

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

I Was Raped by My Father. An Abortion Saved My Life.

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the countless girls and women who have been raped — including those who, like me, were raped by a father, an uncle or another family member.

It was the early morning of my 10th birthday the first time that I was raped by my father. It would not be the last. The shock was so severe that I temporarily went blind before I began the fifth grade a few weeks later. By the time the school year began, my father had taken me to see a battery of doctors — a medical explanation would paper over the fact that the trauma caused by his sexual violence had caused my body to shut down.

The physiological suffering that I endured included severe migraines, hair loss and even gray hair — at 10 years old. While other girls may have longed for puberty, I loathed the idea of it. My body became a vessel that was not mine. It had been taken from me. I lived in fear of the night, and the footsteps outside my bedroom door.

I gravitated to closets — I would find the deepest corner, sit with a flashlight, read and rock myself. Only years later, while in therapy at 16, would I understand that my involuntary rocking when relating to these experiences was the manifestation of my stress and anxiety.

My father's predations were hidden behind wealth, social status and his acting the part of a committed and attentive parent. I attended elite schools in New York City, studied ballet at a renowned academy and took private violin and tennis lessons. My father never missed a parent-teacher conference. However, that veneer of normalcy belied intimate family violence that had begun years before with his physical abuse of my mother. At times he was so violent that she was hospitalized.

At age 12, I was pregnant by my father, and I had an abortion. Before we got to the doctor's office, I had no idea that I was pregnant. My father lied about my age and the circumstance of my pregnancy, informing the doctor that I was 15 and that I had been reckless with a boyfriend. My father shook his head, explaining to the doctor that he was doing all that he could as a single parent — my parents had divorced by this time — but that I was out of control. Both men seemed to convey contempt toward me. For many years, the shame of my father's lie lingered with me — the stereotype embedded in the narrative of the risky, hypersexualized Black girl.

My shame was never about the abortion. I will forever be grateful that my pregnancy was terminated. I am fortunate that my body was spared an additional trauma imposed by my father — one that today would be forced by some state legislatures and courts. No child should be pressured or

expected to carry a pregnancy and give birth, or to feel remorse, guilt, doubt or unease about an abortion under any circumstances, let alone rape or incest.

As Justice Harry Blackmun recognized in his majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, the barriers to a decent life are enormous when there is an unwanted pregnancy — for many, they are insurmountable.

In the end, my way out was to leave the economic security of home at age 15. That, too, is a decision that I will never regret. But it was not easy. When I left, I had \$10 and no access to the savings account my father held for me. I enrolled myself in a public school on Staten Island. To support myself, I cleaned the house of a very kind couple. I lived in an unfinished attic and survived on a modest diet that mostly consisted of beans, rice and cans of tuna. To win my freedom from my parents, I went to court, where I endured interrogation from ill-prepared and insensitive lawyers about being raped as a child.

As a survivor of childhood rape and pregnancy — and today a law professor who teaches constitutional law and bioethics — I recognize the grave dangers of the current crop of abortion bans.

In Texas, the right to an abortion is virtually meaningless under Senate Bill 8, which bans most abortions after about six weeks of pregnancy, when many people will not know they are pregnant. Like the Mississippi ban, it provides no exceptions for rape or incest.

Given the importance of the Supreme Court's deliberations this week, and the naïve bravado of Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas suggesting that rape [will disappear in his state](#) with a tough-on-crime approach, I felt compelled to speak out.

The governor imagines [that he can](#) “eliminate all rapists from the streets of Texas,” but like many abusers, my father was respected in the community, a successful businessman who was adored by family, friends and colleagues. I, on the other hand, felt alone and in fear. I was not only sexually abused, but physically harmed as well. I was threatened to keep quiet and told by my father to “grit your teeth and bear it.”

No one ever wants to write about such experiences, exposing intimate aspects of their lives, revisiting traumatic aspects of childhood. That is probably a big reason survivors of incest do not come forward. Even as our society becomes more enlightened about sexual assaults and abuse, often survivors pay a cost. While in college, a prominent professor warned me to

never speak or write of my experiences. He believed that I had a bright future ahead and that I could be personally and professionally harmed by sharing my story.

Yet, the lack of compassion and the hubris that underlies the Mississippi and Texas legislation deserves a response.

With those laws, the state has in effect forced girls to carry the burden of its desires, forcing many of them to risk their health — and even risk death — by remaining pregnant. Like a military draft, the state has coercively conscripted rape and incest survivors to endure one more tremendous burden. To take another devastating physical and mental hit. To tie their lives to those of their rapists. This time it is state lawmakers who strong-arm their bodies into service.

This draft — the pregnancy draft — is warfare at home, and the state leaves its girls on the battlefield to fend for themselves. Rather than provide aid and care, states often punish girls who have run away from home after experiencing sexual violence. [More than 80 percent](#) of the girls in juvenile justice systems in some states are victims of sexual or physical violence. For so many of these girls, their pipelines are not from youth to college and graduate school, but to juvenile detention and possibly prison. Their lives are treated as expendable and not worth saving.

Abortion bans represent more than isolated state lawmaking or states' rights — they represent an attack on the fundamental principles of liberty, freedom and autonomy. As Justice Blackmun noted in a 1986 majority opinion that reaffirmed Roe, “few decisions are more personal and intimate, more properly private, or more basic to individual dignity and autonomy” than the decision to terminate a pregnancy. Abortion bans that provide no exceptions for rape and incest are a particularly cruel and immoral type of lawmaking.

For these reasons, this is a pivotal moment for the Supreme Court to issue a corrective and show that here, too, the arc of the moral universe may be long, but as foretold by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it bends toward justice — and that includes the protection of girls.

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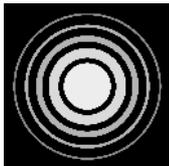
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