

Forum: abortion in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay

In recent years the abortion issue has risen to the top of the political debate in various Latin American countries. Uruguay, with the “*Bill in Defense of Reproductive Health*”, and Brazil, with a case under review in the Supreme Court to authorize interruption of pregnancy in cases of fetal anencephaly, have been the main protagonists in this political scenario. The importance of these events is not limited to the local attempts at changing legislation. The example of Uruguay and Brazil should be viewed as successful experiences at resisting a growing trend at reviewing liberal abortion legislation, especially based on recent changes in the United States. Just as there is an increasing understanding of the right to abortion as an extension of individual freedoms and consequently as a human rights issue, there is also a growing religious intransigence that views abortion as an act of murder against the fetus.

This tense political context of expansion and guarantee of individual freedoms and increasing religious influence in the legislative order of Latin American countries provides the backdrop for the three articles in this Forum on Abortion. The articles discuss the political and health care reality in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay. The authors are local and regional protagonists in the process of reviewing abortion legislation.

The first article, *Current Situation with Abortion in Colombia: Between Illegality and Reality*, by Ana Cristina González Veléz, physician and National Director of Public Health in Colombia, portrays an absolutely restrictive legislative scenario in the region. Colombia is part of the 0.4% of the world’s population subject to legislation that prohibits abortion under any and all circumstances, even cases of rape or risk of death to the woman. Vélez discusses this legislation’s ambiguity in a country fraught by violence and inequality, where wealthy women have access to safe abortion while poor women risk their lives through unsafe abortion.

The second article *The Experience in Uruguay: the Bill in Defense of Reproductive Health*, by Mónica Xavier, physician, Senator, and author of the bill proposing a review of the Uruguayan legislation in 2004, presents the principal proposals in this bill that mobilized Latin America while it was being voted. The bill was passed by the House of Deputies but voted down by the National Senate. Had it passed, it would have been the first truly liberal abortion legislation in Latin America. In order to understand the experience reported by Xavier, one should not overlook the fact that Uruguay is one of the most intensely lay Latin American countries in both juridical and legislative terms.

The third article, *Abortion and Fetal Non-Viability: The Brazilian Debate*, by Debora Diniz, anthropologist, one of the main protagonists in the anencephaly case submitted to the Brazilian Supreme Court in 2004, discusses the principal ethical and legal arguments underlying the suit. Although the suit is limited to anencephaly, a malformation that affects one out of thousand pregnancies, the discussion spawned by the legal case paved the way for a broader debate on the punitive characteristics of abortion in Brazil.

The three articles present different expressions of a persistent theme for public health and more recently for the Latin American bioethical debate. Latin America has one of the most restrictive abortion legislations in the world. Unsafe abortion is the third or fourth cause of maternal mortality in a major portion of the countries, a clear indication of the urgency of this health-related and ethical debate. The goal is for this Forum on Abortion to strengthen the public, lay, and reasonable debate on an issue that stimulates both our moral certainties and our commitment to individual freedoms and public health.

Debora Diniz

ANIS: Instituto de Bioética, Direitos Humanos e Gênero, Brasília, Brasil.