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Abortion: UN is urged to intervene in “human rights crisis” in US after ending of rights

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Five international charities have called on the United Nations to act over what they have described as the “human rights crisis” in the United States in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2022 abortion ruling to restrict access to services for millions of women.

In an open letter the charities plead for UN officials and agencies to make an official visit to the US to ask politicians to comply with international law and their obligations as a UN member state to protect and uphold the rights to life, health, privacy, liberty, and security.^{1,2}

On 24 June 2022 the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade*, the landmark 1973 decision that protected women’s liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction.³

The letter, from agencies that include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Physicians for Human Rights, said that the restrictions on abortion deny “women’s decisional and bodily autonomy in a way that rejects the agency, dignity and equality of people who can become pregnant.”

The series of laws laid down by various US states to restrict abortion access after the Supreme Court ruling were a “continuation of the country’s devaluation of the lives of Black and Brown women, [and] communities of color and of lower socio-economic status are bearing the brunt of these laws” said the letter, which was signed by over 200 experts. It added, “Dozens of clinics have closed across the country since *Dobbs* [the 2022 ruling] was decided, increasing travel time and distance for women seeking care—and barring access for those women unable to travel.”⁴

The letter lists a series of responses from US healthcare practitioners about the effects of anti-abortion legislation on women’s healthcare, gained through interviews by two of the agencies. They describe cases where women who were miscarrying had difficulty in accessing abortion and where care was denied in cases of ectopic pregnancy. Other examples included hospitals delaying care until the woman’s health had deteriorated to a level most certainly to fit within narrow and vague “risk to life of the mother” exceptions and pregnant women forgoing prenatal care to avoid surveillance.

Christine Ryan, legal director of the international human rights organisation the Global Justice Center, one of the letter’s signatories, told the *Guardian* newspaper, “It has become almost tragically ironic that the US government uses the language of human rights to condemn state abuses against citizens of other countries. For too long, the US has been able to avoid that type of international scrutiny.

“The US must be castigated on the world stage for its treatment of women, girls, and others who can become pregnant—the scale and intensity of human rights violations that the US is inflicting on its population are near unfathomable at this point.”⁵

1 Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls. Mar 2023. https://www.globaljusticecenter.net/files/UNSpecialProceduresLetter_USAbortionRights.pdf.

2 Cox D. How overturning *Roe v Wade* has eroded privacy of personal data. *BMJ* 2022;378:o2075.

3 Tanne JH. US Supreme Court ends constitutional right to abortion. *BMJ* 2022;377. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1575 pmid: 35760421

4 Tanne JH. *Roe v Wade*: Medical bodies declare support for abortion rights, as doctors and states face confusion. *BMJ* 2022;378. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1643 pmid: 35787509

5 Noor P. UN urged to intervene over destruction of US abortion rights. Mar 2023. *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/02/destruction-us-abortion-laws-human-rights-violation-un>.