

Writers on the Range: Women shouldn't be second-class citizens

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I felt like a second-class citizen when the Supreme Court ended the constitutional right to abortion last summer.

After a handful of religious men (and one woman, Amy Coney Barrett) stripped women of the 49-year-old right to decide what to do with their own bodies, it was clear: If you were a woman, your body was no longer your own.

Ironically, in Idaho where I live, the abortion controversy is making it harder for women to have the babies they want. This year the Idaho Legislature defunded research into preventing maternal deaths, and the state also chose not to extend its postpartum Medicaid coverage.

Then in March, the only hospital in the northern Idaho city of Sandpoint announced it would no longer provide obstetrical services. Patients must now drive 46 miles for labor and delivery care. Why? Physicians

were leaving the state, the hospital board explained, and recruiting replacements would be “extraordinarily difficult.”

The board also cited the Idaho Legislature, which had passed bills to criminalize physicians for doing nothing more than providing nationally recognized “standards of care.”

In Idaho, once evidence of a heartbeat is detected in a fetus, abortion is illegal — except in documented instances of rape, incest or to save the mother’s life. A doctor I interviewed told me about a patient in her late second trimester of pregnancy. The fetus was severely malformed and would not survive, she said, and “standard of care” called for aborting this fetus. But Idaho law meant it had to die inside the mother.

Idaho legislators also say that bringing a minor across state lines for an abortion is “trafficking.” The hysteria continues with a new law that allows family members and the father of an aborted fetus to file civil lawsuits against doctors.

There’s also the legal push in courtrooms to bar mifepristone pills that induce safe early abortions. This spring, U.S. Solicitor Gen. Elizabeth Prelogar sent an emergency appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, urging the justices to block lower court rulings that had banned the drug.

She noted that the abortion pills have a safety record of more than 20 years, and no federal judge had ever overruled the FDA’s judgment about the safety of a drug. In April, the high court ruled that access to mifepristone may continue while litigants seek to overturn FDA approval.

Another drug used along with mifepristone, misoprostol, has many uses in reproductive health. It’s on the World Health Organization Model List of Essential Medicines. Yet this year, Wyoming banned the use of any medication, including misoprostol, that could be used for abortions.

Days before the law was to take effect, Teton County Judge Melissa Owens blocked it, pending the outcome of a lawsuit. The litigants are also suing to stop Wyoming’s near-total abortion ban, enacted in March. Judge Owens suspended that ban as well and combined the two lawsuits.

Federal law, which requires doctors to treat patients in emergency situations, trumps state law. But a federal investigation reported by the Associated Press, found that two hospitals — Freeman Health System in Joplin, Missouri, and University of Kansas Hospital in Kansas City — violated federal law when they refused to provide an emergency abortion to a pregnant woman who was experiencing premature labor.

Doctors said the fetus would not survive and her health was at serious risk, yet they would not abort the fetus because a heartbeat was detected.

But when you look at the ballot box, abortion has fared well, especially in California, Vermont and Michigan, where voters added the right to abortion to their constitutions. A pro-choice judicial candidate won in a landslide in Wisconsin, and the states of Kansas, Kentucky and, most recently, Ohio, saw voters reject measures that could have led to bans.

Then this July 13, the FDA approved Opill, the first daily oral contraceptive available for use in the United States without a prescription. If that option had been available to me as a teen in the 1970s, I would not have had to sneak off for an abortion at age 16.

One thing's for sure: if men got pregnant, none of this would be happening.

Crista Worthy is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation in the West. She writes in Idaho.