
The liberation of motherhood

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The right to abortion is under threat in the United States and parts of Europe. Health is a fundamental human right that can never be taken for granted.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

On 30 May 2022, it will be 44 years since the Norwegian parliament (the Storting), with a majority of one, voted in favour of elective abortions up to gestation week 12 in Norway (1). The fight had been a long one. In 1915, with her lecture 'The liberation of motherhood', Katti Anker Møller (1868–1945) was the first in Norway to publicly advocate for the legalisation of abortion and free access to contraception. A little over 50 years later, in 1967, Aase Lionæs (1907–99) was the first to fight for free access to abortion from the benches of the Storting (1).

Many Western countries experienced a similar development in the view on abortion during this period. In the United States, developments culminated in 1973, when the US Supreme Court ruled that women have the right to an abortion up to the point of fetal viability (2). Since then, this issue has continued to divide the United States on a growing number of fronts, and on 2 May 2022, the website Politico published an internal document from the US Supreme Court showing how five of the current nine judges want to overturn the 1973 ruling (3). The absence of a national abortion law in the United States means that if the ruling is indeed overturned, the legislature of each state will be responsible for determining whether women should continue to have the right to an abortion. At the moment, it seems that abortion is set to be outlawed in about 25 of the country's 50 states (4).

Principled opposition to abortion is strong, albeit surprisingly recent, among conservative Christians in the United States, especially in evangelical congregations. The argument that life is sacred from the moment of conception only emerged in these communities in the 1970s (5). Such views did exist prior to this, but primarily in the Catholic Church, and even there it did not become part of the ecclesiastical doctrine until 1917 (5). The fight against abortion can thus also be interpreted as a clash of cultures, where opposition often goes hand in hand with other issues among the deeply conservative American right. It is already being debated which other traditional liberal rights, such as the right to contraception and same-sex marriage, may be at risk if the arguments set out in the Supreme Court's leaked document are allowed to prevail (6).

«Restricting the access to abortion does not reduce the number of abortions»

In recent decades, a growing number of countries have improved the access to abortion. However, the progress is far from standard. In large parts of Latin America and on the African continent, abortion is either totally prohibited or very strictly regulated (7), and access to contraception in many of these countries is also severely restricted.

Authoritarian countries in Europe are also becoming more restrictive. In Romania, abortion rights are being gradually undermined, in pace with the increasing problems in accessing contraception and mounting pressure on sex education in schools (8). The right to abortion still exists in Hungary, but there too it is under pressure (9). Poland has virtually a total ban on abortion, and healthcare personnel are being prosecuted for providing help with abortions (10). In Slovakia, a recent proposal to severely restrict abortion rights was narrowly rejected in the National Assembly (11).

Restricting the access to abortion does not reduce the number of abortions. On the contrary, estimates show that in countries where abortion is prohibited, the abortion rate is 37 per 1000 women per year, while in countries where abortion is permitted, the corresponding figure is 34 per 1000 women per year (12). Forcing abortion out of the

health service and into the back streets also has major repercussions for public health. Unsafe abortions, i.e. abortions performed outside the health service, are the cause of 4.7–13.2 % of maternal deaths on a worldwide scale (13). Global estimates from 2010–14 show that 45 % of all abortions are unsafe, and a third of these are performed using invasive and dangerous methods by people with no training (13).

More than 100 years after Katti Anker Møller's lecture, the right to abortion is something that is taken for granted in Norway. This is no longer the case in the United States and some parts of Europe. Health is a fundamental human right that needs to be secured afresh for each generation.

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