

MEXICO - Legal Abortion No Longer a Distant Goal for Activists

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IPS - Mexico could join Cuba and Guyana as the only countries in Latin America where abortion is legal in cases other than those involving rape or a threat to a pregnant woman's life.

Two draft laws apparently enjoy majority support, and the Church and conservative groups are up in arms.

For the first time "there is a serious, mature debate on this, and a strong possibility that abortion will be decriminalised, which would be a very positive step in terms of the rights of women," Martha Juárez, spokeswoman for the non-governmental Information Group on Reproductive Choice (GIRE), told IPS.

Last week, opposition legislators from the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the small Alternativa party introduced a draft law in the Mexico City legislature that would allow voluntary abortion to be carried out in the city up to the 14th week of pregnancy.

And on Tuesday, PRD senators presented a draft law in Congress that would make abortion legal nationwide before the 12th week of pregnancy.

"It does look very likely that these draft laws will be approved, which would be appalling, because it would legalise the murder of defenceless beings," Jorge Serrano, director of the anti-abortion Comité Pro Vida (Pro-Life Committee), commented to IPS.

"We are not against women's rights, but what rights are we talking about if abortion is a crime, in every sense of the word," he argued.

The conservative governing National Action Party (PAN), which does not hold a majority in the city legislature or the national Congress, announced protest demonstrations and legal action aimed at blocking the two draft laws, while President Felipe Calderón urged lawmakers to handle the issue "with great care."

Calderón said he would respect the decisions reached by the legislators. But he clarified that he believes in "the defence of life" and considers the present legislation, which allows — in most Mexican states — abortion only in case of rape, a deformed fetus, or a threat to the life of the pregnant woman, adequate "for now."

Of the 193 United Nations member countries, 188 allow therapeutic abortion in order to save the woman's life. Only in Chile, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Vatican is abortion illegal under any circumstance, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, women's groups and activists are fighting for the legalisation of abortion in nearly every country.

A study by the Autonomous National University of Mexico estimated that up to one million illegal abortions a year — equivalent to 30 percent of all pregnancies — are practiced in this country of 103 million people.

Other studies have reported that backstreet abortions are the fourth or fifth leading cause of death among Mexican women, and that even in cases of rape, deformed fetuses or risk to the mother's life, obtaining permission for a legal abortion is nearly impossible.

A survey carried out last year by the National Institute of Statistics found that only 15 percent of the pregnant women interviewed said they really wanted to be having a baby at that time.

The Vatican announced that it was sending Colombian Bishop Alfonso López, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, to Mexico to support opponents of the new draft laws.

Conservatives have dredged up their standard arguments claiming that abortion is murder. They have taken out advertising space in the local press to explain in detail what abortion methods consist of and to point out that at a few weeks' gestation, the fetus already has a fully human form.

Furthermore, the Coalition for the Rights of All has put videos on the Internet showing how a fetus dies when a woman has an abortion.

GIRE's Juárez said that conservatives are using the "sensationalist strategy of broadcasting old videos" to oppose the draft laws. She said that if they had "a minimum of integrity" they ought to make available other videos showing the deaths of women who have undergone unsafe backstreet abortions.

An estimated four million abortions a year are practiced in Latin America, and 5,000 women die as a result, according to the WHO. Thirty to 40 percent of women who go through the procedure suffer life-threatening complications.

"Deciding whether or not to have a child should be exclusively the woman's choice. That is her right, and she should not have to put her life at risk for it," Juárez said.

"It is not our point of view that abortion should become a general practice. The important thing is to have a public health system that improves and extends everything to do with sex education and prevention of unwanted pregnancies," she said.

The draft laws under debate in Mexico stress that access to contraceptive methods needs to be improved urgently.

Juárez said that "in the present legislative process we found maturity and an openness to listen to different points of view, and a clear resistance to the threats and warnings from the church and conservatives, which is a reason to celebrate."

But Serrano of the Comité Pro Vida said that failure to listen to the Church, which is threatening to excommunicate those who are in favour of legalised abortion, would be a major error. In his opinion, the Church is only defending the life and dignity of human beings, and "no one should be opposed to that."

The debate includes the timeworn discussion about whether a fetus at less than 12 or 14 weeks gestation should be considered an individual person or not, and whether or not it feels pain when it is aborted.

Alfonso Gutiérrez, a Mexican doctor who specialises in assisted reproduction and owns several clinics, said that the fetal nervous system starts functioning from the seventh week of gestation, "but I can't say for sure that it can already feel."

"What I do say is that abortion destroys a potential person," he said.