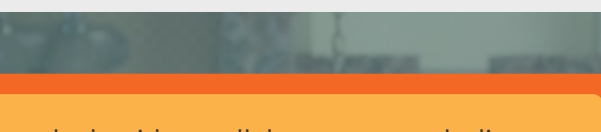


Abortion Onscreen in 2016

Portrayals of Abortion on American Television

In 2016, we identified **13 plotlines on American television** where a character considers getting an abortion, and 10 plotlines where they actually do obtain one. These numbers follow the patterns we've observed over the past three years: a fairly consistent number of pregnancy decision-making plotlines and abortion results, with a slight increase in the rate of choosing abortion over past decades (77% this year, compared to about 50% in our overall sample). We also saw **fewer shows mentioning or discussing abortion** when it wasn't directly related to a pregnant character's decision - this year, when abortion was mentioned in a plotline at all, it was probably because a character was getting one.

We saw a continued trend of portraying abortion in less heavy-handed, dramatic ways, with more humorous, light-hearted, and matter-of-fact depictions. Abortion stories on TV are now less about the agonizing decision-making, and more about the straightforward post-abortion reveal. One change we did observe was that **4 of the 10 characters who got abortion on TV this year were already mothers**, in contrast just one (of 8) in 2015 and 6 (of 40) in our ten year sample from 2004 to 2015. If this trend continues, TV characters getting abortion will more closely resemble real women who get abortions, the majority of whom are already parenting. Regarding other demographic descriptors, **women of color continue to be underrepresented** among television's abortion patients.



Last winter, *Shameless* dealt with parallel pregnancy plotlines for Gallagher sisters Fiona and Debbie. In "#AbortionRules," Fiona encouraged her teenaged sister to get an abortion, to Debbie's adamant refusal - only to have Fiona's own pregnancy revealed soon after. In "NSFW," Fiona does choose to get an abortion. Her decision was dealt with matter-of-factly, and her focus after the abortion seems to be on getting her hands on a milkshake, rather than agonizing over the choice she just made. This story arc is not the first time *Shameless* has addressed abortion: in 2012, the characters hosted a fundraiser to raise money for a friend's abortion. Through this plotline, it is one of the only shows to have depicted cost as a barrier to abortion access.

JAN 17 **FEB 14**

Shameless (Showtime)
Episodes: "#AbortionRules" and "NSFW"

JAN 31
Call the Midwife (PBS)

Episode: Episode 5.3

Call the Midwife has explored abortion in-depth twice before (Episodes 2.5 and 4.6), including a graphic illegal abortion that led to a uterine hemorrhage and hysterectomy for Nora, a mother of eight. In this new plotline, Dorothy, an unmarried school teacher, becomes pregnant as the result of an affair with a married man. In rapid succession he abandons her, and she is evicted from her home and fired from her job when her pregnancy is discovered. When the usually sympathetic Sister Julienne offers her only judgement and a room at a hostel, Dorothy self-induces an abortion with a coat hanger. She ends up in the hospital after losing a dramatic amount of blood and any possibility of future children, only to be questioned by a police officer. Despite this, the ending is somewhat hopeful: after the police decline to prosecute her for her own abortion, Dorothy leaves Poplar to get a fresh start somewhere new.

FEB 07
Mercy Street (PBS)

Episode: "The Belle Alliance"

Mercy Street is PBS's new period medical drama, following both Union and Confederate nurses at the Mansion House Hospital in Virginia during the Civil War. The show dealt with abortion in its fourth episode, when Aurelia, a contraband slave and hospital laundress, discovers she is pregnant after being raped by a hospital steward. Aurelia first tries to end her pregnancy using pennyroyal oil, which fails, and then inserts a metal rod into her uterus. Unsurprisingly, this self-induction goes horribly wrong, leading to an emergency surgery to repair a uterine perforation. The surgery saves her life, but leaves her infertile.

APR 13
The Americans (FX)

Episode: "Clark's Place"

The Cold War spy drama *The Americans* included an abortion disclosure this year for Martha, the wife of Clark, one of KGB spy Philip's aliases. As Martha discovers her husband's many secrets (he's not really Clark Westerfield; he is a KGB agent; his "sister" is really his wife), her own story of a high school pregnancy and subsequent illegal abortion is revealed. However, it's not Martha who does the revealing: her abortion has become part of the file that the FBI keeps on her. Thus, Martha is portrayed as vulnerable not only because of revelations about her husband, but because of her abortion history.

In this *Outlander* plotline, Louise, an eighteenth-century married socialite, confides to Claire, a time-traveling twentieth-century trained nurse, that she is pregnant as the result of an affair with Prince Charles. Louise wants to continue the pregnancy, but cannot face the stigma of an illegitimate pregnancy, so she seeks Claire's advice on inducing an abortion. Because Claire sees that Louise would prefer to remain pregnant, she convinces Louise that abortion would be too dangerous, and that the best solution is to sleep with her husband and pass the child off as his. Louise is shocked: "Sleep with my husband?! But my lover would be furious!" Nonetheless, she follows this advice. This is one of the few 2016 plotlines in which abortion is considered but not chosen.

APR 30

Outlander (Starz)
Episode: "La Dame Blanche"

JUN 02
Peaky Blinders (Netflix)

Episode: Episode 3.5

Like several other shows on this year's list, *Peaky Blinders* had dealt with an abortion plotline before. In the first season, Ada discovered she was pregnant and planned to get an abortion (following the advice of Polly, who discloses her own past abortion), only to be stopped by Freddie on her way. Freddie marries her, allowing her to continue her pregnancy without shame. In this year's plotline, Polly's estranged son Michael has impregnated Charlotte, a motor heiress, and arranges for her to get an abortion. Charlotte expects him to accompany and support her during the illegal procedure, but Michael shows up late, pays the provider, and immediately leaves to take care of "family business." A desperate and fearful Charlotte begs him to stay as he callously walks away.

JUL 22
BoJack Horseman (Netflix)

Episode: "Brrap Brrap Pew Pew"

The year's most infamous abortion comedy was on the Netflix comedy-drama *BoJack Horseman*, when celebrity social media manager Diane accidentally tweets that pop star Sextina Aquafina is getting an abortion. While Diane is the one who is really pregnant and getting an abortion, Sextina embraces the mistake, releasing a single entitled "Get That Fetus, Kill That Fetus" and airing her staged abortion on pay-per-view television. The parallel abortions (Sextina's fake one, and Diane's real one) build a commentary on what "appropriate" behavior around abortion should be, challenging whether and how abortion can be funny - while depicting a funny abortion.

OCT 24
Jane the Virgin (CW)

Episode: "Chapter 46"

Jane the Virgin has included several pregnancy decision plotlines in the past that included mention of abortion, but this year the show actually had *Xiomara*, Jane's mother, get one. The abortion was revealed six weeks after the fact, when the narrator comments that Xo took medicine for cramps after having a medication abortion. The plotline reveals the complex levels of support women face when getting an abortion: while Xo has her daughter's acceptance and support, she struggles to disclose to her own mother. The episode is further noteworthy for depicting the first Latina main character to get an abortion on network primetime television.

OCT 27
Grey's Anatomy (ABC)

Episode: "Roar"

Along with several of Shonda Rhimes's other shows, *Grey's Anatomy* has rarely shied away from including abortion decision-making and provision onscreen. The episode "Roar" featured Victoria, a pregnant patient who discovers she has advanced pancreatic cancer. The doctors advise Victoria to get an abortion and proceed with aggressive treatments that might extend her life by few months. Instead, Victoria pushes for the option of surgery that will extend her life long enough to deliver the child, while ensuring she is likely to die soon thereafter. Victoria pushes back on the idea that an abortion would save her life: she is going to die either way. She wants to deliver the child before she does, and decides not to get an abortion.

OCT 28
Good Girls Revolt (Amazon)

Episode: "Dateline"

Amazon's *Good Girls Revolt* follows the women researchers of *News of the Week* magazine, as they prepare to file a complaint against their employer to allow them to write. Set in 1969, the show checks off many of the expected plotlines related to the second wave feminist movement: a sexual awakening, an empowering divorce, an incident of workplace sexual harassment, and, almost of course, an illegal abortion. The abortion is not meaningfully tied to the rest of the show's action, beyond that it shows the women banding together to collect money for their colleague who needs one. When Cindy accompanies Angie to the abortion provider's home, she discloses that she also had one, and that she had no reasons after. The plotline is noteworthy for its portrayal of illegal abortion as, essentially, quite safe.

NOV 02
You're the Worst (FX)

Episode: "Talking to Me, Talking to Me"

In this plotline, *You're the Worst* revisits a joke from its previous season, when Gretchen referred to a friend's past abortion as an "abobo." This time, it's her best friend Lindsay getting the "abobo," after impregnating herself with her estranged husband's sperm. Lindsay is stopped on the way into the clinic by an anti-abortion "sidewalk counselor" to talk over her options. When Gretchen confronts the counselor, the woman agrees that, having heard the context, Lindsay should probably get the abortion. Afterwards, Gretchen comments on how unconcerned Lindsay seems - she won't let that day's abortion interfere with her enjoyment of her pie. Even with a character as quirky and unconventional as Lindsay, the abortion is presented as a matter-of-fact errand.

NOV 11
Crazy Ex-Girlfriend (CW)

Episode: "When Will Josh and His Friend Leave Me Alone?"

Like with *Jane the Virgin*, Paula's abortion on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is revealed after it has happened. In fact, viewers are led to believe that Paula has resolved to continue her pregnancy, even if it means dropping out of law school before she's even begun. Yet, we soon see Paula recuperating in bed while her husband waits on her, and when the doorbell rings, her teenaged son shouts, "Mom, I'll get it since you just had an abortion!" This exchange shows that, despite the fact that she was secretive about her pregnancy, Paula was open with her family about her abortion, and that she chose it to pursue her own future opportunities.