

U.S. ruling a reminder 'the work is not done' in Canada: Yellow Brick House

The Supreme Court of the United States' 5-4 decision last week to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, upending abortion rights in the U.S., is a reminder that 'the work is not done' on our side of the border.

This is the view of Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of the Aurora-based Yellow Brick House, a shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Women looking for help at Yellow Brick House seek their services for a variety of reasons, says Ms. Herenda, and unwanted pregnancies, although not a sole reason, can be 'part of the mesh of issues' that a family can be dealing with.

'It's a whole combination of methods and controls that her perpetrator uses to control her,' says Ms. Herenda. 'Sometimes unwanted pregnancies [are part of that]. Sometimes it's a tool that can be used to control the women, ensuring that there is a vast number of children that are in the family that are above and beyond their physical ability to manage.'

When the Supreme Court of the United States' (SCOTUS) decision was released last week, Ms. Herenda says it was a 'devastating setback for American women' and a setback to all advances on women's rights made over the last half-century.

A woman losing the right to make a decision that affects her own body 'is an attack on our freedoms and rights.'

'I don't want other people to make a decision about what I'm going to do with my body. It's degrading,' she says. 'We know it is going to impact marginalized women exponentially as they may not have access to certain privileges and benefits that other women might have.'

'I think there is always a concern that [it] might have an impact on future laws in Canada. We know right now that women do have access to making that choice, although in some rural communities that access is definitely more difficult for women. This is a struggle we have had for centuries now, although we do know that at the Federal level we have the support of our Prime Minister who is continuing to advocate for abortion rights for women.'

'The bottom line is if, as a society, we go in the direction of making decisions for women you're treating us as less of a human being than the male counterpart. We will not stand for that because it's her choice. It's a woman's choice to make a choice about her body.'

'I would like to ask any man: would you like to have anybody make a choice about what to do with your body?'

Moving forward, Ms. Herenda says the issue needs to be on the agenda for all political parties as it is a non-partisan human rights issue.

They will continue to advocate at both the Federal and Provincial level for maintaining 'current rights and increasing [the opportunities] for women to have access to make decisions about what happens with their bodies.'

It's far from a 'done deal,' she adds.

'It's a reminder that the work is not done,' she says. 'We're not at a stage where we have equitable treatment without counterparts and we have to continue having our voices heard and engaged in the community. The community needs to be able to engage and have conversations about this and request from their elected politicians to represent women's rights.'

'With respect to women's rights, what's on our continuous agenda is to have sustainable support from our Provincial and Federal government to be able to provide sustainable services to women and children who are impacted by violence. We're not there yet. There are wait lists, there's lack of accessible services that women who are in a position to leave an abusive relationship are often

stuck because they can't have access to services, especially in rural areas.

?We need to see bigger investments from our governments into ensuring that women and children have access to services. There has to be an investment in prevention programs so that we can start changing the numbers of devastating statistics we're hearing about to make or break the cycle of violence.

?That is not going to happen overnight. That requires commitment to prevention and investment in education programs?that educates young people about healthy relationships and how to identify risk factors and how to potentially avoid being in an abusive relationships ? and educating men about the consequences of their behaviour and actions on women, children and society as a whole.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Report