



Testimony of Patricia S. Ravenhorst, J.D
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SC Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
Before the Senate Medical Affairs Committee
Opposition to Restrictions on Abortion Care Access
August 17, 2022

To the members of the Senate Medical Affairs Committee:

On behalf of the SC Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault or SCCADVASA, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony about how reproductive autonomy and access to abortion care is critical to safeguarding the life, health, and safety of the thousands of people in South Carolina who are trapped in abusive relationships or have been the victims of sexual assault.

My name is Patricia Ravenhorst, and I am an attorney from Greenville, South Carolina. The majority of my 22-year legal career has been dedicated to fighting for the rights of crime victims in South Carolina. I have had the honor of standing alongside hundreds of survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child sexual abuse and human trafficking as they fought for their right to justice, their right to privacy, their right to safety, and quite literally their right to simply be alive.

Today, I am here in my role as the General Counsel & Director of Systems Advocacy of SCCADVASA, which is the statewide non-profit organization dedicated to ending domestic and sexual violence in South Carolina. We support the work of the other 22 non-profit organizations throughout the state whose advocates directly provide life-saving services, information, and support to victims.

As you deliberate today regarding the right to access abortion care in South Carolina, we ask you to carefully consider the rights of survivors of both domestic violence and sexual assault. We ask you to consider their right to live a life that is free from further trauma, free from further risk of physical harm and free from the risk of being murdered by their abuser.

Pregnancy in an Abusive Relationship Often Leads to an Escalation of Physical Violence and Increased Risk of Death by Homicide. Access to abortion care is essential to save the lives of victims in abusive relationships. There is broad consensus that when a patient is facing a “substantial risk of death” or “substantial and irreversible physical impairment”, they should continue to have access to abortion care. Therefore, it is critical to understand the correlation between intimate partner violence, pregnancy, and the dire and often deadly consequences of limiting access to abortion care for people in abusive relationships.

In South Carolina, 42.3% of women experience intimate partner violence, sexual violence or stalking in their lifetime. People living in abusive relationships often do not have the autonomy to make decisions for themselves, including the decision to have sexual intercourse or to get pregnant. In fact, 10.3 million U.S. women reported having a partner who tried to get them pregnant against their will or refused to use contraception. This is commonly referred to as reproductive coercion.

Once someone in an abusive relationship becomes pregnant, the violence frequently escalates. In fact, more than 320,000 pregnant women are abused by their partner each year, and the odds of experiencing such abuse increases by 10% for each pregnancy. This leads to the alarming reality that homicide is now one of the leading causes of death during pregnancy.¹ Therefore, denying access to critical healthcare, including abortion care, increases the danger a victim is in and decreases their ability to seek safety or leave their abusive partner. Banning access to abortion care could be a death sentence for people in abusive relationships.

Reproductive autonomy is a chance to break the cycle of violence. Currently, up to 22% of pregnant people seeking abortions report they are in an abusive relationship, and many report that concern about violence is a reason they decide to terminate their pregnancy. Those who report violence as a reason for abortion describe not wanting to expose children to violence and believing that having the baby will tether them to an abusive partner.² Limiting access to abortion care increases the likelihood that victims will be forced to remain in the relationship and raise children in an increasingly abusive environment; thus, continuing the cycle of violence.

The Rape & Incest Exception Fail to Protect the Privacy and Safety Rights of Domestic and Sexual Violence Victims. Victims have the right to access abortion care without conditions that require disclosure of their victimization to a medical provider and mandatory reporting to law enforcement. Rape is a violent crime that removes all choice and control over a victim's body and can result in unplanned and unwanted pregnancy that may tether the victim permanently to their rapist. Both domestic and sexual violence are intimate crimes that often go unreported due to shame, fear, or the relationship between the victim and the offender. In fact, in South Carolina, 92% of sexual assault victims had a prior relationship with the offender. Conditioning access to healthcare, including abortion care, on a victim's willingness and ability to disclose or report what happened causes unnecessary trauma, threatens their physical safety and violates their state constitutional right to privacy and the

¹ Wallace, Maeve PhD; Gillispie-Bell, Veronica MD; Cruz, Kiara MPH; Davis, Kelly MPA; Vilda, Dovile PhD. *Homicide During Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period in the United States, 2018–2019.*

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<<https://journals.lww.com/greenjournal/Abstract/2021/11000/Homicide_During_Pregnancy_and_the_Postpartum.10.aspx>>

² Roberts SC, Biggs MA, Chibber KS, Gould H, Rocca CH, Foster DG. *Risk of violence from the man involved in the pregnancy after receiving or being denied an abortion.* BMC Med. 2014 Sep 29;12:144.

doi: 10.1186/s12916-014-0144-z. PMID: 25262880; PMCID: PMC4182793

<<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4182793/>>>



rights guaranteed in the SC Victims' Bill of Rights. Additionally, rape and incest exceptions simply fail to provide any protection for victims of domestic violence or reproductive coercion.

Restricting Access to Abortion Care Violates the State Constitutional Rights of Victims of Crime. As mentioned previously, crime victims in South Carolina – including domestic and sexual violence victims – are not only protected by the SC Constitution's explicit right to privacy, but they are also protected by the SC Victims' Bill of Rights. The Victims' Bill of Rights in Article I, Section 24 was added to our state's constitution "to preserve and protect victims' rights to justice and due process regardless of race, **sex**, age, religion, or economic status."

Restricting victim access to abortion care or conditioning that access on reporting the crime to their doctor and law enforcement violates the victim's constitutional rights to "be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity," "to be free from intimidation, harassment, or abuse" and to "be reasonably protected from the accused." In the aftermath of domestic or sexual violence, victims should not be forced to further jeopardize their privacy, health, physical safety, or their lives in order to safely access abortion care.

Whether you realize it or not, everyone in this room knows someone who has been a victim of intimate partner violence. We ask that instead of adding to their pain, you approach the issue with a sense of compassion and care for all those who have experienced violence and intimidation and ensure that the laws you pass are not the source of further harm. We ask you to join us in protecting the health, safety, and lives of victims of domestic violence and sexual assault by maintaining their broad access to abortion care.

Sincerely,

Patricia S, Ravenhorst
General Counsel & Director of Systems Advocacy
SC Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault