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Roadside America

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Plan B: The Road To Understanding Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom

The 2021 film *Plan B*, directed by Natalie Morales, centers around the fictional story of two teenage girls, Sunny and Lupe, on a road trip across South Dakota to get a Plan B emergency contraceptive pill from Planned Parenthood after being refused at their small-town pharmacy. The film is a typical raunchy teen comedy, but its underbelly deals with serious issues revolving around identity and women's reproductive rights. This premise is not outlandish. Women in real life face barriers regarding reproductive health and contraception. This film is a well-done depiction of and helps people understand that often, women must engage in forced mobility to receive the reproductive healthcare they need.

As mentioned before, this film takes place in South Dakota. According to a national state ranking of reproductive rights, "Status of Women In The States," South Dakota is ranked the lowest among all 50 states, including Washington D.C. (Reproductive Rights). At the beginning of the film, when the girls initially go to their local pharmacy, the pharmacist declines to offer them the pill and explains that in South Dakota, there is "a conscience clause" where if it goes against their personal beliefs, medical professionals can refuse to give someone birth control drugs. The pharmacist then explains that his "hands are tied, morally speaking." This clause is not fictional. According to Planned Parenthood, South Dakota is one of six states that employs a

conscience clause when receiving emergency contraception such as the Plan B pill (Planned Parenthood). In "Why do they take the risk? A systematic review of the qualitative literature on informal sector abortions in settings where abortion is legal", Sonia Chemlal and Giuliano Russo describe more abortion clinics are shut down in conservative states, "pushing women to travel long distances for a legal abortion" (Chemlal and Russo 7). For instance, in Texas, the recent state abortion law allowing one to receive an abortion within six weeks when most women do not know they are pregnant has caused many to travel far to obtain abortions. According to the Guttmacher Institute in "Impact of Texas' Abortion Ban: A 14-Fold Increase in Driving Distance to Get an Abortion", Texas women would have to drive over 14 times longer than they did to receive an abortion (Nash, Bearak, Li, and Cross).

The main characters, frustrated, make the swift decision from this incident to drive to Rapid City, South Dakota's Planned Parenthood, over three hours away. Although the beginning of the road trip has many comedic moments, including when they took Sunny's mother's minivan with her real estate sticker on the back and when the radio kept playing songs and segments about pregnancy, The characters are not eager to go on the road. They see it as a mission to receive the pill within the preferred 24-hour window to take it. As recognized in Variety's "'Plan B' Review: A Girls-Behaving-Badly Comedy With Two Star-Making Performances and a Scandalous Spirit", Owen Gleiberman explains that the film "deal[s] with a world in which a 17-year-old girl might find herself in the position of having to make a fork-in-the-road decision about her destiny" (Gleiberman).

When discussing people, destiny is an important subject and corresponds to how people typically deal with on the road. Sunny and Lupe have their conflicts at home, Sunny feeling the need to be perfect for her single Indian mother and Lupe feeling indifferent from her Hispanic,

Catholic family. On the road, their feelings about their friendship and identity are revealed, especially in vulnerable situations.

Sexual harassment plays a role in the character's journey on the road and plays into the more significant theme of forced mobility. Dr. Jessica Enevold, in her thesis, "Women on the road: Regendering Narratives of Mobility," explains that "Women's mobility is consistently linked to sexuality." Although men on the road have exhibited negative social traits, women have been placed lower socially, purposely because of sexuality (Enevold 6). This argument about gender directly connects to the film, especially towards the middle. The girls arrive at a gas station at night and encounter two older men in the lot, making lewd comments at them like "looks like we have a couple of hot tamales" and "tasty." Immediately after this, a male soldier passes by, and the men instantly act polite and thank him for his service. This interaction shows the gender gap when it comes to respecting. On top of this, it further highlights how difficult mobility is for women, especially when women are already forced to go on the road to seek healthcare. Still, the added sexual harassment common for female travelers makes the journey even more difficult.

In the middle of the film, Sunny and Lupe are desperate. It's the middle of the night, they have been on the road for a while, and on top of this, they have just been informed that Planned Parenthood was most likely closed for the night. Their desperation leads them to a drug dealer at a random park who claims to have fake IDs and a Plan B pill with "a small chance, it's PCP" for hundreds of dollars. Without the money, the dealer states that they can work something else out, alluding to them performing a sexual act to him. To Lupe's surprise, Sunny decides to go through with the exchange in complete seriousness. The exchange is interrupted by a comedic moment, and the girls run off with IDs and pill. Later, when the girls lose their car that night. Unable to

travel further, Sunny, feeling hopeless, takes the “possibly PCP” pill, hoping it is a Plan B. It turns out to be a hallucinogenic drug, which causes conflict when they search for the car. She is delirious and even accidentally hits someone with the found minivan. These moments in the film are filled with comedic moments, but they call attention to the idea of desperation. Being forced to go on the road for reproductive healthcare is an act of desperation itself, but the film also displays the other acts of desperation many women feel the need to turn to.

In areas with more restrictive laws, many women turn to alternative methods for reproductive healthcare, especially abortion. For instance, in "Unsafe Abortion: Unnecessary Maternal Mortality" by Dr. Lisa B Haddad and Dr. Nawal M Nour, the correlation between unsafe abortion and abortion laws is discussed. Data explains that countries with more restrictive laws regarding abortion have higher abortion-related deaths, "34 deaths per 100,000 childbirths" compared to countries with fewer restrictions, "1 or fewer per 100,000 childbirths" (Haddad and Nour). Dr. Haddad and Dr. Nour go into further detail pertaining to the impacts newly placed abortion laws have on mortality via unsafe abortions, using Romania as an example. In Romania, one could get an abortion easily up until 1966. Before this, the mortality rate was "20 per 100,000 live births", by 1989, after the laws were implemented the rate jumped to "148 deaths per 100,000 live births" (Haddad and Nour). Although it can be argued that the film "Plan B" is not technically about abortion and pertains more to emergency contraception, Sunny's willingness to receive that healthcare shows parallels with women seeking abortion, as she is willing to put herself in multiple unsafe situations, that could even be fatal, all because her access to proper and relegated medicine is restricted.

In conclusion, the connections that the film “Plan B” has to the reality of women being forced to go on the road to receive healthcare make the audience understand the gravity of the

issue better because the film portrays a realistic depiction that sources can back up in multiple aspects. The specific location of the film provides correct information that educates the audience. The desperation of the characters makes the audience empathize with the fictional women and women in general.

Works Cited

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Honor Pledge

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.

ES/Caroline Davis/

