although abortion is considered a standard and safe healthcare procedure, an increasing number of people want to ban abortions due to their own moral and religious beliefs. Briefly, pro-choice advocates view abortion as a question of individual liberty, privacy, and public health. At the same time, pro-life advocates are considered social conservatives who abhor abortion based on the premise of saving human life and defending family morals (Htun, 2003). In recent years, many pro-life activists have espoused arguments claiming they care about women and push an 'abortion is bad for women' rhetoric (Roberti, 2021). The recent emphasis on women rather than the previous 'purity of foetal life' and 'sinfulness of abortion' arguments is strategic. The tactic is opportunistic as the group realised that the 'foetal personhood model' had its limits. By presenting the illusion of being pro-woman, anti-abortion legislation produces a narrative of making women the priority.

Nonetheless, despite differing personal opinions and beliefs, every woman should have the opportunity to access safe and legal abortions. Abortion is not an easy decision for a woman. Therefore, a woman should be given the right to choose the option that best suits her and her circumstances. Considering the conservative direction in the United States with the conservative majority in the Supreme Court and many states, overturning *Roe v. Wade* and banning abortion is not a distant future anymore. However, the decision to ban abortion would only harm women. It is unfair that a woman's personal decision to have a child or not is taken away from her. Criminalising and banning abortions does not mean stopping abortions (Oberman, 2022). Banning abortions only restrict women from accessing safe and legal procedures. However, the problem with the debate is that there is an inherent danger of separating the physical body from the issue of abortion. Despite abortion being a lived reality for many women, the issue is discussed in abstraction. Therefore, this report will focus on documenting various people's experiences with abortion or its ban.

## Personal Narratives

### Nida Allam's Experience



Nida Allam: the North Carolina Congressional Candidate. Source: Nida Allam's Campaign Website, 2022.

In April, Nida Allam, a North Carolina congressional candidate, wrote an op-ed to talk about her experience with an ectopic pregnancy that led her to make the difficult decision to have an abortion. In 2021, Nida Allam's abortion saved her life. For the past few years, Nida Allam and her husband's family planning has been a difficult journey paved by infertility and miscarriages (Allam, 2022). After a year of various fertility treatments, Nida Allam was ecstatic when she received the news that she was pregnant in 2021. However, Nida Allam's doctor told her and her family

that she was, unfortunately, suffering from an ectopic pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> Owing to the high risk of rupture, “ectopic pregnancies can lead to severe haemorrhages including internal bleeding” (Allam, 2022). If she had not undergone the procedure, she could have died. Grieving the previous miscarriages, Nida Allam had to make the heartbreaking decision to abort the pregnancy she was looking forward to. Despite the emotional trauma of the experience, Nida Allam considers herself a fortunate woman. Allam (2022) argues that, unlike many women, she has “access to doctors, health insurance and a supportive partner who respects my right to control my own body- and determine my own destiny”. Despite the insurance, during the experience, Allam argues that she still had to pay “thousands of dollars out-of-pocket for treatment” (Allam, 2022). Countless Americans, especially those suffering from ectopic pregnancies, are not as lucky.

1. According to March of Dimes, Ectopic Pregnancies occur in about 1 in 50 pregnancies with women that have got pregnant while on the intrauterine device (IUD) or reproductive issues like endometriosis increase their risk of their pregnancies being ectopic. All ectopic pregnancies end in pregnancy loss. Without treatments like abortion, women are under severe risk.

Like Nida Allam, many people with similar experiences have come forward. The most notable being is Senator Gary Peters (the first sitting U.S Senator to share his personal story about family abortion), who come forward to reveal his experiences with abortion to save his former wife's life. Senator Gary Peters' first wife, Heidi, revealed that "if it were not for urgent and critical medical care, I could have lost my life" (Bassett, 2020).<sup>2</sup> The issue with removing Roe v. Wade is that many anti-abortion legislations in various states aim to remove the exceptions to abortion. In states like Georgia and Wisconsin, many legislators work with anti-abortion groups to push bans that would not allow the procedure, even on the grounds of endangerment to the mother's life. Therefore, in situations like Nida Allam's, where the pregnancy is ectopic and the risk of haemorrhaging is high, the procedure would not be done as it would be considered an abortion. In other states, the legislation for the exception is written in a way that cites 'life of mother' rather than 'health of the mother' (Cha & Wax-Thibodeaux, 2022). Therefore, in situations like Heidi's pregnancy, where the outcome was losing her uterus or 'only' her reproductive organs, she would not have had the right to get an abortion.

Moreover, due to the language ambiguity within many legislations regarding abortion, many doctors would not perform the procedure as they could be liable or even face criminal prosecution.<sup>3</sup> Legislative Director of Pro-Life Wisconsin said, "we are calling for a total ban, no exceptions. We don't think abortion is ever necessary to save the life of the mother" (Cha & Wax-Thibodeaux, 2022). Pro-Life Wisconsin's Legislative Director's statement emphasises that abortion bans are an attack on women as they aim to make women second-class citizens whose life is not essential. The foetus, which depends on a mother for survival and nourishment, has more rights than the woman growing it within her body.

2. In the 1980s, Heidi suffered from early symptoms of miscarriage (when at four months, her water broke, leaving the foetus without the amniotic fluid). The doctor told the family to wait for the miscarriage to happen naturally. After a few days, when it still did not happen naturally, the doctor recommended an abortion because there was a fear that Heidi could become septic. Despite the faint heartbeat, there was no way the foetus could survive. However, because of legislation ambiguity, the hospital banned abortion. As days passed, Heidi's health deteriorated. The doctor informed them that she could lose her uterus or even die if she did not have the procedure within the next few hours. Due to the dire situation, Gary Peters took Heidi to another hospital willing to do the procedure and saved Heidi's life (Bassett, 2020).
3. For example, the Texas and Idaho bills ban abortions as early as six weeks while also allowing private parties to take legal action against the providers of abortion and people who help women obtain them.

## Savita Halappanvar's Death



Savita Halappanvar Died from Septicaemia even though an abortion could have saved her life. Source: Holland & Cullen/Irish Times, 2012.

Savita Halappanvar's death in 2012 in Ireland shocked the whole world and revolutionised Ireland's Abortion law. While the woman of Indian origin lived in Ireland, the denial of abortion is also an essential lesson for people in the United States. As previously emphasised, with the push to remove even exceptions to abortion, in the United States, many women like Savita Halappanvar will, unfortunately, lose their lives.

On October 21, 2012, Ms Halappanvar went to the Galway University Hospital with severe back pain when the doctors found that she was experiencing a miscarriage at 17-weeks. However, like many conservative countries that ban abortion, inducing miscarriages is considered termination. Therefore, Savita had to wait for her body to miscarry naturally. Even after a day when she was still experiencing pain, she asked the staff "if she could be induced" (Holland, 2018). However, the staff refused as there was a faint foetal heartbeat. According to Mr Halappanvar, the staff at the hospital told Ms Halappanvar that she could not be induced "because it's a Catholic country" (BBC, 2012). Mr Halappanvar further revealed that his wife told the staff that she was not Catholic but a Hindu and asked them why the law was imposed on her. However, the staff reiterated their position. Despite Savita Halappanvar's deteriorating condition; as the doctors were able to find a foetal heartbeat, they

could not do anything to help her. Savita Halappanvar delivered the foetus on the third day before slipping into a coma. She was transferred to a “high-dependency unit, and then intensive care, where she deteriorated into a septic shock, multiple organ failure and died of cardiac arrest at 1.09 am on October 28, 2012 (Holland, 2018). Mr Halappanvar's requested autopsy inquiry found that her cause of death was septicaemia.

Compared to Nida Allam, Sen. Gary Peters and many others, Savita Halappanvar and her family were never allowed to get the procedure to save her life. Despite the urgency of the situation, a woman's life was not considered, as legislation banning abortion was given more importance. Therefore, the question arises: Can anti-abortion laws, like those that Georgia and Wisconsin are trying to implement that do not even consider a woman's life, be pro-life?



## Amie's Story

### 'When Birth control Fails!'

In the documentary *Abortion Stories Women Tell*, Amie revealed her reasoning for opting to get an abortion in Missouri, where the documentary was filmed. Director Tracy Droz Tragos interestingly showcases the numerous people involved in the debate. The documentary emphasises the women's voices and their reason for an abortion while also showcasing doctors, clinic escorts, security guards and even pro-life activists outside clinics and the more formal organisational structure.

At the beginning of the documentary, Amie explains that she unexpectedly got pregnant and chose to have an abortion as having another child would burden her family. As a single mother of an 8-year-old and a 5-year-old, she cannot afford to have another kid as she works 70-90 hours a week when her children's father has them (Tragos, 2016). As a single mother, Amie works so many hours to look after her two children that she cannot even afford to (physically) carry a baby and continue working. If she had chosen to carry the child, she would have had to cut her working hours, resulting in an inability to support the children she already has. Amie's story is memorable as it emphasises the harsh reality of many women seeking abortions after unplanned pregnancies. Unfortunately, many women cannot afford another baby and know that their family could go hungry if there is another mouth to feed.

Within the same documentary, a woman who chose to remain anonymous because of the stigma around abortion revealed that she got pregnant despite being on birth control. She never expected to get pregnant, especially since, at the time, she had an eight-month-old baby girl. While she adores her baby girl, she is mentally and financially unable to look after another child. The anonymous woman revealed that while many may argue that she could give her child up for adoption, for her, she would not be able to go through with it emotionally. In her opinion, adoption is "1000 times harder to deal with" (Tragos, 2016).

## Sarah's Story



Abortion Rights Protester in Austin, Texas. Source: Morninique Monroe/ Teen Vogue, 2022.

In 2021, Sarah narrated her abortion story to Advocates for Youth to raise awareness about the necessity of accessibility for abortion. In 2018, Sarah was in a relationship with a man 13 years older than her. When describing her relationship, Sarah revealed that “The relationship slipped from toxic, to mentally abusive to physically and sexually abusive” (Sarah, 2021). Because of the abuse, she was isolated from her friends, pushing Sarah to start drinking heavily. Like many women, Sarah never thought she could be pregnant as she had her period the previous month. Moreover, Sarah believed that her unusual menstrual cycle resulted from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Sarah, 2021). She realised that she was pregnant only at the end of the second month of the pregnancy. When Sarah told her abuser about the pregnancy, he got excited with the news, as, in her opinion, it was his way to further abuse and control her (Sarah, 2021). In fact, she believes that he purposely got her pregnant to trap her.

Owing to the circumstances, she chose to have an abortion, which initially worsened the abuse. However, later he accepted her decision and even promised to take her to get the procedure. Due to Florida's state legislation, abortion was still an option for Sarah, as she was able to book an appointment mere weeks before the permitted 24 weeks expired. Till July 1, 2022,<sup>4</sup> Florida allows abortions up to 24 weeks.

4. On April 14, 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed the State's most restrictive abortion regulation that bans abortions after 15 weeks, called the 'Reducing Fetal and Infant Mortality Law' (HB 5). It comes into effect on July 1. However, the gestation by which the weeks are calculated is no longer based on 'between fertilisation and birth'. Instead, according to the legislation, gestation is calculated from "the first day of the pregnant woman's last menstrual period" (Bridges, 2022).

## Emily's Story



Protestors gathered at the Washington Monument before Marching to the Supreme Court. Source: Jose Luis Magana/ Teen Vogue, 2022.

It took Sarah two years to tell her story as there is so much stigma surrounding abortion. Sarah said, “If I had a child with my abuser, my child's life would have been broken from the start. That's not fair to them or me” (Sarah, 2021). Furthermore, she hopes her story helps other girls and women in similar situations choose an option that suits them. Sarah wants girls and women to know, “You're not selfish for choosing abortion” (Sarah, 2021).

Nine years ago, Emily decided to have an abortion in Indiana within the first trimester (eight to nine weeks of her pregnancy). Although *Roe v. Wade* still protected the procedure, the restrictions in the Midwest had already become severe. She believes that the restrictions imposed on her to get an abortion were “unnecessary” (Campoamor, 2020). She was forced to have an ultrasound<sup>5</sup> and attend mandatory counselling sessions that required travelling several hours back and forth (Campoamor, 2020). Making Emily wait for her abortion reveals that even within the first trimester, when receiving an abortion was classified as her fundamental right, the state can still interfere and try to control

5. According to many state policies, abortion clinics must perform mandatory ultrasounds even if the woman does not want to have an ultrasound before her abortion to make her hear the foetus's heartbeat to dissuade her from the procedure. Moreover, the extra ultrasound becomes an added expense for the woman.

women. During the whole experience, whenever she went to the clinic for check-ups and counselling sessions, she was often confronted by protestors that yelled at her that she would 'burn in hell'. Again, this experience is ubiquitous for many women, as often pro-life advocates protest outside health care clinics that provide abortions. In *Abortion Stories Women Tell*, Tragos (2016) showcases that outside many clinics, pro-life activists quote bible scriptures to shame women that enter the place. Many doctors' lives have been threatened, and the clinics like Planned Parenthood have had to ask for 'Clinic Escort' volunteers to protect women and families that come to the clinics.

In Emily's situation, as she was only at the 8–9-week stage in the pregnancy, she needed only two pills. However, despite it being the safest medical procedure, Emily revealed that she went into debt at 19 because of the unnecessary restrictions. According to Emily, the policies in Indiana are not based on 'pro-life' but on 'pro-birth' (Campoamor, 2020). She has never regretted her decision because she contends that the procedure saved her life by letting her escape an abusive relationship. The decision she made nine years ago has helped her future by allowing her to marry her soulmate, earn three college degrees and become the person she is today. Emily expressed that she wants to be a mother at some point in the future, but she decides that. She, like other women, should not be forced into parenthood, especially by the government.

## Steffi Gaines' Experience



A Protestor in Washington, D.C. showing Sign "Bans of Our Bodies". Source: Leigh Vogel / Teen Vogue, 2022.

Since the publication of the leaked draft opinion by Justice Alito that emphasised the potential overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, many people have become more open about their abortion stories to raise awareness. If *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, abortion rights that have been protected for 50 years will be removed, leaving women blindfolded and left stumbling in the dark once again. With the potential of abortion rights going back to pre-*Roe*, many women have started telling their abortion stories, especially those that were forced to opt for an illegal procedure because of the lack of legal and safe procedures.

Steffi Gaines (now 73 years old) detailed her illegal abortion experience in the pre-*Roe* days when abortion was illegal and not protected in many states. At 16, Ms Gaines was “taken advantage of by an older man”; the man forced her to have sex with him (Thornton, 2022). Unfortunately, she got pregnant. She and her best friend emptied their bank accounts to pay for a 'back-alley abortion'. Despite paying 500 U.S Dollars, she could never get the procedure as she was scammed (Thornton, 2022). A few days after the incident, the doctor that administered the pregnancy test came to her house to scare her. As her parents did not know what to do, they took her to a police station to be lectured by a stern police officer. The doctor then talked Ms Gaines at the age of 16 to go to a psychiatric hospital. As she was still pregnant, after her month in the psychiatric hospital, she was sent to Tijuana to her uncle and aunt to have the abortion (Thornton, 2022).

In Tijuana, after being given anaesthesia, three male 'assistants' came into the room and groped and sexually molested her (Thornton, 2022). Owing to the anaesthesia, she was unable to fight back. When she returned to the psychiatric hospital, it was discovered that she had an infection from the procedure, which meant being transported to a regular hospital for treatment (Thornton, 2022). As many illegal abortions are conducted in unsafe areas by unlicensed people, many women and girls are not provided with the necessary Post-Abortion Care (PAC). As such, like Steff Gaines, many women and girls develop complications like infections that could become severe issues if not treated properly. However, many women and girls that have had illegal abortions do not seek treatment as they may fear prosecution for procuring illegal abortions. At 16, Steff Gaines was unfortunately taken advantage of by an older man. Instead of being helped, especially by the doctor who administered her pregnancy test, she was urged to go to a psychiatric hospital. Furthermore, because of the lack of accessibility to safe and legal abortion at the time, she was sent to a neighbouring city (albeit in a different country) to get the procedure. She was further abused by men meant to help her in her already vulnerable state. Ms Gaines sent her story to the editor of the Los Angeles Times, hoping that no other woman would experience the trauma she did when trying to get an abortion. However, with the banning of abortion, there is a big chance that illegal abortions will become the only option for many, and women run an additional risk of being further abused.

## Rhonda Papell's Experience

At the age of 17, after an illegal abortion, Rhonda Papell woke up in the hospital with two detectives in her room. Rhonda Papell revealed that her abortion took place in her boyfriend's kitchen by a woman that stole medical instruments from a hospital where she worked (Thornton, 2022). A week after the procedure, she was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. The detectives that Rhonda Papell woke to informed her that if she did not help them testify against the woman that performed the illegal abortion, they would make her a 'ward of the state' till she was 21 while her boyfriend would be sent to jail for statutory rape (Thornton, 2022). Both her boyfriend and she testified against the woman because of the fear of being sent to jail and their rights being taken away. Rhonda Papell's story can become true for many women as states are pushing to create legislation to arrest any person that performs abortions. Therefore, many detectives or police officers may use 'fear of arrest' to force women to testify against the doctor or nurse which will also further restrict 'illegal' abortions done by medical practitioners. Lawyers will not only be forced defend women's rights but defend them against misogyny and racism that is embedded in the legal system. The end of Roe will allow states to further abuse and marginalise low-income pregnant women in hyper-police jurisdictions. Moreover, in states like Louisiana (where the government is debating a controversial bill that could allow women to be charged with murder for having an abortion (Crane, 2022)), women's right to choose what happens to their bodies can result in more years than robbery and rape. The law will become a weapon to further subjugate women.

## Conclusion

There are many stories out there, just in the United States, where accessibility to abortion has helped women, or on the other side, abortion bans that have caused trauma to a woman and often death. The stories have been detailed in the hopes that people unsure about supporting abortion rights realise that it is not about personal feelings but about women being able to make the right decisions for themselves. We must listen to their stories. Safe abortion helps women. Moreover, as emphasised, banning abortion removes women's reproductive rights and endangers their reproductive health. If the Supreme Court successfully overturns *Roe v. Wade* in June, many women and girls will be pushed to opt for crude and unsafe methods of abortions risking their health and lives. While numerous states are creating bills and legislations to ban abortions by terming them as 'foetal protection', the same states are not creating bills to protect women or foetuses when they are born or giving women financial, economic, and social security during and after pregnancies. Looking at the pro-life rhetoric, the legislators seemingly only want to control women's bodies. However, the question arises if protecting life is a necessity, why are women's lives trivialised? A foetus that is not yet born and cannot survive without the mother, has more rights and protection than the woman bringing it into the world.

Additionally, the current rhetoric within the United States, especially by conservative legislators, emphasises that women are not meant to be equal citizens as their choice and their lives are not as important as a man's. Bodily autonomy, the right to govern your own body, is a fundamental human right. Attempting to remove even the exceptions that allow women to get legal abortions in instances of rape, incest, and medical circumstances, emphasises that the fight for equality and mutual respect is still present in the United States. As Vice President Kamala Harris pointed out in 2018, there is no law that the government has the power to "make decisions about the male body" (Ioannous, 2018). The stories mentioned here are just a few of the millions of women that have had an abortion. While politicians and people can espouse 'pro-life' and 'pro-birth' sentiments, one should not look at the issue as abstract. It is the lived realities for women. Pregnancies and the decision to terminate are an individual choice for women that are governed by many factors. Therefore, it should be up to the individual women to choose the option that suits them.



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