

**Advancing Abortion Justice:
An Ethnography of Gender-Based Violence and Contentious Politics at Clinics**

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Abortion access is at a crisis point in the United States, and achieving equitable reproductive futures requires examining our past. At the time of writing, thirteen states enforce near-total abortion bans, and five more states contest their right to abolish abortion as courts block bans. Abortion provision is determined by contested political geographies that reinforce or resist gendered power relationships. I propose anti-abortion violence is a form of gender-based violence mechanized by contentious politics observed in “entrenched contention.” Entrenched contention refers to social movement activity spatially fixed at a particular location. The study site, Whole Woman’s Health of South Bend, features a variety of spatial characteristics; these include proximity to supportive and hostile communities with limited resources and repertoires, and a built environment regulated by layers of authority.

The story of abortion provision and policy in South Bend, Indiana, from 2015 to 2023 provides a case study in the evolution of and resistance to gender-based violence from contentious politics at the end of the *Roe* era. Process tracing illustrates the macro-level causal cycle, focusing on clinic loss, rebirth and looming bans. Analysis demonstrates how this causal process can be applied at the micro level to understand power, violence, harm, and response. The organized power of the anti-abortion movement has constricted the ability of clinics to provide care. Pro-abortion advocates are limited in their ability to alleviate anti-abortion harm and have to exercise strategic capacity to optimize resources and resourcefulness. New clinics offer a venue of opportunity for protestors to employ repertoires of contention. Spatial and temporal factors explain the escalation of and adaptation to anti-abortion violence. The entrenched contention of anti-abortion opposition in South Bend is observed in the deployment of resources and repertoires by pro-abortion advocates to reduce violence and sustain clinical care.

This project contributes to abortion policy scholarship by placing into conversation the theoretical frameworks of gender-based violence and contentious politics. Contentious politics explains the mechanisms of harm, while gender-based violence conceptualizes and motivates the study of harm and guides the consideration of possible responses. These approaches aggregate multiple layers of analysis to understand how anti-abortion violence from movements and governments produces physical, sexual, psychological, economic, cultural, and social harm. Findings from this study offer a bold vision for abortion policy in a post-*Dobbs* America.

Contentious politics are public actions by groups making political claims, and these sustained collective actions respond to changing opportunities and organizational limits. The contentious politics “school” lends a greater emphasis on social science methodology to address substantive problems in a real-world context. This detailed case study illustrates a causal chain of violence and response through the practice of political ethnography and autoethnography. The investigation uses a “from-within” ethnographic approach to generate knowledge as research immersed in a social process. The case study draws from the author’s movement experience, participant-observer fieldwork, interviews with pro-abortion participants, and archived institutional materials. Contentious politics provides tools for the empirical study of specific mechanisms to then generalize about the causes and consequences of gendered harm in any local context.

Gender-based violence offers a normative social justice perspective that motivates the study of interlocking forms of injustice to help people rectify oppression with social change. Gender-based violence is harm directed at someone because of their gender, such as targeted violence toward abortion clinics due to the services they provide. Abortion care defies the interlocking political system of “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” as named by bell hooks, by offering essential

reproductive freedoms. Gender-based violence is an analytical approach that prioritizes and privileges the perspectives of the most impacted in investigations of frameworks of power, politics, and struggle. This research is aligned with previous scholarship that problematizes anti-abortion violence in the context of real lives and not a political debate. As such, this study centers the lived experiences and wisdom of people who have experienced gender-based violence to reduce harm from anti-abortion violence through policy action at all levels.

We must navigate toward a just future in systems of violence and repression. Reproductive freedom is care without barriers, fears, interference, or violence. Reproductive freedom extends beyond the right to choose and emphasizes equality and bodily autonomy. This orientation of justice means centering the self-determination of pregnant people and their right to govern their own bodies free of coercion. It is freedom from structural violence and allows people the capacity to decide if and when they have children and under what conditions those children are raised. Reproductive freedom is the guiding star of the abortion justice movement and this research.

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