“The Handmaid’s Tale” Today

What would happen if women lost their say-so regarding reproductive rights?

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When women began dressing in flowing red robes and demure white bonnets à la the handmaids in Margaret Atwood’s book The Handmaids Tale to protest anti-abortion laws in different states, the media took notice. The costumes helped draw attention to the ongoing war against women’s reproductive right to legally terminate a pregnancy.

During some protests, the women filed into legislative buildings en masse—sometimes holding signs—and sat or stood silently. At one event, they chanted their response to anti-abortion laws with a chorus of “We do not consent!” The message was clear: Women demand control over their own bodies.

On January 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in Roe v. Wade that access to a safe and legal abortion is a constitutional right. Almost immediately, the ruling faced political efforts to overturn the decision; such challenges have persisted ever since.

Currently, a slew of states—including Alabama (which bans all abortions with no exceptions), Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, Louisiana and Ohio—significantly restrict women’s ability to get an abortion. Roadblocks to abortion in these states take the form of doctor and hospital requirements, time limits on a woman’s stage of pregnancy, the viability of the fetus, state constraints on funding, rules for private insurance coverage, compulsory counseling, waiting periods and special guidelines that necessitate parental consent and notification for minors to undergo the procedure.

Now, these limitations have become commonplace. Could they one day give men in power mastery over women’s reproduction?

Interestingly, Atwood’s book was published in the 1980s, a time when states were passing anti-abortion laws.

In Missouri, the ruling handed down in Webster v. Reproductive Health Services in 1989 upheld a state law that severely limited women’s access to an abortion and established a precedent that states could restrict care for this medical procedure.

Through the years, attempts in other states to erode Roe v. Wade have achieved varying degrees of success.

In 2017, Representative Justin Humphrey (R–OK) introduced a bill stipulating that no abortion would be performed in the state “without the written informed consent from the father of the fetus.”

Like the powerful men in Gilead—the fictitious city in Atwood’s novel—Humphrey views pregnant women as “hosts” for the embryos they carry.

“The control of women and babies has been a feature of every repressive regime on the planet,” Atwood wrote in an essay published in 2017 in The New York Times. “Of those promoting enforced childbirth, it should be asked: Cui bono? Who profits by it? Sometimes this sector, sometimes that. Never no one.”

Many draw a parallel between the social order oppressing women in Gilead and what America might be like should Republican lawmakers succeed in rolling back all the legislation that has passed thanks to Roe v. Wade.

When asked whether The Handmaid’s Tale is a prediction, Atwood preferred to describe the book as an “antiprediction,” writing, “If this future can be described in detail, maybe it won’t happen.”

But, she cautions, we also can’t depend upon such wishful thinking.

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