

Abortion battle obscures reproductive realities for women in Chile

SUNDAY, 28 JULY 2013 10:00

WRITTEN BY ROSALIND ADAMS

As politicians and human rights groups tussle over abortion bill, many women in Chile remain without access to reproductive health choices and information.

"I put the pills in with a large tampon, to make sure they were in deep enough," Mariana said. "They told me I had to do physical activity, so then I began to sweep and clean the toilet."



The 29-year-old's experience with the drug misoprostol is one of many printed in *The Manual*, an instruction guide on how to self-abort that is published by [Feminists and Lesbians for the Right to Information](#).

While the issue of abortion has gained new momentum in recent weeks after the story of [Belén, a pregnant 11-year-old girl made international headlines](#), women are finding ways around the harsh restrictions in Chile.

In a public forum Wednesday afternoon, local pro-choice advocacy groups addressed a crowd from the steps of the Universidad de Santiago de Chile.

"Abortion is a reality across Latin America that we must acknowledge," Javiera Marquez of the group Bread and Roses, said. "Thousands of women every year are already having abortions here."

Chile is one of six states in the world that has a blanket ban on abortion, installed in 1989 in the final days of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. In the wake of this, a culture bereft of information and social stigma has flourished.

This puts women at risk, said Veronica Diaz, director of the Valparaíso based group, [Catholics for the Right to Decide](#).

"Most women who need an abortion are alone and devoid of information, and have trouble getting real help because they are exposed to deception and fraud," she told The Santiago Times. "They risk their lives and health for this very reason."

Where the law has failed to provide a choice, other options have cropped up to meet the demand.

Clandestine clinics with medical professionals who perform "scrapings" exist, but the costs are prohibitively expensive for most women, Diaz said. A private clinic may be as much as 2 million pesos — about US\$4,000.

Increasing use of misoprostol

Instead, at-home methods have become the preferred choice for women in Chile.

In rural areas, women may resort to homemade herbal remedies, but these can have tenuous outcomes.

"The first time, I tried to use abortion herbs like cinnamon, ginger, etc." describes 27-year-old Graciela in *The Manual*. "But because of how far along I was in the pregnancy, I then opted to use the pills."

The use of misoprostol pills is the more common experience for women in Chile who wish to terminate their pregnancies.

"Most women who become pregnant unintentionally and need to resort to an abortion are women who have few economic resources, and so they mainly resort to misoprostol," Diaz said.



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Also known under its brand names as Misotrol or Cytotec, misoprostol is an anti-inflammatory drug that can be used to treat ulcers, but is also commonly used to induce labor — or abortion. It is also on the World Health Organization's (WHO) Model List of Essential Medicines.

The drug has [changed the landscape](#) of abortion for women in Chile and across Latin America, where restrictive abortion regulations reign. When used correctly and with guidance, it allows a woman to make a personal decision, with relative safety in the privacy of her home.

But risks remain, especially when administered without medical guidance. The pills may be taken orally, but are most often inserted vaginally. If pushed too far up, they can cause infection. Hemorrhaging can also occur.

In Chile, the drug was taken off pharmacy shelves under Michelle Bachelet's administration, because of its known property to induce abortion. But instead of the prohibition discouraging use, a black market dominates the distribution of the drug, full of suspect products and dealers.

The cost can range from 50,000 to 70,000 pesos, or US\$100 to US\$140, for the recommended dose of four pills. In the U.S. where the drug is legal, the cost is about US\$2 per pill.

"The problem is that there is a lot of supply of the drug on the Internet that is misleading," Diaz explained. "There are many who are looking to profit without worrying about the health of women and so they sell them crap that nobody knows exactly what it is."

Another woman — Connie, 29 — tells her story in *The Manual*, describing such a situation.

"When I got home, I unwrapped the package of seven pills, and I put them in as he told me. I started feeling itchy, but I did not bleed," she recalls.

"I was itching and waited many hours and nothing. I discovered they were fake, so I washed with water, trying to get out the crap that this scoundrel sold me," she describes.

In a country where abortion is punishable by up to five years in prison, these penalties create fear and can discourage women from seeking help in case of emergency — which some NGOs seek to alleviate.

"A central problem of this issue remains the criminalization of abortion," Francia Jarnett of [Chileans Against Violence Against Women](#), said at the public forum on Wednesday, speaking of the ways women are discouraged from having an abortion.

"[This country] uses its own legal, moral, and ethical code to intimidate women," she added.

The Dutch NGO, [Women on Waves](#), sells the prescribed amount of the drug over the internet to women who are less than nine weeks pregnant and live in countries where it is unavailable, for a donation of about US\$120.

The group Lesbians and Feminists for the Right to Information contends that most problems with the drug occur due to lack of information and poor access to legitimate pills, and seeks to combat this with both the manual and an abortion hotline.

The group runs an abortion hotline from 7-11 p.m. everyday, which guides women through the process of using the drug.

According to Angela Erpel, who works with The Abortion Line, the hotline is able to counsel women legally because the same information is on the websites of certified medical authorities like WHO and The International Women's Health Organization.

Volunteers are also instructed to stick to a lawyer-approved script when counseling women. The hotline has received more than 12,000 calls since it began operations in 2009, according to its website.

[Estimates](#) for the number of abortions performed in Chile each year range from 60,000 to 160,000. No reliable figures exist, as the use of misoprostol can be imperceptible from a natural miscarriage and often goes unreported.

Lack of political will

While self-initiated abortions continue, much of the public debate has focused on legalizing therapeutic abortion — or interrupting pregnancy when the physical or mental health of the mother is in danger.

But it has been difficult to muster any real political support for this, even though [polls show](#) that a majority of Chileans support therapeutic abortion.

Advocacy groups like Miles Chile and Amnesty International have used the case of Belén to [rally around a bill](#) currently sitting in Congress that would legalize the procedure in these circumstances. But so far, there seems little movement from parliamentarians.

"I don't think the bill is going to pass, there are too many conservatives in Congress and this has been a very long road and things are slow to change," Erpel told The Santiago Times.

A previous version of the bill [failed to pass the Senate in 2012](#) in a vote 19-12.

Former president Michelle Bachelet, a frontrunner in November's presidential election, has been vocal about supporting therapeutic abortion in her campaign. Her newly-minted opponent Evelyn Matthei also introduced a proposal in 2010 to decriminalize therapeutic abortion.

Yet it is difficult to predict how much a new president may influence the political climate in a country — and region — where the Catholic Church still has a stronghold on the politics and culture of its people.

"In Congress last year, while discussing the possibility of therapeutic abortion, we could not help but notice that the right wing party members climbed into the stands to sit with the Catholic hierarchy, and that evangelical representatives had the privilege of being invited to reserved seating places in order to observe the voting," described Diaz.

Before serving as president, Bachelet served as health minister, and created a controversial program to distribute free emergency contraception to females at least 14 years old. The program was later halted after a ruling from Chile's constitutional court.

But Bachelet's administration did not raise reproductive rights issues as part of its agenda.

"When Bachelet assumed the presidency, she slammed the door in the face of women in regards to reproductive rights issues and diversity in sexual rights issues," Diaz said. "The administration made a covenant with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, agreeing not to put issues of sexual reproductive rights on the agenda."

Lack of education and social stigma

While a majority in Chile support therapeutic abortion in the case of the health of the mother or rape, the same poll shows that most do not support abortion for any reason.

Many Latin American countries have legalized therapeutic abortion, but stringent restrictions are still common across the region.

Cuba, Guyana, Puerto Rico, Uruguay and Mexico City — or about 3 percent of the region by population — are the only places where women may elect to have an abortion.

In this environment, many see increased education efforts and better access to reproductive health information as the most important, immediate solution.

Diaz said her experiences led her to conclude that adolescents across social classes are not well-informed in regards to sex education, and this is where the problem of unwanted pregnancies begins.

"They don't know, for example, about the use of condoms and that this is vital for preventing sexual transmitted diseases and pregnancies," Diaz said.

Adela Montero, the director of the reproductive health clinic [CEMERA](#), which is affiliated with the Universidad de Chile, said better health and education services are needed for women to make better informed choices and prevent pregnancies earlier.

This is a combination of a set of ethics handed down by the Church, as well as rampant social stigma around sexuality, she said.

"The fact is, in our country, we do not talk about sexuality," she said. "We need more facilities that can deliver prevention counseling and pregnancy with contraceptive alternatives out there."

In the heavily Catholic country, the church uses its resources to influence not just lawmakers but also the public, Diaz said, creating advertisements that bring fetuses to life, begging not to be killed.

Diaz said education is important, but so is mitigating this impact of the Catholic Church.

"In order for things to change, we also have to decriminalize the consciousness of people who carry the burden of sin when they think of abortion."

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