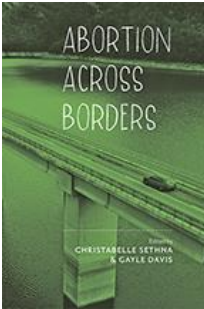


BOOK REVIEW



Abortion Across Borders: Transnational Travel and Access to Abortion Services

Christabelle Sethna and Gayle Davis (eds)

Baltimore, MD, USA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

ISBN-13: 978-1-421-42729-4. Pages: 360 (hardback). Price: £44.50

If you like historical and geographical approaches to the subject of abortion, this book is an interesting read. The book is about travelling for abortion or, as the authors of the chapter on Ireland prefer to call it, reproductive mobility and restrictions thereof. This book is a great example of interdisciplinary scholarship: the authors comprise several historians, a geographer, a sociologist, a psychologist, a lawyer and an architect. There is also a fair amount of politics in the book. This makes for varied approaches to each chapter, most of which focus on one country. The well-off find travelling across borders relatively easy, poor people find it hard, and some with domestic ties, mental or physical health issues or no visa find it impossible. Destinations that have abortion laws with no residency stipulations have been the most popular, Britain being a case in point.

Travelling is within countries as well as across international borders. Distances travelled vary enormously and in some cases are vast. Sherri Finkbine flew from the USA to Sweden in 1962 because she had taken thalidomide and the enormous publicity this generated triggered a change in Swedish law the following year. Kimberley to Perth (Western Australia) is nearly 3400 miles return and El Paso to Houston (Texas) 1500 miles for the round trip by road.

The Contraception, Sterilization and Abortion Act 1977 in New Zealand initially made abortion more restrictive because of the excessive bureaucracy. Substantial numbers of women were flying to Australia: Auckland to Melbourne is 4 hours each way by air. Despite the Morgentaler ruling of 1988 which decriminalised abortion, abortions in Prince Edward Island, Canada were virtually unavailable from 1986 to 2016, a situation similar to that in Ireland prior to January 2019. Charlottetown to Halifax, Nova Scotia, is 400 miles return by road and ferry. Around 175 000 women have travelled to Britain from the Republic of Ireland and been logged in the statistical returns; others gave British addresses and so are not recorded as coming from overseas.

What the book doesn't say so much about is the enormous stress, upheaval, expense, difficult logistics, delay and stigma which are all over and above the basic issues women face with an unwanted pregnancy. Nor the practical problems of coping with bleeding on the way home or difficulties with any follow-up needed back in their country of origin.

This book went to press in October 2018 and, in the short space of time until publication in early 2019, the situation in Ireland has been transformed. The editors took the risky decision to commission a chapter on 'Brexit'. Little did they realise that the story would still be unfolding all this time later. It is apparent that in the event of a 'Hard Brexit', delays may occur because of visa requirements. I won't say any more on this for fear of this review also being overtaken by events!

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