



## Position Statement: NASW-NYC opposes attacks on Reproductive Justice

**“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in healthcare is the most shocking and inhumane”- Dr. Martin Luther King**

The landmark Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 ruled that while not absolute, women had a *fundamental* right to privacy in deciding whether to have an abortion. Since that time, there have been ongoing debates and challenges to this ruling around reproductive freedom, healthcare rights, and the government’s ability to regulate individual choice. On the evening of May 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, many of us learned the news that Governor Kay Ivey (R), of Alabama, signed the controversial and highly protested, House Bill 314, *Human Life Protection Act* into law. This legislation bans all abortions in the state of Alabama, except when "abortion is necessary in order to prevent a serious health risk". The legislation also criminalizes abortion as a Class A Felony, which carries a punishment of up to 99 years in prison for medical providers who perform the procedure. Finally, the legislation makes no exception in the case of incest or rape, which raises questions about the true motive for such a position, given that the clause ‘except to prevent serious health risk’ was included. This position forces us to consider how Alabama defines and interprets the terms serious, health, and risk.

As Social workers, we are in a unique position to witness and work to prevent ‘serious health risk’(s) because we advocate for and provide the most mental health services in America. Among the vast ways and areas that we practice, social workers also support, advocate for, and treat victims of rape, incest, human trafficking, and every form of abuse. We know all too well the profound and lasting impact that trauma, emotional, psychological, sexual, and physiological abuse has on children, individuals, families, and communities. We know that these experiences, as well as the criminalization of poverty, experiences of oppression, lack of education, resources, and access to quality health care, do pose a ‘serious health risk’ because every day, we see and treat the devastating impact that these experiences leave on the human psyche.

Locally and beyond, we have seen and heard the swift reaction of those on both sides of this issue. While as a profession, we firmly support individual decisions, feelings, beliefs, morals, and values as they relate to abortion or other issues; we directly oppose these measures when done at the exclusion, oppression, silencing, or stripping away of the rights of others. The Social Work profession is deeply committed to social justice, equity, and among many others, values self-determination; it is unconscionable that choice, healthcare access, and a fundamental right to privacy is removed and under threat for anyone.

As we grapple with this decision in Alabama as well recent reproductive rights limitations in other states such as Georgia and Ohio, we are left to consider the wider implications for those who will be most impacted. Research is clear that with an increase in access to education and birth control over the past few decades, there has been a gradual reduction in the

number of abortions each year<sup>1</sup>. While trends have gradually reduced, what research also indicates, is that almost half of the reported pregnancies in America are unintended and approximately four in ten resulted in abortion<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, while women of all races seek abortion (39% White, 28% Black/African American; 25% Hispanic), accounting for race, there is a disproportionate number of impoverished women who seek abortions as compared to those who are more socially and economically advantaged or stable<sup>3</sup>. Social Work is predicated on the belief in equity, and on calling out oppressive practices. We also call on the lessons that history has taught as it relates to restricting reproductive justice. We are keenly aware that individuals who don't have equitable access to healthcare and those denied the right to live, participate, and consistently engage wholly in society, often suffer the most and have increased risk(s) associated with quality of life, health, and mortality.

The National Association of Social Workers takes the position to firmly support reproductive justice for women which includes, "the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights"<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, we go beyond the arguments around reproductive issues that typically focus on prevention or termination of pregnancy. We assert that in using a reproductive justice lens, we believe in the necessity of affording women the right to decide whether to have children, while supporting the social, emotional, economical, educational, and health needs of those that are parents, so that they can raise and support the development of their children in safe and healthy environments.

The New York City Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers strongly and uncompromisingly, opposes ANY practice that dehumanizes, demoralizes, marginalizes, and strips the rights of individuals to engage in self-determination. When the practice of silencing and taking away the rights of individuals occurs anywhere, we open the path to challenging and removing the basic human rights of everyone, everywhere. As a profession, we must oppose these practices whenever and wherever they arise; whether that be in our families, our communities, our cities, states, or among those we elect to our government. NASW-NYC will continue to raise our voices in support of equitable practices; we will continue to advocate for social justice, equity, accessible, and high quality health care for everyone. Our profession calls us to be the voice of the oppressed; we will not sit silently and watch as others are disenfranchised and as they are stripped of their fundamental rights.

In solidarity,



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<sup>1</sup> Guttmacher Institute (2018). Induced Abortion in the United States. Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>

<sup>2</sup> Center for Disease Control (2015). Abortion Surveillance-United States, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6713a1.htm#suggestedcitation>

<sup>3</sup> National Association of Social Workers (2018). Social Work Speaks: National Association of Social Workers Policy Statements (2018-2020). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, L. (2007). What is reproductive justice? In Reproductive justice briefing book: *A primer on reproductive justice and social change* (pp. 4-5). Atlanta and New York: Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective and the Pro-Choice Public Education Project.