

Abortion Rights in Latin America

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For proof that criminalizing abortion doesn't reduce abortion rates and only endangers the lives of women, consider Latin America. In most of the region, abortions are a crime, but the abortion rate is far higher than in Western Europe or the United States. Colombia -- where abortion is illegal even if a woman's life is in danger -- averages more than one abortion per woman over all of her fertile years. In Peru, the average is nearly two abortions per woman over the course of her reproductive years.

In a region where there is little sex education and social taboos keep unmarried women from seeking contraception, criminalizing abortion has not made it rare, only dangerous. Rich women can go to private doctors. The rest rely on quacks or amateurs or do it themselves. Up to 5,000 women die each year from abortions in Latin America, and hundreds of thousands more are hospitalized.

Abortion is legal on demand in the region only in Cuba, and a few other countries permit it for extreme circumstances, mostly when the mother's life is at risk, the fetus will not live or the pregnancy is the result of rape. Even when pregnancies do qualify for legal abortions, women are often denied them because anti-abortion local medical officials and priests intervene, the requirements are unnecessarily stringent, or women do not want to incur the public shame of reporting rape.

But Latin Americans are beginning to look at abortion as an issue of maternal mortality, not just maternal morality. Where they have been conducted, polls show that Latin Americans support the right to abortion under some circumstances. Decriminalization, at least in part, is being seriously discussed in Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay and Argentina, and perhaps will be on the agenda after the presidential election in July in Mexico.

International pressure is helping. In November, the United Nations Human Rights Committee decided that Peru had violated a woman's rights when a hospital denied an abortion to a 17-year-old carrying a severely malformed fetus, who died shortly after birth. United Nations conferences on women also have forced governments to track and publish their progress on expanding women's rights. This has emboldened women's groups and led to the creation of government offices on women's issues, which have helped the push for abortion rights.

Latin American women, who are increasing their participation in the work force and in politics, have also become more vocal. Their voice would be much louder were it not for the Bush administration's global gag rule, which bans any family planning group that gets American money from speaking about abortions, or even criticizing unsafe illegal abortions. This has silenced such respected and influential groups as Profamilia in Colombia. Anti-abortion lawmakers in Washington can look at Latin America as a place

where the global gag rule has worked exactly as they had hoped. All Americans can look at Latin America to see unnecessary deaths and injuries from unsafe abortions.