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Letters to the Editor

OPINION

LETTERS

Abortion Views, and Personal Stories

Readers' responses to recent Opinion pieces include accounts of their own abortions and a grandmother's death after an illegal procedure.

Feb. 5, 2022

Angie's video: <https://youtu.be/uZvJT772KbU?list=PLlMpvey-5hPdGMicgO3qcUfL-nij7sBdj>



Credit...Matija Medved

To the Editor:

Re “[Women Shouldn’t Need Abortions for Equality](#),” by the Rev. Tish Harrison Warren (Opinion, Jan. 24):

I totally agree with Ms. Warren that societal changes are needed to support pregnant women and girls so that their decisions whether to bring a child into the world versus abort aren’t dominated by lack of money, day care, decent housing or adequate insurance.

But I am confused about what exactly she is proposing: Does she want to make abortions harder or impossible to obtain? Does she believe that this would propel society to change in the positive ways that she has outlined? And where does birth control fit into this picture?

Personally, I believe that an abortion is always a tragedy on some level. Lowering the number of abortions is always desirable. However, I believe that every girl and woman has her own beliefs, and should not be forced to carry a pregnancy to birth.

Making abortions hard to get will mostly affect poor women, while the societal changes that would help these women to raise their children will not be coming anytime soon. Meanwhile, making sure that birth control is easily available and inexpensive or free is a no-brainer.

Laurel Bender
Boulder, Colo.

To the Editor:

The essay by Tish Harrison Warren on the difficult abortion issue was the most insightful and heartfelt discussion of abortion ever. The fact that she has counseled women in crisis and experienced a difficult pregnancy diagnosis adds to her credibility. She reminds all of us, whether leaning left or right, of our need to respect life and of the sometimes arduous duties that entails.

During my 40-year career in pediatrics, I was inspired by the courage and grace of parents caring for their special needs children with Down syndrome and other conditions who could have been aborted. Those children and their parents facing these difficult choices deserve our love and support.

Allan LaReau
Kalamazoo, Mich.

To the Editor:

My story is probably not atypical, and 50 years later I have no regrets about having had an abortion. I was 22 years old, living 2,000 miles from my family, a victim of date rape, no serious boyfriend, no serious career, ashamed of the date rape but not of an abortion.

I had fears for a child born under those circumstances. My religious beliefs did not recognize a fetus as an independent life. I respect those who believe differently from me, but I demand that in turn they respect my religious beliefs.

An abortion was not a difficult decision for me. The alternatives were horrifying. Now it is the loss of the right to an abortion that is horrifying.

Susan Olney
San Francisco

To the Editor:

Tish Harrison Warren took lonely trips to the recycling plant in Texas in the early '80s, choosing to separate her trash when it was time-intensive and difficult. Now she has curbside recycling every Wednesday. And so it should be with pregnancies, she argues. Make the choice to carry a child to term an easy one: Celebrate pregnant women,

provide maternity leave, prenatal care, a road to success for young women with children, etc.

Yes to all of that! But remember: Nobody took away her regular trash can in Texas in the early '80s. Nobody forced her to recycle when there was no infrastructure to do so. They eventually gave us recycling bins, and now we have a choice.

Kirsten Harjes
Davis, Calif.

To the Editor:

Tish Harrison Warren articulates a beautifully written argument opposing abortion on demand in a society that does not ease the choice to continue a pregnancy. I found myself deeply respecting her view. She does not, however, articulate a fundamental philosophical and moral disagreement that underlies the abortion debate.

That is the question about when an undifferentiated ball of cells in a woman's uterus becomes something more than an undifferentiated ball of cells. It would be nice if one could draw a clear line at conception, as many do, but in my view that is not the case. For me, we become human gradually step by step. So any line is difficult and arbitrary, but such is the problem of choice in a moral world.

So thus far we have decided as a society to respect individual choice about where to draw that line. It's a position that I earnestly support in the face of a moral question that has no clear answer.

Stephen Karakashian
Milwaukie, Ore.

To the Editor:

My mother was raised without a mother. My grandmother, after having four children, did not want a fifth. They were Italian immigrants, poor, and could hardly support the four children they did have. Because of this, my grandmother had an abortion. And because abortions were illegal at the time, she went to a back alley abortionist.

She developed an infection but would not go to a hospital because she was afraid she would be arrested, and she died. As a lapsed Catholic, I think abortion is horrible. But I will defend any woman's decision to have one.

Barbara Vogell
Nesconset, N.Y.

To the Editor:

Re "[When Abortions Were Illegal](#)" (Sunday Review, Jan. 23):

I was 18 in 1969 when I wound up in the back seat of an old Cadillac riding down a dirt road in Birmingham, Ala., where I had come to have an abortion. The doctor declined after examining me. Too far along, he said. But he knew someone else.

The three-room wood shack had three barking dogs, urine on the floor, and a room with a bare light bulb hanging over a sheet of plywood over two sawhorses. There was a medical diagram on the wall. I climbed up, and the wild-haired old redhead inserted a tube through my cervix and stuffed cotton batting in my vagina to hold it in place.

About 36 hours later, with a fever and after hemorrhaging, friends dropped me off outside the hospital. But they wouldn't admit me without parental permission! I phoned an older woman friend and asked her to pose as my mother and agree to surgery. Police surrounded me. Who did this to you? I did this to myself. Who did this to you? I did this to myself.

A dilation and curettage was performed. I was lucky. I lived. But I almost died. And there will always be disadvantaged, uninformed, scared, alone young women and girls who will suffer without available health care.

Angela Fremont
New York

To the Editor:

Thank you for sharing these stories of women's pain and bravery in seeking and receiving abortions before Roe v. Wade, and the lives they went on to lead. But I wonder, what would the women have said when asked about the children they might have had, and the lives they could have led? These stories are important, too — and left out all too often.

Mitchell Goins
Chicago

To the Editor:

In "[The Case Against Abortion](#)" (column, Dec. 2) Ross Douthat wrote about the "slippery slope" of declaring that fetuses are not persons. But another slippery slope has already happened: [A pregnant woman was shot in the belly](#), killing her unborn child, and *she* was arrested because she started the fight. That is where logic gets us.

A fetus is a human life; that's logical. But if a just society is based on logic, a humane society is based on compassion. Overturning Roe means putting people in jail, for all

manner of miscarriages and instances where a woman didn't prevent harm to her unborn child.

Erika Bachiochi (“[I Refused to Vote for Trump, but I’m Grateful for His Court Picks](#),” Opinion guest essay, Dec. 9) and Tish Harrison Warren are full of ideas I agree with. But the society they seek should not depend on throwing people into jail.

Maybe we’re finally realizing there’s a false choice: pitting the “logic” of being pro-life against a “right” that is often the only choice. The answer lies in neither worshipping logic nor creating a competition between rights. The answer is compassion.

The current threat to legal abortion is leading to conversations we should have had all along. I hope it leads to common ground.

Amy Crider
Chicago

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“I was ready to
die rather than tell.”
Sandra, 72, had an abortion in 1968.

[“When Abortions Were Illegal”](#) (Sunday Review, Jan. 23)



BEFORE ROE

By Ilana Panich-Linsman and Lauren Kelley

Photographs by Ilana Panich-Linsman

Ms. Panich-Linsman is a photographer in Austin, Texas. Ms. Kelley is a member of the editorial board.

The end of Roe v. Wade is coming.

The Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling in June in a case from Mississippi called *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, and that ruling will likely overturn or gut *Roe* — that imperfect but critical precedent that has given Americans the right to abortion since 1973. Since Jan. 22, 1973, to be precise.

The week of its 49th birthday, *Roe v. Wade* is hobbled. Not only is it unlikely to make it to 50 in any recognizable form, but for millions of women across the country who live in states where abortion is almost unobtainable even now, it might as well already be gone.

Still, *Roe's* demise will be shattering, and there is much work to do in preparing for it. One important part of that work is studying what came before. That's not because what comes after *Roe v. Wade* will be the same; today, women have better access to information about safely managing their own abortions, and it is becoming increasingly easy to get hold of pills with which they can do so. The risks for these women are often more legal than they are medical.

Rather, we must remember the struggles of Americans who had abortions before the procedure was widely available — like the women photographed below, many of them telling their stories for the first time — because we will need to draw from their experiences in fighting back. Yes, a fight will be needed to regain access to abortion for millions once *Roe* is gone. And these women have waged that fight. They have waged it with their bodies. And they have the scars to prove it.

“It was a practical decision, not a moral one.”

Katherine Deutch Tatlock

Had an abortion in 1960

“I don’t know why I entered into this relationship, because I was not really attracted to him,” said Ms. Tatlock, who was sharing a place in San Francisco with several roommates. “I had too much to drink, it was late at night, and we had sex,” she said. “It was not a fun thing for me. I think I blacked out. It was the first time I ever had sex, and I got pregnant.” She had always wanted a baby, but not like this. Not then. “I was a baby myself,” she said.

The family doctor Ms. Tatlock saw laughed at her when she asked about an abortion, but suggested she go to the hospital, where she might be approved for the procedure.

At the hospital, she went in circles with a psychiatrist for about an hour before the psychiatrist finally said to her: “You need to tell me whether you would kill yourself if you can’t have an abortion, or kill your baby.”

“I was crying. I had to lie,” said Ms. Tatlock. “I said as fast as I could, ‘Yes, I would kill myself or my baby if I can’t have an abortion.’”

Ms. Tatlock had her abortion. She was OK. One of her roommates, who became pregnant weeks later and sought an illegal abortion, had a much harder experience: “Her uterus was pierced by an object. As I’m telling this story, I am trembling. It really was scary. She almost died in my arms.”



“The abortion was a life-altering experience. It felt very self-determining and self-affirming.”

Loretta Ross

Had an abortion in 1970

When Ms. Ross became pregnant at age 14 as a result of incest, her parents considered sending her to Mexico for an abortion. They lived in San Antonio, and they had heard of many girls and women crossing the border to end their unwanted pregnancies. But so many of them never came back. Instead, they placed their daughter in a home for unwed mothers and encouraged her to give the baby up for adoption.

“The home was a compound behind really tall walls with barbed-wire fencing,” Ms. Ross recalled. “I was the only black girl that I could see there.”

“We did no gossiping, no giggling, no exchanging of stories about what had happened to us,” she said of the 20 or so other girls who were in the home. “It was like we had all taken vows of silence.”

She remembers the message from staff being: “We were bad girls, because that’s what got us in the compound, but if you just do what we say, then you can come back and become good girls again.”

Ms. Ross decided not to put the baby up for adoption after all. Not long after she had her son, she went to Howard University in Washington, where she became vice president of her class.

She became pregnant again at age 16, and this time, she knew she wanted to get an abortion. Abortion was by then available in the District of Columbia, but she needed parental permission. Ms. Ross’s mother wanted her to drop out of college instead.

“By the time I had gone through all the fighting with my mom, and all the delays, I was in my third trimester,” said Ms. Ross. “I had to have a saline abortion, where they inject this huge — it felt like a mile long — needle into your stomach, and induce labor.”

It turns out she had been pregnant with twins. “I could have conceivably been a mother with three kids at 16,” Ms. Ross said. “And all I can do is thank God that that abortion was available to me in 1970, because otherwise my story would have had a vastly different ending.”



“I was lucky — not smart, but lucky.”

Linda

Had an abortion in 1969

“He casually walked over and told me to wait a couple of minutes and then go outside and follow him, like a spy movie,” said Linda of the man she met up with one night long ago in the French Quarter of New

Orleans. “I guess it says something about my desperation and determination that I followed his instructions.”

She followed the man to a restaurant, and he led her to an apartment above it.

“All of a sudden I realize I’m walking upstairs with a strange man who’s going to perform an abortion on me,” she said. “And there is a little bit of looking around, before you go up those steps, and just thinking, well, surely this is going to be OK. It was, but I realized too, looking back on it, how lucky I was.”



“I would never, ever want anybody to go through what I went through.”

Arla Ralston

Had an abortion in 1970

A Methodist minister referred Ms. Ralston and her boyfriend to an abortion provider in Chicago, but first she confirmed the pregnancy with her family doctor in Iowa. “He was livid and yelled at me,” she said, adding that he “underlined ‘unmarried’ three times” on the referral note he wrote for her.

“The procedure cost \$350, a lot of money in 1970,” she said. It was her first time on an airplane.

Years later, she helped establish a family planning clinic in her hometown.



“I was a teenager, I was basically a child, and children make mistakes.”

Lois Ice

Had an abortion in 1969

Ms. Ice found herself on a rectangular dining table, just long enough for her to lie on, as a woman who might have been a nurse performed an abortion on her without anesthesia.

She was still in high school in Detroit. She didn't tell her parents, even though her father was a doctor.

"I was thinking, well, I can take care of this myself, I don't need a parent to help me," she said.



“I couldn’t handle more than one child.”

Jean Emma Frances

Had an abortion in 1968

Ms. Frances and her husband at the time had a 1-year-old, and they knew they couldn’t afford to have another child. So she called a work friend who told her he had been trained by a doctor to perform abortions.

She had to visit him three times before the procedure worked. “I don’t even think he dilated me. I think he just inserted the catheter,” she said. She ended up in the hospital with an infection.



“In all of the years since then, I’ve never told anyone this story.”

Wanda Kilbourne

Had an abortion in 1970

A friend helped Ms. Kilbourne, who at the time was a 22-year-old single mother in Phoenix, schedule an abortion in Mexico.

“Fortunately, I came through it fine,” she said, but “I had to lie to so many people to get this taken care of.”

“I still can’t imagine ever telling my parents about it. I mean, they’ve been dead for 30 years, and I still can’t imagine telling them about it,” she said, adding, “Even my brother, who is just about my best friend in the world, doesn’t know about it.”



“There were so many girls from that era that did not survive.”

Rita Ray

Had an abortion in 1959

“I remember this boyfriend drove there,” said Ms. Ray, who was a high school senior in Louisville, Ky. “It was at night, dark, through an alley. I was told to enter in through the back, going up a flight of steps; maybe it was an apartment.”

She met a woman who led her into a bedroom. “She instructed me to lay down on the bed, and she did this procedure. I knew she wasn’t a medical professional. She had a crucifix on her wall above the bed,” she said.

“I was lucky that I didn’t die.”



“I was ready to die rather than tell.”

Sandra

Had an abortion in 1968

Sandra was 19 years old when she fainted at her job at a bank in Euless, Texas. She was taken to a hospital, where she was treated for a severe infection. She recalls being asked: “You had something that was poisoning your system – can you help us at all on this? Because there have been several women who have come in, girls, recently, with the same problem.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sandra replied.

Knowing that her husband didn’t want a child, Sandra had gone to a sleazy motel and paid a man \$500 to insert a catheter into her uterus. He injected her with something that “smelled like bathroom soap,” she said.

She never told her husband about the abortion. At the time, she didn’t tell anyone.



“I wanted to be able to make my own decisions.”

Elizabeth Ramirez Watson

Had an abortion in 1973

Ms. Watson was in medical school in Mexico, where abortion was illegal in most cases. She had heard that abortions in the United States were now legal, so two friends drove with her from the city of Torreón to Texas. But when they got to the doctor's office, she was turned away.

Consulting the telephone book, they went from doctor to doctor, but struggled to find anyone who would provide an abortion. Finally, a nurse in a doctor's office agreed to insert a catheter into Ms. Watson.

“When she finished, she taped everything and then she said, ‘Dress as quickly as possible.’ She left the catheter in. She taped it to my leg. She wanted me like, boom, out the door,” said Ms. Watson.

When she went back to Mexico to continue her medical training, she hemorrhaged. “I really felt like I was going to die,” she said.

She eventually became a doctor and moved to Texas. She has two daughters, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild, with another on the way.



Ilana Panich-Linsman is a photographer whose projects focus on women's rights, health care and the U.S.-Mexico border.

Correction:

A previous version of this article misstated the year of one woman's abortion. Linda had an abortion in 1969, not 1959.



By Lauren MacIvor Thompson
Dec 13, 2019



By Diana Greene Foster
Nov. 22, 2021



By Mary Fitzgerald
Dec 2, 2021