

Overruling Roe v Wade: The International Dimension

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American exceptionalism can be a dreary thing, and no more so than each time a US president promotes the country’s imperial credentials and continued prowess. But in matters of literacy, shared wealth, and health care, the US has been outpaced by other states less inclined towards remorseless social Darwinism.

The overruling of [Roe v Wade](#) by the US Supreme Court in [Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization](#) has created a sense that those outside the US will somehow draw inspiration from the example of the sacred foetus and the diminished autonomy of its carrier.

MSI Reproductive Choices, a group furnishing contraception and safe abortion services in 37 countries, was palpably concerned. “As a global abortion provider, we know that the impact of this decision will be also felt around the world,” [warned](#) Sarah Shaw, Global Head of Advocacy at MSI Reproductive Choices. “From the Global Gag Rule to US funded anti-choice groups who harass women outside our clinics and lobby governments to restrict access, decisions made in the US have an impact beyond their borders.”

The organisation’s Africa Director, Banchiamlak Dessalegn [is also worried](#) about the repercussions of US judicial reasoning. “Today’s decision has the potential to harm women, not just in America but around the world, and undermine the efforts of countries across Africa to recognise a woman’s right to choose.”

Beyond any discernible court legacy beyond national borders, the US role in stifling abortion arguments globally is far from negligible. Republican administrations since Ronald Reagan have made a habit of enforcing the “global gag rule”, also known as the Mexico City policy, limiting US aid regarding family planning services. Since 1973, Congress has tended to [attach the ban](#) to foreign aid spending bills where US funding will go to foreign groups that perform abortions or “motivate” individuals to seek them.

In terms of situating the shift *Dobbs* entails, the US finds itself keeping company with a

small rear guard in the abortion wars. Since the 1990s, over 60 countries have taken the move of permitting or decriminalising abortion. A clutch of countries have bucked the trend, among them Poland, Malta, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

In Europe, the US example is likely to stir an anti-abortion frontline that has all been long battered. Agenda Europe, a network of anti-abortion, pro-Christian and far-right organisations comprising activists, commentators and politicians, is one of its most active collectives. Since the early 2010s, its participants have sought to generate critical support for the standard slew of causes: pro-life, pro-family, anti-LGBT rights. Their continued work has been significant enough to catch the interest of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (EPFPD).

On its own [website](#), Agenda Europe seeks to correct “egregious falsehoods” about alleged extremism and militancy, objecting to the label of “religious extremists” attributed to them by such the EPFPD. “Members of Agenda Europe promote the dignity of every human person, the importance of the family, and religious freedom, as enshrined in all major human rights treaties. As Europeans, our members share the Christian Philosophical and Intellectual foundations of our continent.”

The abortion battleground reached Europe’s centre stage in June 2021, when the European Parliament [passed a nonbinding resolution](#) urging EU countries to see any interference with access to contraception, fertility treatment maternity care and abortion as human rights breaches. While 378 MEPs voted in favour, 255 voted against, with the centre-right European People’s Party and the European Conservative and Reformists [arguing](#), much along the lines used in *Dobbs*, that such policy should be left to individual EU states. But even in the final text, its original drafter, Croatian Socialist MEP Pedrag Fred Matić, took issue with the presence a “conscience clause” that would permit doctors to withhold abortions “on grounds of religion or conscience”.

It was with a Christian Philosophical spirit that Poland imposed a near-complete ban on abortions which took effect in 2021. The state has also, in rather creepy fashion, created a [pregnancy registry](#) which has been seen as a surveillance tool that can be used to track women should they order abortion pills or seek an abortion overseas.

For all this pessimism, the already hefty movement in favour of abortion rights is just as likely to assert itself in the wake of developments in the US. Milly Nanyombi Kaggwa, senior clinical advisor for Africa at Population Services International, [points out](#) with necessary perspective that abortion is only strictly prohibited in 5% of countries.

Groups such as MSI Reproductive Choices have also drawn a line in the sand of resistance. “To anyone who wants to deny someone’s right to make decisions about what is right for their body and their future, our message is ‘We are not going back’.” *Dobbs*, in short, may prove on the international stage to be more damp squib than firecracker.

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