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GLOBAL HEALTH

Chile: Senators debate abortion measure one vote away from becoming law

BY LISA NIKOLAU ON 19 JANUARY 2017

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Chile's President Michelle Bachelet discussing the proposed abortion measure at UN Women in 2015. (Credit: UN Women/Flickr)

Anti-abortion senators in Chile are arguing against a measure that is now one vote away from allowing abortion under certain circumstances.

It has taken lawmakers two years to get to this point. President Michelle Bachelet initially proposed a bill to decriminalize some abortions two years ago. In March 2016, the lower house of Congress [approved](#) the bill; the Senate Health Commission approved the bill in September. On Monday, *La Nacion* reported, the measure [passed the Senate panel](#) with a 3-2 vote, and will now need a full-Senate vote to become a law.

Anti-abortion senators presented their argument against the measure yesterday, and introduced an initiative that would provide comprehensive care for women with complex pregnancies. The initiative would provide psychological and economic support as well as preference for medical hours both during pregnancy and after childbirth. The proposal would cost close to \$12 billion Chilean pesos (\$18 million USD).

The president of the right-wing Independent Democratic Union (UDI), Jacqueline van Rysselberghe, said that "accompaniment is the way to tackle complex pregnancies, protecting women and their unborn children, not the government's response to legalize abortion, which impairs the dignity of the people," Chilean broadcaster ADN [reported](#).

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The abortion measure under consideration would decriminalize the procedure up to 12 weeks gestation under three conditions: if the pregnancy puts the woman's health at risk, if the fetus is unviable and in rape cases.

Tireless opposition

Chile's pro-choice politicians and advocates have faced fierce opposition over the years. Since 1990, legislators have submitted 15 abortion-related bills to Congress. Today, many right-leaning politicians and interest groups continue to protest any change in the legislation.

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The Roman Catholic Church is leading the opposition, and in September organized an [anti-abortion rally in the nation's capital](#) that drew support from tens of thousands of people.

One of the senators who voted against the measure this week, Hernán Larraín of the far-right Independent Democrat Union (UDI), [told reporters](#) he opposed the measure because it is unconstitutional. Should the measure get full Senate approval, he added, its opposition plans to take it to the Constitutional Court.

"We want legislation to protect life and this project breaks that principle," Larraín said. "This is a project that obviously would have to change our constitution to approve it and I don't think that is justified."

In Chile, therapeutic abortion was legal for more than half a century until dictator Augusto Pinochet banned it under all circumstances in 1989.

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Still, pro-choice advocates point out that nearly [200,000](#) women seek out illegal and unsafe abortions in Chile every year. Those who can afford it turn to underground private clinics or the international collective [Women on Web](#) to access Misoprostol, also known as the abortion pill, which leads to a successful abortion [90 percent](#) of the time if taken correctly, according to the World Health Organization.

Chile's poor, however, have even fewer options. In 2008, the [Chilean Ministry of Health](#) said more than 33,000 women were hospitalized with abortion-related complications.

Chile is one of only six countries – El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Vatican, Malta and the Dominican Republic – that refuse abortion under any circumstance.

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