

Lawmakers Reject Bill to Allow Rape Victims Abortions

Peruvian rape victims who have become pregnant have no legal option but to keep an unwanted pregnancy after Congress voted against a bill to legalize abortion in such cases, an issue that has divided ordinary Peruvians.

The vote, late on Tuesday, meant the Latin American nation kept in place a stringent law that permits abortion only if the mother's life or health is at risk.

"It has been decided to shelve this bill, which was proposed by civil society groups that aimed to decriminalize abortion, based on criteria proposed by the Congress committee that the basis of the right to life is from the moment of conception," said conservative congressman Juan Carlos Eguren.

Congressman Julio Rosas said the decision was taken to "safeguard the health of a mother and the greater interests of the unborn child."

Peruvian women's rights groups had collected 64,200 signatures in favor of the bill in the past year to support their campaign to get it debated in Congress.

Before the vote, campaigners for and against the bill held demonstrations outside the Congress building in the capital Lima, pro-choice activists standing topless with the message 'Let me decide' painted across their waists.

A recent opinion poll published in El Comercio newspaper found Peruvians were divided over the abortion issue, with 52 percent of people questioned in Lima saying they were in favor of allowing abortion in the case of rape.

Rights groups say the plight of pregnant rape victims is made

worse by a law that bans public health services from providing emergency contraception—which is however available from private healthcare providers for those who can afford it.

The Church's enduring influence on society, and public condemnation of abortion, are factors behind the strict abortion laws in Peru and across predominantly Catholic Latin America, where six countries have a total ban on abortion.

The Catholic Church and conservative lawmakers argue that abortion infringes on the rights of an unborn child, which should be protected by law at all costs.

Women unable to obtain a legal abortion often risk their lives undergoing a dangerous backstreet abortion.

The World Health Organization has said botched abortions are a leading cause of maternal death worldwide, accounting for 12 percent of all maternal deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on 2008 figures.

The impact of stringent abortion laws on girls in Latin America recently came to the fore when Paraguay denied a pregnant 10-year-old girl an abortion after she was alleged to have been raped by her stepfather, sparking international debate.

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