

Opening Statement of Chairman Sheldon Whitehouse
Senate Committee on the Budget
No Rights to Speak of: The Economic Harms of Restricting Reproductive Freedom
February 28, 2024

I call this hearing to order. Today we will discuss women's rights — their right to bodily autonomy, their right to set the course of their own life, and their right to economic freedom. I hear often that the Budget Committee should *only* be concerned with debt and deficits. But any serious conversation about debt and deficits must also analyze threats to economic growth and stability. Debt and deficits do not occur in a vacuum. They result from the fiscal decisions we make, and from what we do that strengthens or weakens our economy.

Reproductive rights are intrinsically tied to economic opportunity. Reproductive justice is economic justice. Restricting one restricts the other. As Professor Myers, the leading economist in this space, will testify today: we can measure the economic harms from dismantling *Roe v. Wade*, especially in already marginalized communities.

The *Dobbs* decision triggered an immediate crisis for millions of women, as antiquated state bans snapped back into place, and some states implemented new restrictions on reproductive freedom. Our witnesses Allie Phillips and Dr. Zahedi-Spung will explain how these draconian state laws put patients, their families, and physicians into heartbreaking situations.

About 25 million women of reproductive age live in states with severe restrictions on abortion, most in states that failed to expand Medicaid and already had higher rates of maternal death. Black women are disproportionately affected, as many live in southern states, with the worst restrictive policies, with existing structural barriers to care, and with already high rates of pregnancy-related complication and death.

Doctors too lose their freedom, to practice medicine as they are trained, delivering patient-centered, evidence-based care. I hear from Rhode Island OBGYNs about their colleagues in other states being put in impossible positions, with the lives of women and babies put in jeopardy.

For a great many reasons — often deeply personal and harrowing — one in four women seek an abortion before age 45. One in four. That freedom — to decide if and when to have a child — affects a woman's life trajectory and her family's financial security. As the pivotal Turnaway Study found: women denied an abortion, who had to carry a pregnancy to term, were four times more likely to live in poverty.

The reverse holds true too. Reproductive freedom and choice — including abortions and contraception — lowers maternal mortality, alleviates health risks, increases women's earnings, increases the probability that women attend college, and boosts local economies. Freedom turns out to have economic value.

In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, these economic values were key to the Court's holding. The Court said: "The ability of women to participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation has been facilitated by their ability to control their reproductive lives."

Economists and researchers have since quantified the damage of state abortion restrictions to local and state economies, and the correlation is easy: the more extreme a state's restrictions, the more its economy suffers. A new study estimates that state abortion restrictions cost the national economy, on average, \$173 billion per year.

In overturning *Roe* and *Casey*, a small, right-wing majority of a captured Supreme Court inserted the government into the personal life decisions of millions of women; removing that freedom, never minding these consequences. This is a Court with members on a mission. This freedom fell at their hands. Next may be the freedom to take Mifepristone, an abortion medication long proven safe and effective. Next could come the freedom to use contraception. Even in vitro fertilization (IVF) is under the gun, at the hands of right-wing extremists.

A Republican-led Congress and a second Trump administration could mean a national abortion ban. If re-elected, Trump could abuse Executive power to remove Mifepristone from markets, or try to prevent abortion medications, or even contraceptives, from going through the mail. The Republican effort to ban mail-order medication could cause even larger economic damage than *Dobbs*.

Generations of women fought for the freedom to make their own personal decisions. They fought, and they won. And their victory brought economic gains in which we all share. But now Trump and an extremist GOP are trying to undo it all, leaving young women and girls in America with fewer rights than their grandmothers. Women and girls have lives worth respecting and protecting too, and no one should be forced to carry a pregnancy to term against their will. Stripping women of this freedom casts a long shadow over their lives, and their families' lives, and it casts a long shadow over our economy as well. Congress should safeguard access to abortion, and contraception, and codify *Roe* into law. This is something women should decide; it's just not the government's business.

I will now turn it over to Ranking Member Grassley.