

Reproductive rights in America

With Roe v. Wade overturned, disabled people reflect on how it will impact them

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SHRUTI RAJKUMAR



People with disabilities worry about how they will be disproportionately affected by the Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

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In 2008, around eight weeks into her second pregnancy, Robin Wilson-Beattie began experiencing hyperemesis gravidarum, which caused her to have severe episodes of

vomiting. She had gone through this condition as well as other complications, such as preeclampsia, during her first pregnancy four years prior and knew that she would likely become bedridden, but this time she didn't have the support to help her through it.

With a 4-year-old son at home, she also didn't know if she'd be able to raise another child, so she decided to get an abortion. However, when she arrived at the clinic to get an abortion, she was denied care because of her disability, which had resulted from a spinal cord injury.

"They were not comfortable giving me an abortion because I had a disability. [My] paralysis scared them. I don't know why. The disability just freaked them out. They said I would have to go to a doctor and have it done in a hospital, so I had to go through health insurance," said Wilson-Beattie, a disability, sexuality and reproductive health educator.

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The landmark 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion nationwide, was overturned by the Supreme Court on Friday. Though the court's decision will impact everyone, disabled people, especially those with multiple marginalized identities, will be disproportionately impacted for a number of reasons, such as health care inequities, sexual violence, poverty and the loss of autonomy that they have

historically experienced.



Robin Wilson-Beattie

Wilson-Beattie had to wait two additional weeks from the time she had originally sought the abortion. When she was finally able to schedule the appointment, Wilson-Beattie was sexually assaulted by the doctor during the examination but stayed quiet because she didn't feel like she had any other choice.

Disabled people are at high risk of being in a situation where they would need access to an abortion. According to a survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, disabled people were over three times more likely than nondisabled people to experience sexual assault. The likelihood increases for people with multiple disabilities.

Mia Ives-Rublee, director of the Disability Justice Initiative at the Center for American

Progress, said that access to abortion is crucial to the survival of disabled people because for some, carrying a pregnancy to term could put their own life in danger. For example, Ives-Ruble doesn't know if she'd be able to carry a pregnancy to term due to her short stature, low lung capacity and brittle bone disease, called osteogenesis imperfecta.

"If I am not able to have an abortion [and] if I accidentally get pregnant, that could have significant impacts to my health. That's a huge concern for me, as an individual who is continuing to focus on my career and as a person who wants to have a choice in the matter," she said.

The loss of bodily autonomy has a deep history within the disability community, said disability activist Emily Ladau. As apparent in present-day issues such as forced sterilization and conservatorships, disabled people are stripped of their right to make choices for their own bodies. Ladau recalls many moments in her life, especially in medical situations, in which she felt that her body was not fully her own and that she didn't have a role in her own care.

"Knowing that I have the option to make the right choice for my body, at any given moment, is something that I don't think should be too much to ask for," said Ladau.

"But knowing that that could be very easily taken away in a world where I already have to fight for respect and agency and autonomy when it comes to engaging with medical professionals is a very frightening thing."



Emily Ladau

Ladau points out that she has a lot of privilege in such situations as a white woman and as someone who can verbally articulate her needs — a privilege that not everyone in the disability community has.

When Morénike Giwa Onaiwu was rushed to the hospital after experiencing bleeding and pain at work, she was too overwhelmed to verbally communicate what was happening to her doctors. She relied on her co-worker to explain that she had had a medication abortion weeks prior. She believes that the doctors found it weird that her co-worker was speaking for her and questioned whether she had the cognition to communicate with them.

Reflecting on their abortion and the emergency room visit weeks later, Giwa Onaiwu said they experienced a lot of pain and were inadequately treated due to their race and disability. After they had the medication abortion, the doctor declined to examine them, even though that is standard protocol. They remembered the doctor telling them that the termination was "for the best" because the pregnancy had probably resulted in "some sort of mutation."

When she had been rushed to the ER with her co-worker weeks after the abortion, she was given painkillers, but the excruciating pain persisted. She asked for more medication, but she says she was treated horribly, as the doctors assumed she was exaggerating and displaying drug-seeking behavior.

"They did ask me if I was taking any medications. I'm autistic and have ADHD, so I did mention the meds. [With] stimulants that one takes for ADHD, I know that there are people who are perceived as drug seeking, taking them for recreational purposes or obtaining prescriptions that [are unjustified]. I think there were some misconceptions," said Giwa Onaiwu, who is the equity and representation chair for the Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network.



Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

After they were stable, they found out that due to what they allege was the negligence of the doctor who had administered their abortion, they could have died from an infection that was caused by retained products of conception in their body.

"This nightmare occurred while *Roe* was in place. Imagine what can and will happen to people, especially disabled people of color, without that legislative protection in place," they said.

Ives-Rublee, of the Center for American Progress, said that people who can get pregnant and who have more needs, such as disabled people and people of color, are still going to get abortions, by traveling either to another state or abroad. She believes that more organizations will be working on creating mutual aid programs to help pay for out-of-state abortion assistance.

Wilson-Beattie said that she had the privilege of having health insurance coverage for her abortion but that this isn't the case for everyone. Disabled women are some of the lowest-income people in the U.S., said Ives-Rublee. According to the Center for American Progress, disabled women have a poverty rate of 22.9%, compared with 17.9% for men with disabilities and 11.4% for nondisabled women.

With the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, Ladau worries about what's next. She points out that June 22 was the anniversary of the *Olmstead* decision, which declared that people with disabilities have the right to receive care in their homes and communities and be fully integrated community members. Despite the fact that *Olmstead* is 23 years old, she said, disabled people are still fighting for full, equal and equitable access to the broader community.

"It frightens me to think that as we swing further to the right, we can continue to revisit cases that were already decided, first of all, but second of all, that have changed people's lives, although not enough lives. And simply because a group of people who were anointed with this power decided it's OK and can turn around years of civil rights that disabled people still aren't done fighting for," said Ladau.