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## Op-Ed on the Need to Protect Reproductive Rights

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In the United States, it is already getting harder and harder for people to access reproductive health services. In Alabama, for example, Governor Kay Ivey signed a law that banned abortion from the time a person was “known to be pregnant” with no exception for rape or incest. In 2019, 58% of U.S. women that were of reproductive age lived in states like Alabama that were hostile to reproductive rights. Reproductive services not only provide women with the choice to make decisions about their bodies, but it provides them with quality health care. Without reproductive health clinics, millions of women could be without their primary source of health care which would increase the number of unsafe abortions, unwanted pregnancies, problems during pregnancy, people spreading STDs, and many more issues. All of these critical issues can be prevented if we protect reproductive rights and increase access to these services.

Research from the American Medical Association suggests that when women are denied reproductive services like abortion or contraceptives, they experience a greater risk for depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. The effects are also shown to linger even five years after being denied reproductive care which increases the chances of lower life satisfaction and lower self-esteem. Not only is mental health at stake when women do not have access to reproductive health care services, but physical health is jeopardized. Research has also shown that women are more likely to experience greater health during and after pregnancy when they have access to reproductive services. The physical well-being of a baby also increases with more access to reproductive services including fewer premature births and fewer infants being born at a low birth weight. Researchers estimated in 2010 that public funding for contraceptives resulted in a reduction of one million unplanned births, over 150,000 of those births would have been premature, at a low birth weight, or both.

Recently, the American Journal of Public Health found that increased access to reproductive health services increases educational and career opportunities for women. When we give women the choice to delay or plan their pregnancies, it gives them more choices to pursue higher education or professional careers and also gives children better outcomes. Without this choice, many women are left to abandon their goals to find a way to care for their babies. This could very well be the case for many young women with lower incomes like myself. I know that if I were to get pregnant now as a 21-year-old college student, I would not be able to provide a quality life for my child. If I was forced to have a baby I wasn't ready for, I know the consequences would be immense for not only me but my baby. I most likely would have to drop out of college, unable to achieve my degree, which would make it hard for me to provide a quality living environment. Providing and protecting access to reproductive services allows all women, and young women like me, to wait until they are financially stable and ready to provide a quality life for a child.

Reproductive rights in the United States have become politicized, especially within the past four years. This has brought forward many myths about reproductive services, specifically abortion. One of these myths is that "a lot of people get abortions in the third trimester." This opposing argument is simply false due to the fact that 89% of abortions occur within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy and about two-thirds occur at eight weeks of pregnancy. Another common opposing argument is that "people who get an abortion feel guilty afterward." However, years of research suggest that having an abortion does not increase a women's risk for post-traumatic stress or depression. Many of these arguments against reproductive rights create a false perception and hurt the efforts to protect reproductive health services in our country. For reproductive rights to be protected, it is up to you and your community.

The efforts to protect reproductive rights could not be possible without the commitments from you and members of your community. It is important to elect policymakers that support a women's right to choose and that plan to expand access to reproductive services to everyone in all parts of the country. This includes pushing to restore insurance coverage so that services like abortion, among other reproductive services, are affordable for low-income women. Educating the community on the real benefits and services that reproductive health services have on women is also an important step to reproductive freedom. Writing letters, sending emails, organizing peaceful protests, and calling elected representatives when new legislation arises can be extremely effective when trying to get your voices heard.