

Ableism in Reproductive Health: We Demand Justice!

By Kendra Scalia,

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The disability community is confronted with medical ableism across primary and specialty healthcare services. The assumption is that my disabled body does not engage in sexual activity, let alone have a need for comprehensive reproductive rights. When engaging in conversations about reproductive healthcare with medical professionals, many disabled people contend with coercion of sterilization. I can't count how many times I have been asked by doctors if I'd be willing to submit to a completely unnecessary hysterectomy to "ensure I don't have kids." This rhetoric has long been held in our societies, cemented by the Supreme Court's appalling ruling in 1927 *Buck v. Bell* which upheld that it is the bourgeois state's right to "*prevent those who are manifestly unfit from breeding.*"

The fear of our healthcare systems is palpable among people with disabilities, most especially our racialized, immigrant, queer, trans and gender non-conforming siblings. The history of my community is one of eugenics, isolation, abuse and murder. It continues to this day often behind closed doors, in a society where appropriate sex education in regard to disabled bodies and minds is almost vacant, where disabled people and seniors are still warehoused in institutions we've placed fancy names upon like "skilled living," "nursing home" or "group home." In these prisons our disabilities are used as weapons against us. We're often raped, beaten and neglected with no or poor medical attention.

And despite whether we live in an institution or the community, women with disabilities are three times as likely to be physically abused or assaulted than non-disabled women. Forty percent of women with disabilities experience sexual assault or physical violence in their lifetimes; and more than 90% of all people with developmental disabilities will experience sexual assault.

People with disabilities are continuously being told that our bodies are not our own, that we should not reproduce. Yet when those of us experience an unwanted pregnancy, we're often barred from abortion access due to the Hyde Amendment which prevents federal Medicaid dollars to be used for these medical procedures -- a program designed specifically for poor and disabled populations. While NY and 15 other states offer state funding for Medicaid abortion access, a change in location for school, work, travel or other life events means our reproductive choices are eliminated.

The ableism in reproductive health and our society as a whole is upheld by capitalism -- a system that devalues our bodies and minds when they don't look or function as the white cis het able man deems "normal." We're here today to proclaim loudly that all people have the right to bodily autonomy and reproductive choice. Our disabled bodies are our own!

Our disabled siblings have fought in silos for decades against forced sterilization, medical ableism, a lack of sexual information, abortion rhetoric from both sides that use disability as a means to their end, and so much more. I am infuriated and disgusted at the abuses this capitalist system creates and thrives upon -- abuses that reap profits at the expense of our health and our freedoms.

The disability justice community holds among its ranks some of the most oppressed individuals in the world. It is our oppression and lived experiences that make us natural born leaders and fighters for justice. I'm here today to call upon the broader community to work together in solidarity with our disabled female leaders, our disabled trans leaders, our disabled non-binary leaders, our disabled queer leaders, our disabled Black leaders, our disabled Indigenous leaders, our disabled brown leaders, and our disabled immigrant leaders. We are stronger together. We must join side by side to demand reproductive justice for all of us!