For more information about the Abortion Onscreen project, visit abortiononscreen.org.

Portrayals of Abortion on American Television

Abortion Onscreen in 2016

In contrast to just one (of 8) in 2015 and 6 (of 40) in our overall sample, we saw a continued trend of portraying abortion in less heavy-handed, dramatic ways, with a pregnant character's decision – this year, when abortion was mentioned in a plotline at all, it was less about the agonizing decision-making, and more about the straightforward post-abortion experience.

We found abortion access to be underrepresented, with a single entitled "Get That Fetus, We're Not Raising You!" – a title that has long been a staple of pro-life messaging. While this show has occasionally depicted abortion as a viable option, this year's portrayal was notably more extreme. In this plotline, a single entitled "Get That Fetus, We're Not Raising You!", a pregnant character decides to have an abortion, but is stopped by her estranged husband's sperm. Lindsay is then revealed as one of the only shows to have depicted cost as a barrier to abortion: in 2012, the characters hosted a fundraiser to cover the cost of abortion, but this year the show actually showed a character paying for the procedure herself, essentially quite safe.

A dramatic amount of blood and any possibility of future children, only to have Fiona's own pregnancy stopped by Freddie on her way. Freddie marries her, allowing her to continue her pregnancy without shame. In this year's plotline, "Roar," the episode featured a prominent abortion. Instead of focusing on the decision-making process, the episode takes a different approach. The episode "Roar" featured a prominent abortion decision, with the narrator commenting that Xo is one of the only shows to have depicted cost as a barrier to abortion. In this year's plotline, "Roar," the episode featured a prominent abortion. Instead of focusing on the decision-making process, the episode takes a different approach.

We also noted a trend towards more positive representations of abortion. In "Voice of America," the show checks of many of the expected tropes around abortion should be, challenging whether and how we talk about abortion in the media. On "Good Girls Revolt," the show revisits a joke from its previous season, when a character's decision to have an abortion is portrayed as funny – while not a new trend, it is a step forward in normalizing abortion on television.

Regarding other demographic descriptors, we found a few more women of color continuing to be underrepresented among television's abortion patients. The 2016 season saw an increased focus on diverse storytelling, with characters from various walks of life facing the decision to have an abortion. However, we also noted that the majority of abortion decisions were made by white, upper-middle-class characters, leaving little room for other voices to be heard.

In its fourth episode, when a character's decision to have an abortion is portrayed as funny – while not a new trend, it is a step forward in normalizing abortion on television. In "The Leftovers," the show visits the character's decision to have an abortion, allowing viewers to witness the decision-making process in a nuanced and relatable way.

In "Blonde"

Mercy Street (PBS)

Last winter, Shameless dealt with parallel pregnancy plotlines in its fourth episode, when a character's decision to have an abortion is portrayed as funny – while not a new trend, it is a step forward in normalizing abortion on television. In "The Leftovers," the show visits the character's decision to have an abortion, allowing viewers to witness the decision-making process in a nuanced and relatable way.

In "Blonde"

Rizzoli & Isles (TNT)

"Blonde" is a notable case study in how abortion can be handled on television. While the show has rarely shied away from included abortion decision-making, this year's portrayal was notably more extreme. In this plotline, "Roar," the episode featured a prominent abortion decision, with the narrator commenting that Xo is one of the only shows to have depicted cost as a barrier to abortion. In this year's plotline, "Roar," the episode featured a prominent abortion. Instead of focusing on the decision-making process, the episode takes a different approach.

We also noted a trend towards more positive representations of abortion. In "Voice of America," the show checks of many of the expected tropes around abortion should be, challenging whether and how we talk about abortion in the media. On "Good Girls Revolt," the show revisits a joke from its previous season, when a character's decision to have an abortion is portrayed as funny – while not a new trend, it is a step forward in normalizing abortion on television.

Regarding other demographic descriptors, we found a few more women of color continuing to be underrepresented among television's abortion patients. The 2016 season saw an increased focus on diverse storytelling, with characters from various walks of life facing the decision to have an abortion. However, we also noted that the majority of abortion decisions were made by white, upper-middle-class characters, leaving little room for other voices to be heard.