**Down to the Struts**

Season 5, Bonus: Disability and Reproductive Freedom

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Guest: Sara Luterman

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today, we’re taking a pause in the content we had planned for this week To bring you this very special bonus episode. On June 24, the Supreme Court issued its decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization. Writing for the majority, Justice Samuel Alito

Overturned Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the decisions that, for five decades

Have maintained a Constitutional right to abortion access for those who can become pregnant

 Disabled people have long struggled for autonomy over their reproductive decisions. In its 1927 decision in Buck v. Bell, the Supreme Court set a precedent that states could sterilize inmates in public institutions, arguing that the state of Virginia did not violate the due process and equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment when it required Carrie Buck to be sterilized because it was in the state's interest to prevent imbecility and feeble mindedness from being passed down to future generations. This is just one example of the lack of autonomy that disabled people have when it comes to their reproductive choices. According to a recent report from the Center for American Progress over one in three Medicaid recipients under the age of 65 have disabilities but the Hyde Amendment prevents Medicaid dollars from going towards abortion services. The report also noted the focus of abortion rights advocates on disability as a grounds for terminating pregnancy, citing high rates of abortion based on Down Syndrome diagnoses and highlighting the urgent need for cross movement solidarity between the Disability Justice and reproductive justice movements. Despite the disproportionate impact of reproductive laws on disabled communities, we understand little about disabled people's views on abortion until now. That's why I'm excited to share my conversation with Sara Luterman. Sara is the caregiving reporter for The 19th. She gained exclusive access to a first of its kind national poll conducted by the organization Data for Progress. The poll describes how disabled people feel about abortion. Sara and I discussed the history of access to reproductive choices for disabled communities, the results of the data for progress poll, and what they mean in light of the Supreme Court’s opinion in Dobbs. Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you, Sara, for joining me, especially at such short notice.

Sara Luterman:

I'm happy to be here.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I'd love it if you could start by introducing yourself and talk about the path that led you to become a journalist at The 19th.

Sara Luterman:

So, my name is Sara Luterman, and I'm the caregiving reporter at The 19th. The 19th is a nonpartisan nonprofit newsroom focused on the intersection of policy and gender. So we write a lot about women's issues. We write a lot about LGBTQ community issues. In terms of how I became a journalist. I actually started out working in Disability Rights initially—from…like a…I worked for the Association of University Centers on Disability, which is primarily concerned with intellectual and developmental disability. And then I think like a lot of people 2016 happened, and President Trump was elected and a lot of things changed very quickly. And something that I found, as that transition happened, especially as disability became more central during the protests that happened with adapt, like a lot of people remember people getting pulled out of their wheelchairs on the Senate floor and all that. I was just very frustrated with how media was covering it. I didn't feel they understood what they were looking at, or the full context of it. And so I thought, well, I could do that. So I can do that better. So I decided to become a journalist. The transition wasn't immediate. I did spend like a chunk in the middle there kind of like doing journalism part time and part time making explainers for nonprofits on a contract basis. So, so they were explainers for people with intellectual disabilities on political topics like voting or the federal budget process. And basically, the idea is to take like these very complex political issues that really like govern people's lives and make them into something like a fourth grade reading level with pictures, so that more people could understand what these things are and how they impact people. And they also had to be nonpartisan, which was frequently difficult, especially with the federal budget process, because there's explaining that explaining deficits in a nonpartisan way is basically impossible. It's what I learned. So yeah, I was doing that. But I wanted to be a journalist. And so I sort of started doing doing more and more journalism work. And as I got more and more journalism work, I transitioned more away from the nonprofit work. And eventually, eventually, I was able to do journalism full time, and it has just been a delight.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really exciting. I'm so happy for for the fact that you were able to come into this role. And I, I really enjoy your title of a caregiving reporter, can you say a little bit more about how you've conceived that role.

Sara Luterman:

So obviously, before I came to The 19th, most of my writing was about disability with some focus on elder care, because there's just like a ton of overlap in terms of the funding buckets, like the funding for long term disability and the funding for elder care are basically the same funding. The 19th was looking for someone who covers sort of all of the structures that support care work in our country. So not just elder care, and not just long term disability, but also childcare. And sort of looking at, like the work that people perform in order to help others live their lives as as work and not like as something that's just like this, like, nice thing that people do for each other like that it is something that people are paid to do. That's a profession that has all of these political issues tied into it, issues of race, issues of class issues of immigration status, like all of these economic issues, like there's just the the structures around care work are really complex. And so I'm really excited that The 19th envision this position is being about all of that, because what it really fundamentally comes down to is that our society, devalues care work and devalues the people who need care work. And that's true pretty much across the board. Regardless of why someone needs that care work. Again, it's just a really exciting job. And I'm excited that The 19th thought that that was a job that should exist. I don't think anyone else has a caregiving reporter.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I don't think I've I've come across that at all, which is why I was so intrigued by the title. And I'm really happy that you're in this role and reporting on these important issues from sort of the framework and the lens of disability, which I think is a really interesting way of looking at it. And in that caregiving reporter role, you've also tackled, you know, issues around health care. And what I invited you to come speak about today with me is related to that in many ways, which is women's health care and abortion and the complex perspectives that disabled people, particularly disabled women and disabled women of color have in relation to this very thorny sort of political football. Before we sort of dive into the issues of the day around abortion, I would love for you to share a little bit you've reported deeply on issues around eugenics and sterilization in the disability context. So I wondered if you could share a little bit about helping us unpack why the issue of abortion is so complex for disabled people.

Sara Luterman:

I guess I'll start off by just doing a quick explanation of what eugenics is. So essentially, eugenics is the pseudo scientific idea that you can breed a better person, that things like intelligence, and even things like moral fiber and are somehow genetically imbued in us. So this idea of eugenics is also like deeply wrapped up in in racism and in ableism. Because if you're creating a better person in the American context, that often means a whiter person and a non disabled person. So the United States is really like the innovator on eugenics and had this massive forced sterilization program for decades. Nazi Germany actually used California's system in particular as a template when they started conducting their own eugenic experiments and exterminating the disabled. So there was this woman named Carrie Buck, and she was institutionalized for being feeble minded, which was the terminology at the time. It's actually unclear if she had a disability or not. But, she was probably sexually assaulted and became pregnant. And this was seen as evidence of her feeble mindedness. This is a podcast so people can't see me making quotation marks with my fingers. But yeah, so she ended up institutionalized her mother was institutionalized. And then the baby that she had was also institutionalized. And so the institution that she was in wanted to sterilize her and Carrie Buck did not want to be sterilized. So it went all the way to the Supreme Court. And in this case called Buck v. Bell, Carrie Buck, and I think it was in 1927. So the court ruled that when the state has a public health interest, they can sterilize people against their will Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, at the time, had this quote that I think a lot of people remember which is, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” That it was in the public interest to prevent people like Carrie Buck from reproducing. And so the result of this was more sterilizations after the Holocaust sterilization became a little bit more controversial, but it was still conducted well into the 70s. In the 40s and 50s in the south, a lot of black women were subjected to sterilization without their knowledge, to the extent that it was called the “Mississippi appendectomy” colloquially. In the 70s, there was this huge forced sterilization campaign in Puerto Rico, about a third of women in Puerto Rico at the time ended up sterilized in this program. And so if you were to ask people in the 70s, like, if they were doing eugenics, they would say no, they would say that they're trying to prevent overpopulation or alleviate poverty. But there's this through line that's there that people in these communities see. And so when we talk about abortion rights, I think that for like, a lot of people who have less experienced disability community, or people who aren't part of communities of color, might just think like, oh, well, it's about abortion, it's about choice about abortion, specifically, but actually, like, reproductive choice, has this whole other dimension, like it's not just about the choice to not have a child, it's also about the choice to have a child. And so I think that like, the issue is a lot more complex for marginalized communities in the United States, that it might that it might first appear.

Qudsiya Naqui:

So then we would imagine that disabled people fall on different sides of this issue. And your recent article that you published, was lifting up the results of a recent poll by Data for Progress that is one of the first polls of disabled people, we don't have a lot of data opinion polling from disabled people was something else I gathered from your piece. And it really demonstrated, it demonstrated like a decent amount of alignment with disabled sort of popular opinion about abortion against kind of the broader population or the non disabled population. Could you tell us a little bit about what you found when you looked at the Data for Progress polling results, and, and what that, you know, tie that back to what you were talking about earlier about where some of some of those opinions might come from?

Sara Luterman:

Yeah, so disability has been a bit of a political football in the abortion debate. You have sort of pro choice people, traditionally using it as this cudgel where like, you have to have abortion, or else people are going to have these these disabled children. It's horrible, and living with a disability is horrible, and they're just going to suffer. And so you need to let people make mothers make choices. And then on the other end, you have people who are pro life claiming that abortion devalues human life, that all life is sacred, and therefore, disabled lives are sacred. And so if you're aborting based on disability, that's evil. I'm not sure if that's a word, but I guess the immoral I think it's also worth pointing out that a lot of the people who have that position also tend to oppose services that support people after their birth, which makes it a little complicated. And so there's been decades of polling on this. I know like Gallup has been polling people about abortion since the 1970s. And they've asked people from all kinds of different demographics what they think they've even asked questions about disability about disability motivation, abortion, specifically, but they didn't ask disabled people like they didn't separate out separate out disabled people is like a demographic that has opinions. So we've got decades and decades and decades and decades of data about what Americans think about abortion, and even what Americans think about abortion and disability, but we don't have the opinions of disabled people. So Data for Progress, which they're a progressive firm, but they're the first people that have ever asked basically, in like a in like a systematic, statistically sound way. And I think that the results are really fascinating. When I first had this pitch to me and I hadn't seen the results yet, I just knew that they were going to be conducting the polling. My editor asked me, What do you think the results are going to be? Do you think most disabled people are pro life? Do you think most disabled people are pro choice, and I said, I have no idea. I interviewed in the piece, like someone who's pro life and someone who's pro choice. And I've heard all kinds of different arguments in the community, we're really diverse. And so I didn't know what the result was going to be. I think that the result that Data for Progress came up with makes a lot of sense, though. So the data for progress result was basically that people with disabilities have roughly the same opinions about abortion, as people without disabilities. Basically, most disabled people, like most people, in general, think that abortion should be legal, at least some of the time in certain circumstances, where it starts to get different is what those circumstances are. And this was rapid polling. So they don't have like that kind of granular information, yet, but I think that this was a really great first step and really enlightening and provided a glimpse into a community that's for years been, there's a saying in the disability community, nothing about us without us. And the conversation for a very long time has been about us without us. And so for the first time, a polling firm asked what disabled people think about this, I will say that there's some issues with the methodology, specifically, and this isn't something that like Data for Progress did wrong, it's just a problem in pulling about disability in general. So, on the census, when they're pulling people with a disability, they don't ask, Do you have a disability? They asked six different questions about specific kinds of impairments. And so by doing that, they end up getting a much more accurate picture of how many people have a disability, because if you ask a lot of people who have disabilities, if they have a disability, especially if they're older adults, like like, you know, if they're, you know, at something, and maybe you have a little trouble getting around, they're gonna say no, because they don't identify as disabled. So the Data for Progress question, in this push polling, asked if people have a disability if they identify as having a disability. So the one like issue with this poll is that the number of people who identify as having a disability is smaller than the number of people who actually have a disability. I think the number Data for Progress count within their polling was about 20%. Whereas I think the CDC puts it around 26% for the American population, but that's still pretty good. And honestly, if you're asking people with disabilities, what they think about abortion, asking people who who identify as having a disability makes sense to me, like methodologically? I think it was, I think it was a sound thing for them to do, even if the answer wasn't necessarily like, perfect, like, perfectly accurate, but also like no one's asked before. So like, I'm just I'm just glad that they asked, I really hope that this is just like a first step and that other polling firms start asking these questions. Like, I really want to see it from polling firms that are not progressive, that are that are maybe like, centrist or more bipartisan, like I really, I want to see everyone asking these questions, not just Data for Progress. And so I'm just really excited that they asked,

Qudsiya Naqui:

yeah, it is really exciting. And it was interesting to see the data and the kind of alignment in it to a good degree with public opinion kind of writ large, or the public opinion of non disabled people. I wanted to go back to something you said earlier that so that we could unpack it a little bit more. You mentioned, disabled people were found to support abortion in certain circumstances and not others. And that was different from the non disabled population. So I'm curious if you could unpack that a little bit, because I think it's interesting. And it's also interesting from this framework of, of how we think about care as well.

Sara Luterman:

So we don't have data that's granular about exactly what circumstances people with disabilities think abortion is acceptable in Gallup has polling and other other polling firms have polling on what people in general think about what circumstances are acceptable, which is where they get into questions about specific disabilities, including Down’s syndrome. We don't know. We don't we don't really know. I think it's it's a situation where it would be really exciting to see more granular polling about specific questions in the disability community and and to see pulling based on specific disabilities. I have a very strong suspicion that if you ask, say the Down’s Syndrome Community, what they think about abortion rates, you'd get a very different answer than say, the Crohn's community. it because because their experiences are very different. And because their experiences with abortion are very different. With the Down’s Syndrome Community, you have the issue of prenatal testing, you have the issue of like selective abortion is an actual thing that people with Down’s Syndrome have to think about, whereas like, you know, people with Crohn's don't. So I mean, like, I think that those kinds of things, impact communities and how they think about it, but I'm really just guessing based on like my own personal anecdotal experience, we don't actually know because nobody's asked.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, and that seems, you know, pretty, pretty important. You know, we know that the Dobbs decision that I discussed at the top of the episode is coming down, and we have a good sense of how it will, how it will come down. But even even in spite of that, from your perspective, as a caregiving reporter, from someone who deeply understands the care economy, and kind of what role care plays in people's lives, whether they do or do not choose to bear a child, you know, what, from a public policy perspective, what would you want to see like, how would you envision, you know, how we think about this concept of reproduction, reproductive freedom, reproductive access, from your sort of disability lens and the in the people you've talked to in your reporting,

Sara Luterman:

I think that my outlet, The 19th, has been doing some really excellent abortion coverage. In particular, my colleague, Shefali Luthra, has just been astonishing on this, like she she knows everything. And I really recommend that people check her workout on our website, I will say that the care systems in our country are in terrible shape. I mean, and have been for decades, everything, and COVID, COVID didn't cause these problems, it just made all of the problems that already existed in care delivery worse. So you have a situation where people that deliver care are paid very little, we don't have paid leave in our country, we don't have parental leave a lot of the time. We don't have resources for parents, from the government, really even the Child Tax Credit, which my colleague Chabeli Carrizana has done a lot of writing about which which did alleviate child poverty, to an extent ended up dying, it didn't get renewed, we just have very little political will to make things better for families. And I think that that makes choices more difficult for people. I think that when we talk about choice, it's not just the choice to have an abortion or not have an abortion, it's also the choice to have a child if you want to have a child, that the way that our society is structured, doesn't really allow for people to have those kinds of choices, to the extent that I think that they probably deserve

Qudsiya Naqui:

as a disabled person, yourself as a disabled woman. How can thinking about this, these issues from the lens of disability, sort of expand our understanding of like, what these choices mean, for people.

Sara Luterman:

I mean, I do think that, like, people need to understand that disabled people have opinions, that disability isn't something that just happens to people. It's an identity and a culture. And it's a bunch of identities and cultures that you have all of these people with, with shared experiences and shared ideas that are just like not being treated like a demographic. And I think that when when you just treat disability as like something tragic and bad, that happens to someone, you end up losing a lot of meaning and nuance and understanding. I would like to see other journalists think about disability as like, think about disabled people as a type of people instead of instead of a tragedy.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And I think your in your work and your voice in this space, you're helping to advance that. So thank you, thank you for doing that. And and all the great reporting that you've done. Can you share with our listeners where they can find your work and more about you and the issues that you report on?

Sara Luterman:

These days, all of my work is at 19thnews.org. That's one nine t h news.org. Honestly, click around the website because everyone I work with is amazing. And I'm not just saying that because I'm on the payroll. I feel like I'm just surrounded by all of these absolutely brilliant women and non binary people and trans people who are just producing this amazing journalism.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Awesome. Well, thank you so so much, Sara. Thanks for doing this at the last minute. I think in this time of great change, it's really helpful to have an expert voice like yours on these issues. So, thanks. Thanks for joining us.

Sara Luterman:

Thanks for having me.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of Down to the Struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer, Ilana Nevins and our social media manager, Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo and Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. You can become part of our Facebook group, Down to the Struts Podcast to join our growing community. You can also find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And finally, don't forget to subscribe rate and review the podcast at Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you love to listen. Thank you again for your support. And stay tuned for our next episode so we can get back down to it

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