



## The Danger of Forced Pregnancy

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**By Laura Briggs**

When Amy Coney Barrett suggested that adoption and safe-haven laws were an adequate substitute for abortion care for people who did not want to be pregnant, she was essentially insisting that they do a kind of high-risk, uncompensated labor to produce a baby or child for adoptive families like hers.

Like the anti-abortion movement that supported her nomination for the Supreme Court, Coney Barrett is not shy about acknowledging that she is in favor of forced pregnancy, and that this

labor — in both senses of the term — could benefit other people who were childless or had fewer children than they wanted.

We know this work has value; people who hire women in the United States to carry a surrogate pregnancy pay them \$30,000 to \$50,000 (<https://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/family-finance/articles/how-much-surrogacy-costs-and-how-to-pay-for-it>). Denying abortion to women who want them, and then expecting them to relinquish the resulting baby for adoption, is asking them to do that same labor for free.

As Black feminist legal scholar Pamela Bridgewater has pointed out (<https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/crsj/vol7/iss1/4/>), there is a word for forcing people to do unpaid reproductive labor on behalf of others: enslavement ([https://www.google.com/search?gs\\_ssp=eJzj4tFP1zc0Sso1Si5OKjg9BJMKkpNTcnMS1dIVMhLLMnMzwMArdgK4A&q=breeding+a+nation&oq=breeding+a+nation&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j46i512j69i59j0i22i30j69i60.8098j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?gs_ssp=eJzj4tFP1zc0Sso1Si5OKjg9BJMKkpNTcnMS1dIVMhLLMnMzwMArdgK4A&q=breeding+a+nation&oq=breeding+a+nation&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j46i512j69i59j0i22i30j69i60.8098j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)). In fact, as she argues, forced pregnancy was key to the historic labor system of slavery in the United States — the children of enslaved mothers were themselves enslaved, and once the importation of African people for purposes of enslavement was banned in the United States in 1808, it was how slavers kept the system going and increased their own wealth, including by raping enslaved ([https://www.google.com/books/edition/Killing\\_the\\_Black\\_Body/Te-LDQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=rape](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Killing_the_Black_Body/Te-LDQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=rape)) women. Slavery was outlawed in the United States with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, but Coney Barrett apparently means to reinstitute a version of it.

Bridgewater's analogy with slavery is not an overreach. Denying abortion care particularly affects women of color and impoverished women. Black women are twice as likely (<https://www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2016/us-abortion-patients>) as white women to seek an abortion in the United States, and according to the Guttmacher Institute, 75% of all people (<https://www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2016/abortion-patients-are-disproportionately-poor-and-low-income>) who get an abortion are poor or low income. Women strongly resist doing this forced labor; recently published studies found that in Texas, where the law has made abortion all-but-illegal, 90% of those whom statistics predict would get an abortion (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/upshot/texas-abortion-women-data.html?smid=tw-share>) found a work-around (typically pills or services in a nearby state) and got abortion care anyway.

However, that remaining 10% – how should we think about them? As pregnant women in Texas, they face a startlingly high likelihood of death: 18.5 per 100,000 (about:blank). If we think of this as a job, following Coney Barrett, it's a very dangerous one — indeed, one of the most dangerous in the United States. Annualizing the death rate (since pregnancy is 10 months — yes, people lie about that nine month business; 40 weeks is 10 months), that would make it 22.2 per 100,000. That makes pregnancy in Texas one of the 10 most dangerous jobs (<https://www.ishn.com/articles/112748-top-25-most-dangerous-jobs-in-the-united-states>) in the US — right between farming and firefighting. Yet even that number probably is not high enough. Black, indigenous, and Latinx

women are much more likely to die (about:blank) during or after pregnancy — especially in Texas — so 22.2 is almost certainly too low. The highest maternal mortality rate is among Black women, who die at rates up to three times higher (<https://www.salon.com/2021/04/19/the-link-between-americas-rising-maternal-mortality-rates-and-abortion/>) than white women. Further, studies of health outcomes for people who seek abortions but are denied them find that they are far more likely than average to experience disability (<https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M18-1666>) or death (<https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/58/6/2019/265968/The-Pregnancy-Related-Mortality-Impact-of-a-Total>) as a result — probably because their health and lives were already on the edge, and they were more likely to be experiencing poverty and ill-health.

Pregnant people have always gotten abortions when they were not willing, able or prepared to have a child or assume the risks of pregnancy. The only reason we are willing to make people carry an unwanted pregnancy for ten months is because we devalue them. We don't demand that anyone donate a kidney, even though adult humans die every day for want of one, and most of us have a spare. We don't even compel people to donate a kidney after death — not for their partner or child, much less a stranger. Why do cadavers have a right to bodily integrity that living pregnant people do not? Misogyny, sex-shaming, and racism all play a role, as does the anti-abortion movement's love affair with embryos (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520295872/tiny-you>) and fetuses (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ourselves-unborn-9780195323436?cc=us&lang=en&>), as does the legacy of slavery, which taught us to be comfortable with forcing people to be pregnant against their will.

Amy Coney Barrett admitted the truth about the conservative view of abortion: she thinks pregnant people should be compelled to deliver a baby for someone else. We have to say no to that.

*Laura Briggs is professor of Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is the author of numerous books and articles, including most recently Taking Children: A History of American Terror (<https://bookshop.org/books/taking-children-a-history-of-american-terror/9780520343672>) (University of California Press, 2020).*

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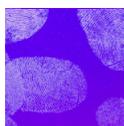
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