

Opinion

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Commentary: SC abortion bill gives batterers another way to control, abuse women

BY SARA BARBER
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Since the U.S. Supreme Court's Dobbs decision in June, countless stories have been shared by survivors, advocates, doctors and other experts that detail how removing access to abortion care is devastating to victims of sexual and domestic violence.

Advocates and survivors have also stressed that the extremely narrow rape and incest exceptions create further harm by requiring physicians to report the circumstances to law enforcement, forcing a violation of confidentiality, which is critical to survivors' safety in the aftermath of violent assaults.

These exceptions also do nothing to help victims of domestic violence, coercive control or reproductive coercion. Abusers have been handed yet another tool to control their partners while the bodily autonomy of all women is being undermined.



And despite all this, South Carolina lawmakers have chosen to close their ears, minds and hearts to the suffering of these victims and their families — evident in potential legislation introduced in both the House and Senate to further restrict access to abortion care.

Rather than choosing to hear the concerns of survivors who've lived through these terrible circumstances, rather than listening to the majority of South Carolinians who oppose an abortion ban, rather than recognizing how even these exceptions are inadequate and finding a better path forward — legislators are turning further away from those who had no choice regarding their current circumstance.

Their focus is instead on implementing greater restrictions that further diminish survivors' chances to reclaim their autonomy separate from the people who harmed them.

We cannot stay silent. We cannot sit back and allow their lack of compassion and refusal to learn about these issues exacerbate the dangers women face as a consequence of domestic and sexual violence.

We are here to speak up and stand with those whose voices have been ignored and marginalized, both in their homes and now by South Carolina lawmakers.

These are the facts regarding sexual violence, domestic violence and pregnancy:

- Rape is a violent crime that removes all choice and control over a victim's body and can result in unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.
- Women living in abusive relationships often do not have autonomy to make decisions for themselves, including the decisions to have sexual intercourse or to get pregnant.
- Once a woman becomes pregnant, violence frequently escalates, putting her at greater risk of domestic homicide — a leading cause of death for pregnant women.
- An abusive partner may forbid the use of birth control, often with the intent to conceive and increase a partner's ties to him, furthering his power and control.
- Denying access to critical health care, including abortion care, increases the danger a victim is in and decreases her ability to seek safety from her rapist or abusive partner.

Taking into consideration all the testimonies, the experiences of lived trauma and the real-life challenges survivors and doctors already are facing, we find ourselves in an alarming situation.



We fear that the legislation, which will be debated Tuesday by the House Judiciary Committee, will be used as one more weapon to keep victims trapped in abusive relationships.

We fear for those who are no longer able to escape their abusers because they do not have access or the financial means to seek abortion care.

We fear for the children born into these abusive situations.

We fear for survivors of sexual assault who are forced to share custody with their rapist.

We fear for the women who will be sued in civil court by their rapist, their former partner, his family or others for accessing critical abortion care.

And above all, we fear that the violence will only get worse.

Everyone knows someone who has been a victim of domestic and sexual violence.

We ask that instead of adding to their pain, you consider this truth and approach the issue with a sense of compassion and care for all those who have experienced violence and intimidation.

We ask you to open your ears, minds and hearts and join us in standing with survivors.

Sara Barber is the executive director of the S.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

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