

# Abortion Onscreen in 2020



In a year marred by unparalleled turbulence, 2020's television and movies provided both a welcome escape from and a weary reflection of our tumultuous reality, and this year's depictions of abortion are no exception. This year, we saw far fewer abortion plotlines on television (only 31 in 2020, compared to 43 in 2019), but a remarkable increase in the number of movies with abortion plotlines (thirteen in 2020, compared to three in 2019). While our previous Year in Review reports have been limited in scope to television, we considered this increase in films of particular importance, and are including them this year.

## **Television**

Of the 31 abortion plotlines, the majority (73%) featured a character actually obtaining an abortion. This is an increase from 2019, where just over 50% of plotlines included a character obtaining an abortion. Yet demographic discrepancies between these characters and the population of U.S. abortion patients remain: the vast majority (73%) of this year's characters obtaining abortions are white, quite different from the U.S. population of abortion patients, which is majority people of color. Furthermore, only one character this year was parenting at the time of their abortion, an all-time low and a distortion of the reality that the majority of U.S. abortion patients are raising children at the time of their abortions. This year's findings are a reversal of the trends we saw in 2019, which documented an increase in both numbers of characters of color, and characters who are parenting

when seeking abortion. This pattern is also substantially different from our recently published research, which documents increased portrayals of characters of color obtaining abortions, even if the majority of these characters are still white. While we cannot draw sweeping conclusions from one year of regression (especially a year in which film and television production was meaningfully disrupted), this year's findings do suggest that the increased diversity observed last year will not continue without sustained effort.

This year also brought fewer depictions of actual abortion procedures than in past years, including only two portrayals of surgical abortions and two of medication abortions. The remaining portrayals consisted of past abortion disclosures or did not depict the procedure onscreen.

Three plotlines depicted characters self-managing their abortions, two characters with herbs and one with blunt surgical instruments. While it is important to depict the multiple ways people may choose to end their pregnancies, that no plotlines addressed the phenomenon of characters managing their own abortions with pills is a significant missed opportunity to depict a growing reality for many U.S. abortion patients.

Several plotlines are worth highlighting, including explorations of race, motherhood, and sexuality in “Little Fires Everywhere,” evident not just in the abortion plotline but in the series overall. “Vida” included the first

plotline depicted a Latina character taking abortion pills onscreen, and her sister both supporting her and sharing her own abortion experience. A “Yellowstone” plotline included a brief reference to the U.S.’s history of eugenics in sterilizing Native American women after their abortion, though the character who has an abortion is white. The reality show “Deaf U” includes a series-long arc about a deaf woman reflecting on her experience obtaining an abortion, the first depiction of the intersection of deafness and abortion on television. A full table of all 31 episodes is available after our analysis, including our top episodes with additional commentary.

## Film

Thirteen movies with abortion plotlines premiered this year, the most to debut in a single year to date. Significantly, more than a third of these films were women-directed, a big shift from previous years in which the majority of movies with abortion plotlines were directed by men. Of this year’s films, about a third of them depicted characters in their teens, who constitute a small fraction of real life U.S. abortion patients. Like their television counterparts, these depictions do not portray the reality of abortion access particularly when it comes to demographics: the vast majority (73%) of this year’s film characters obtaining abortions are white, and a majority of them were also not parenting at the time of their

abortions. Slightly more than a third of these characters faced barriers to abortion access, including parental consent and lack of a nearby clinic, depicted with crushing reality in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and heartfelt humor in *Unpregnant*.

A number of horror films included small but important abortion plotlines, linking past abortions or even abortion considerations with possessed women and demon children. This marks the continuation of a trend in both horror films and television shows to linking abortion to ghoulish character defects. A full table of all thirteen movies is below, including our top films with additional commentary.

# Abortion on TV in 2020

Show Title	Network	Airdate	Episode Title	Type of Depiction
Messiah	Netflix	1/1/2020	Force Majeure	Abortion
Shameless	Showtime	1/5/2020	O Captain, My Captain	Abortion
Good Trouble	FreeForm	1/22/2020	Gumboot Becky	Discussion
Grownish	Hulu	1/23/20	Damn	Discussion
Shrill	Hulu	1/24/2020	WaHam, HR	Discussion
BoJack Horseman	Netflix	1/31/2020	Angela	Discussion
Love is Blind	Netflix	2/13/2020	Will You Marry Me?	Abortion
Shahs of Sunset	Bravo	3/13/20	Pool Party Massacre	Abortion
Curb Your Enthusiasm	HBO	3/22/20	The Spite Store	Abortion
Roswell, New Mexico	CW	3/23/20, 3/30/2020	Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space, Good Mother	Abortion

# Abortion on TV in 2020

Show Title	Network	Airdate	Episode Title	Type of Depiction
Unorthodox	Netflix	3/26/2020	Part 3	Discussion
Little Fires Everywhere	Hulu	4/1/2020, 4/8/2020, 4/22/2020	Duo, Uncanny, Find a Way	Abortion
Mrs. America	Hulu	4/15/2020, 4/22/2020	Phyllis, Gloria, Shirley, Betty	Abortion
Run	HBO	5/17/2020	Tell	Abortion
Vida	Starz	5/24/2020	Episode 21	Abortion
Barkskins	Hulu	5/25/2020	The Turtle King	Abortion
Insecure	HBO	6/14/2020	Lowkey Lost	Abortion
The Politician	Netflix	6/19/20	Election Day	Abortion
Dark	Netflix	6/27/2020	The Origin	Consideration
Yellowstone	Paramount	7/19/2020	Cowboys and Dreamers	Abortion
Frayed	HBO Max	7/30/2020	Episode 2	Abortion
I May Destroy You	HBO Max	8/3/2020	Social Media is a Great Way to Connect	Abortion

# Abortion on TV in 2020

Show Title	Network	Airdate	Episode Title	Type of Depiction
Pan y Circo	Amazon Prime	8/13/2020	My Body is Mine: Termination of Pregnancy	Abortion
The Chi	Showtime	8/23/2020	A Couple, Two, Three	Abortion
Borgen	Netflix	9/1/2020	Episode 3, Episode 4	Abortion
Deaf U	Netflix	9/10/2020	I Have So Many Questions, Am I Not Deaf Enough?, Are You Over Me?, Do You Usually Bring Girls Here?	Abortion
Monsterland	Hulu	10/2/2020	Port Fourchon, Louisiana	Abortion
Teen Mom 2	MTV	10/11/2020	Do Something	Consideration
Filthy Rich	Fox	11/16/2020	2 Corinthians 3:17, James 4:1	Abortion
This is Us	NBC	11/17/2020	Honestly	Consideration
Teen Mom 2	MTV	11/24/2020	Not So Normal Times	Abortion



## TOP EPISODES OF 2020

### Shameless

Episode: O Captain, My Captain



**AIRDATE** January 5

The episode covers the high cost of an abortion out-of-pocket, how even having insurance doesn't mean guaranteed access to abortion care, and a sympathetic clinician "accidentally" misplacing her script pad so that one character can obtain dozens of doses of mifepristone and misoprostol to give to people who come to her seeking abortion care. This is one of the few episodes that portrays multiple barriers to abortion care, and also depicts that lengths that both patients and providers go to overcome them.

Lexie, a wealthy white teenager, gets pregnant and asks Pearl, a younger Black teen, to accompany her to the appointment. Pearl discovers that Lexie is just using her; Lexie lies to clinic staff, using Pearl's name instead of her own. After the abortion, Lexie goes to Pearl's home to recover, and repeatedly asks Pearl's mother, Mia, who is also the housekeeper for Lexie's family, if she made the right decision. Instead, Mia delivers a blistering lecture on race and privilege. Though "Little Fires Everywhere" does not detail the experience of the abortion itself, this plotline's interweaving of multiple experiences of reproductive oppressions (including surrogacy and adoption, in other episodes) makes it unique among this year's portrayals.

### Little Fires Everywhere

Episodes: Duo, Uncanny, Find a Way



**AIRDATES**

April 1, April 8, April 22

# Mrs. America

Episodes: Phyllis, Gloria, Shirley, Betty



## AIRDATES

April 15, April 22

This series largely highlighted the work of notorious anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafley and her successful campaign to thwart the passage of Equal Rights Amendment. Woven throughout the episodes were stories of several characters' abortions, including a depiction of Gloria Steinem obtaining an illegal abortion while in London. Abortion as a thorny political issue comes up consistently in this series, including covering the time period immediately before and after the legalization of abortion in the United States.

In the penultimate episode of the series, Emma Hernandez obtains abortion pills and takes them both at the same time instead of following the clinician's instructions to take them separately. After telling her sister Lyn that she feels fine, Lyn shares that she was a "mess" after taking abortion pills. Later in the episode, Emma is nauseous and dizzy, vomiting in the toilet and seeks support from her ex-girlfriend. This is the first ever plotline to include a queer Latina character obtaining an abortion, and, importantly, receiving support from her ex-girlfriend.

# Vida

Episode: 21



## AIRDATE

May 24



# Yellowstone

Episode: Cowboys and Dreamers



**AIRDATE**

July 19

In a flashback scene, teenage Beth discovers that she's pregnant and asks her brother for help. They both think that going to the abortion clinic in town will compromise her privacy, so Beth has an abortion at nearby Indian Health Services. What her brother doesn't share with her, and Beth only finds out later, is that the requirement for having an abortion at that clinic is mandatory sterilization. This plotline hints at the U.S.'s horrific history of eugenic practices among Native Americans, even if the character who suffers in this plotline is white.

This reality show follows deaf students at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. One of the stars, Alexis, has a season-long arc about a past abortion in which she confronts her former sex partner, Daequan, about whether or not he got her pregnant on purpose. She also shares her abortion with a friend for the first time, and later confronts Daequan about his lack of support during the abortion. Besides noting that she had very little emotional support, Alexis doesn't talk about what the actual abortion experience was like, a missed opportunity to show how the healthcare system does not cater to people with disabilities.

Abortion Onscreen in 2020

## Deaf U

**Episodes: I Have So Many Questions, Am I Not Deaf Enough?, Are You Over Me?, Do You Usually Bring Girls Here?**



**AIRDATES**

April 2, April 8, April 22

# Movies with Abortion Plotlines, 2020

Title	Premiere Date	Director	Type of Depiction
Portrait of a Lady on Fire	2/14/2020	Céline Sciamma	Abortion
Premature	2/21/2020	Rashaad Ernesto Green	Abortion
Saint Frances	2/28/2020	Alex Thompson	Abortion
Swallow	3/6/2020	Carlo Mirabella-Davis	Abortion
Never Rarely Sometimes Always	3/13/2020	Eliza Hittman	Abortion
The Surrogate	6/12/2020	Jeremy Hersh	Abortion
Unpregnant	9/12/2020	Rachel Lee Goldenberg	Abortion
The Devil All the Time	9/16/2020	Antonio Campos	Discussion
The Glorias	9/30/2020	Julie Taymor	Abortion
The Binding	10/2/2020	Domenico Emanuele de Feudis	Abortion
Books of Blood	10/6/2020	Brannon Braga	Discussion
Borat Subsequent Movie Film	10/23/2020	Jason Woliner	Discussion

## Saint Frances



This comedy follows 34-year-old aspiring writer Bridget as she nannies for a kindergartener named Frances. During the course of the film, Bridget has a medication abortion, and her partner Jace reads her *Harry Potter* between cramps and she shows him the blood clots that accompany the abortion. Medication abortion is so rarely depicted onscreen, and this portrayal shows both the physical reality of some medication abortion experiences and how others can provide emotional support. In interviews about this particular role, actress Kelly O'Sullivan shared that she drew from her own abortion experience in portraying Bridget's, a rare instance of an actor both sharing her abortion experience and portraying a character who has one, too.

This award-winning film, set in rural Pennsylvania, follows teenage Autumn and all the barriers she encounters to obtaining an abortion, including not having a clinic nearby, not being able to tell her parents about the abortion, and not having the money to pay for the abortion. With the support of her cousin Skylar, they both travel by bus to New York City, where Autumn is able to have the abortion after they borrow money from a creepy older teen. This film goes to great lengths to expose the patriarchal underpinnings of both abortion restrictions and society at large.

## Never Rarely Sometimes Always





## TOP MOVIES OF 2020

### The Surrogate



This is one of the few films to tackle the intersection of pregnancy decision-making and surrogacy, telling the story of a gay couple, Josh and Aaron, and their friend, Jess, who agrees to be their surrogate, and what transpires when the fetus is diagnosed with a high likelihood of having Down Syndrome. Josh and Aaron encourage Jess to have an abortion and Jess disagrees, instead making connections with their local disability community. Ultimately, Jess decides to have an abortion because she does not want the child to be raised by parents who did not want them.

Straight-A high schooler Veronica discovers that she's pregnant, and, due to Missouri's parental consent laws, must either travel to New Mexico for her abortion or tell her religious mom. After enlisting her former best friend Bailey's help (and car) for an interstate road trip, she pawns the engagement ring given to her by her idiot boyfriend to cover her expenses. Veronica is able to obtain an abortion, and ultimately shares her experience with her mother, who supports her. The film is a buddy comedy: a reflection on Veronica and Bailey's friendship, and the way their shared mission tests their fragile reunion, with Veronica finding powerful support in Bailey.

### Unpregnant

