

## Push to Loosen Abortion Laws In Latin America

December 3, 2005, Saturday

NEW YORK TIMES

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PAMPLONA, Colombia - In this tradition-bound Roman Catholic town one day in April, two young women did what many here consider unthinkable: pregnant and scared, they took a cheap ulcer medication known to induce abortions. When the drug left them bleeding, they were treated at a local emergency room - then promptly arrested.

Insisting that abortion was rare, Pamplona's conservative leaders thought the case was over. Instead, the episode reverberated throughout Colombia and helped to galvanize a national movement to roll back laws that make abortion illegal, even to save a mother's life.

Scott Dalton for The New York Times A rally in Bogota, Colombia, in September supported abortion rights.

Women wearing masks marched in a rally in Bogotá, Colombia, in September to support legalizing some abortions. Latin American countries ban all abortions, yet lead the world in the number of illegal abortions. Latin America holds some of the world's most stringent abortion laws, yet it still has the developing world's highest rate of abortions - a rate that is far higher even than in Western Europe, where abortion is widely and legally available.

Increasingly, however, women's rights groups are mounting challenges in courts and on the streets to liberalize laws that in some countries ban abortion under any circumstances. At least one major case with implications for the entire region could be decided in December.

So far, no country has dropped its ban. But the effort, spurred by the high mortality rate among Latin American women who undergo clandestine abortions, has begun to loosen once ironclad restrictions and opened the door to more change.

Although it may seem small by United States standards, it is a seismic shift for a region where abortion is readily available only in Cuba and a few other Caribbean nations. "There is a real trend for change, particularly in South America," said Marianne Mollman, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, which supports efforts to decriminalize abortion in Latin America. "I think it's the end of the realization that the criminalization of abortion doesn't lead to less abortion, but that it leads to a lot of preventable problems."

In Brazil, the world's largest Roman Catholic country, women's groups successfully pushed for new regulations this year that permit a rape victim to get an abortion without providing a police report to doctors, as was required. The government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva also formed a commission this year that called for legalizing abortion up to the third month of pregnancy. Congress is debating the plan.

In Uruguay, the Senate came three votes shy last year from legalizing abortion, setting the stage for future efforts by abortion rights advocates, while Argentina's Congress is debating about a half dozen bills to legalize abortion in some instances.

Women's rights groups from New York to Buenos Aires are also closely watching the outcome of a lawsuit filed by a Colombian lawyer, Mónica Roa, with the nation's highest court. It seeks to legalize abortion when a mother's life is in danger, when the fetus is expected to die of abnormalities or when the pregnancy resulted from rape.

The central argument in the case - one that could set precedent - is that Colombia's anti-abortion laws violate its international treaty obligations, which require the nation to ensure a woman's right to life and health.

The abortion rights movement in Latin America has come as women throughout the region are having fewer children and benefiting from once improbable opportunities in the workplace and politics. Social mores are also changing. Largely gone, for example, is the social stigma unwed mothers once faced, as well as laws that offered few legal protections for women. Also, divorce is now legal across Latin America.

Emboldened, women's groups that advocate the legalization of abortion have taken to the streets of Buenos Aires; Santiago, Chile; and the Colombian capital, Bogotá, with some marchers publicly admitting they had had abortions.

Regional health officials increasingly argue that tough laws have done little to slow abortions. The rate of abortions in Latin America is 37 per 1,000 women of childbearing age, the highest outside Eastern Europe, according to United Nations figures. Four million abortions, most of them illegal, take place in Latin America annually, the United Nations reports, and up to 5,000 women are believed to die each year from complications from abortions.

In an interview, a doctor in Medellín, Colombia, said that while he offered safe, if secret, abortions, many abortionists did not.

"In this profession, we see all kinds of things, like people using witchcraft, to whatever pills they can get their hands on," said the doctor, who charges about \$45 to carry out abortions in women's homes. He spoke on condition that his name not be used, because performing an abortion in Colombia can lead to a prison term of more than four years.

"They open themselves up to incredible risks, from losing their reproductive systems or, through complications, their lives," the doctor said.

Such arguments have done little to sway an anti-abortion movement that is largely led by influential leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.