

Witness Testimony from Tohan – Abortion Storyteller
Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution
Protecting Roe: Why We Need the Women’s Health Protection Act
June 16, 2021

Good morning and thank you to Chairman Blumenthal and Ranking Member Cruz for this opportunity to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee about my experience trying to obtain an abortion in Texas and how the medically unnecessary restrictions threaten our ability to live freely, safely, and with the families we love.

My name is Tohan. I am a mom, a daughter, an immigrant, a preacher’s kid, and yes, I have had an abortion.

In 2018, I was faced with a life-changing decision. I was in a relationship that threatened my life and my future. My fiancé at the time was abusive and threatening, and I realized that I could not be married to him. If I didn’t get out when I did, I may not ever have been able to. To the chagrin and anger of much of my family and friends, I canceled our wedding three weeks before the date.

I felt so alone, but I knew I made the right decision for me, my son, our safety, and our future.

During all of this, I realized that I was pregnant. I felt it in my bones that I could not continue the pregnancy. The support I received from my closest friends was fleeting. Only a few hours after they realized my decision was real, they began to shame me and called me horrible names. I was deemed an embarrassment by my friends. I was humiliated and alienated.

I needed to be able to permanently leave my abuser and I also knew I couldn’t do it while pregnant. Having an abortion was the only way to keep my relentless abuser away from me and my son. I felt so scared and alone but took the leap of confiding in my father, a minister, who helped me get resources and call the authorities to protect me from my abuser. He supported my decision and we kept it a secret from the rest of my family.

I was born in Nigeria, a country in the western part of Africa. I come from a very conservative and religious family. I was born baptized and raised in the church. Nigerian culture is generally conservative, and the way women are treated limits our decision-making and futures. Like many parts of our society in the U.S. and globally, women are treated as inferior and second best. My decision to have an abortion was considered an abomination by all Nigerian standards.

When I was 13 years old, my close friend secretly had an abortion. It was an unsafe procedure performed by the pharmaceutical salesman who lived down the street. She almost died. My friend’s story was used as a cautionary tale, not that we should make abortion legal, more available, and ensure we have medically accurate information, but that abortion shouldn’t be sought at all.

When I needed my abortion, I found myself in my friend’s shoes. I empathized with what she must have been going through. I was also in school for an MBA so close to graduation, but my grades slipped and I missed some finals due to the stress of dealing with all of this and my abuser. I was in fear of losing my life and the degree that I’d worked so hard for. I’m thankful that my professors later allowed me to make up some of the work and I received my degree a while later. I knew I needed an abortion, even if a dangerous pharmaceutical salesman was my only option.

This is a difficult situation for me to explain to you. You might never fully understand it unless you were faced with this predicament. But please understand that these are real situations that people like me are faced with, every day.

To find an abortion, I looked to the internet. I searched things like “abortion clinic,” “castor oil,” and “DIY abortions,” and even bought castor oil in case I needed to do it myself. When searching, I came across several Catholic church numbers and then a clinic that I thought provided abortions. When I got there, I realized I was wrong. It was a crisis pregnancy center, an anti-abortion clinic with no medical professionals on staff.

When I called, they wouldn't tell me if they provided abortions. They asked me to come in for an appointment. As soon as I arrived, they started preaching to me and telling me how God does not agree with my choices. I'm a preacher's kid and I have my own relationship with God. I don't need someone else telling me what God thinks of me. They told me that there are options out there, aside from abortion, and I could continue the pregnancy and place the baby for adoption. Like most people having abortions, I already have a child. I know what pregnancy is like and I know what it's like to make the decision to become a parent. I know what I need for me and my son's safety.

It was hard to leave there. I felt coerced to stay and they put so much pressure on me to say that I wouldn't have an abortion. They preached about choices, yet I didn't feel like I had one while I was there.

When I finally left, I started searching again for an abortion clinic, this time being sure to check out the websites to make sure the clinics *actually* provide abortion care. Racing against time, after several more searches, I found a clinic in Houston. I scheduled an appointment. I was still a little scared that I might have come across another fake clinic, but I went anyway.

I spoke with a kind counselor who talked to me about all of my options. I told her that I was sure I wanted an abortion. During the counseling, they went through a list of statements that they had to tell me as mandated by the state of Texas. I had to acknowledge that I was advised about how dangerous abortion can be. I know that research shows that's not true. They had to read a statement that said abortion can affect my ability to have kids in the future. That is also not true. Because of the state law, I also had to have an ultrasound even though I would have rather not done it. The ultrasound was particularly disturbing for me because I insisted that I didn't want it. We already confirmed I was pregnant. But their hands were tied. The nurse told me I could look away if I didn't want to see it, but no matter what they had to do it and describe what they saw because it was required by law.

During the ultrasound, they told me how far along I was. I learned that at 13 weeks the cost of my abortion would go up and the availability of providers would go down. I was angry that I had faced so many delays and trying to do this while attending school and caring for my son, and that visiting the anti-abortion clinic cost me time.

Afterward, they told me that I could not have the procedure done that day even though I was ready. I had to wait another day because of the law. Apparently, the Texas government believed I needed more time to think about my decision, on top of the two weeks I'd already been scrambling to try to get care. I was confused at how the state of Texas could dictate my decision and say that I hadn't thought about it enough. They hadn't met me. The law couldn't protect me from my abuser. The law does not bear the emotional burden that I had to. So how could this possibly be?

I had no other choice but to wait.

After waiting the government-mandated 24 hours, my abortion was scheduled. I thought I was out of the woods, but then I ran into another issue: it was not covered under my insurance. The abortion cost \$850. I had no money to pay for it, I had no one to help. I had nothing, only \$120 in my bank account and over \$50,000 of debt from the canceled wedding was looming over me.

Thankfully, a clinic worker saw what I was faced with and she gave me the business card for the Clinic Access Support Network, a non-profit organization that helped me through the process.

The volunteers at Clinic Access Support Network arranged a ride to and from the appointment for me and bought me lunch, which was so kind and helpful. For the first time in my life, I put my healthcare into the hands of complete strangers. Clinic Access Support Network got me the help that years of friendships could not get me. The Clinic Access Support Network showed up for me. They even continued to check in on me to make sure I was fine. I can't believe it. They were the best part of the whole experience.

It took me a few days to get the money for my abortion. I took out an online payday loan of \$600 to pay the deposit and then another payday loan from a different company for \$500 to pay off the \$250 balance.

I didn't realize how predatory payday loan companies are in this country. The interest rate was 400%. That itself became another nightmare. I kept making payments and the balance seemed to never end. Once I paid one payday loan off, I defaulted on the other because I couldn't pay it. It ruined my credit and has done so much damage. It was a never-ending cycle, all because my insurance wouldn't cover it.

When the procedure was all said and done, it took over two weeks and thousands of dollars to get a basic constitutionally protected 10-minute medical procedure. It was a nightmare.

Senators, I am asking you to pass the Women's Health Protection Act. We need a federal law to protect us from these medically unnecessary laws that delay our access to abortion care and make the experience really difficult. We deserve medically accurate information. We deserve to have our appointments as soon as we make our decision. We deserve abortion care in our communities.

I am thankful for my abortion because it allowed me to leave my abuser, care for my son, and move on with my life. But it shouldn't have been that way. As we say at We Testify, "everyone loves someone who had an abortion." Thank you for your time and I hope my story helps you remember these laws that you pass impact your constituents, like me, and your loved ones who have abortions.

Thank you.

Tohan