

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Americas > Argentina > Women (Argentina) > Reproductive Rights (Women, Argentina) > **Argentina holds historic abortion vote as 1m women rally to demand change**

Argentina holds historic abortion vote as 1m women rally to demand change

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Senate votes on bill opposed by Catholic church and pope that would legalise abortion in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy

Ana María Acevedo was a 19-year-old housemaid and already the mother of three children when she was diagnosed with cancer of the jaw.

Her prognosis took a turn for the worse when doctors discovered she was two weeks pregnant, and cancelled her scheduled chemotherapy sessions.

Acevedo was admitted to Iturraspe hospital in the Argentinian city of Santa Fé, where she remained throughout her pregnancy, but she found herself trapped in a legal grey zone.

Doctors said she could not continue with chemo because of her pregnancy – but they would not consider a termination.

Abortion is banned in [Argentina](#), and while it is legal in the case of rape or risk to the woman's life, doctors often refuse to perform the procedure.

"They said they wanted to save both lives: her life and the life of her unborn child," said Ana María's mother Norma Cuevas in an interview.

"I begged the hospital to save my daughter's life with an abortion. The hospital sent me to get an order from a judge but the judge sent me back to convince the doctors. They kept playing a game of back-and-forth with me."

Acevedo's baby daughter was eventually delivered by caesarean section six months into the pregnancy, but died within 24 hours; Acevedo died two weeks later.

Her death in 2007 returned to the spotlight this year, when Cuevas testified at a recent congressional hearing over a proposal to reform Argentina's strict abortion laws.

On Wednesday, the debate comes to a climax when the country's senate votes on a law decriminalising abortion in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy.

If approved, Argentina would become the largest country in Latin America to legalise the procedure.

Although abortion is legal in a few jurisdictions – Mexico City, Cuba, Uruguay, Guyana and the French overseas department of French Guiana – the region as a whole has some of the most restrictive laws in the world, and includes three countries where the procedure is banned in all cases: El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.

“Legalisation in Argentina would have a profound effect on the rest of Latin America, where it remains banned in all the other major countries,” said legislator Victoria Donda, one of the main supporters of the bill.

Human rights activists argue that the regions’s near-total bans on abortion only push women to seek unsafe clandestine terminations, a major cause of maternal mortality.

In Argentina, more than 3,000 women are reported to have died over the last 25 years as the result of unsafe abortion, according to Amnesty International.

Just on Saturday, Liliana Herrera, a 22-year-old mother of two from Santiago del Estero – a northern province with Argentina’s lowest per capita income – died from complications from a clandestine abortion.

The bill before congress has been strongly opposed by both the Catholic church and evangelical Christians.

Legalisation would have a profound effect in Latin America, where it remains banned in the other major countries

Victoria Donda, legislator

Pope Francis – who remains deeply involved in the politics of his home country – has made no secret of his opposition to the bill. On Monday, the Clarín daily newspaper reported that he has [asked anti-abortion legislators](#) to pressure fellow lawmakers to reject the bill.

But the reform has been championed by Argentina’s increasingly outspoken feminist movement, which grew out of [a wave of protests](#) over violence against women – under the slogan “*Ni una menos*” (“Not one less”, meaning no more women lost to gender violence).

Polling suggests that Argentinians are heavily in favour of the bill: in a survey carried out by Amnesty earlier this year, around 60% of respondents said they supported legalisation.

President Mauricio Macri has declared himself “pro-life”, but said he will not veto the law if approved by the senate.

Thirty-seven senators have pledged to oppose the bill, against 31 in favour, and pro-choice activists are hoping that a planned mass mobilisation of women outside Congress will sway undecideds in the 72-seat senate.

Tens of thousands of women – many wearing the green headscarf which has become the movement’s symbol – braved a freezing southern hemisphere winter night to join a previous protest when the lower house approved the bill after a 20-hour debate in June.

Among those who will stand vigil on Wednesday will be [Argentina’s best-known film director](#), Lucrecia Martel, who has been at the forefront of the pro-legal abortion campaign in her native province of Salta.

“We need to be there with the largest amount of people possible, despite the cold,” she said.

Salta, an impoverished northern province, has Argentina’s highest rate of women younger than 25

hospitalised due to complications from clandestine abortions: every year about 3,000 women end up in hospital and 17 die from unsafe terminations.

But Martel frames the campaign as a fight for women's control over their own bodies. "For some, their last bastion of power is their power over women, and those people don't want to concede that territory," she said.

That argument resonates powerfully in Argentina, where women were forced to give birth in captivity during the country's dictatorship, which lasted between 1976 and 1983.

Under military rule, 30,000 people were kidnapped and forcibly "disappeared" by the security forces; pregnant women, however, were kept alive until they gave birth, and then murdered. [Their children were handed to military families to raise.](#)

That practice partly inspired Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and - in turn - Argentinian activists have adopted the costume worn by the books' main characters as a symbol of protest.

Dozens of women dressed in bright red cloaks and white bonnets of Atwood's handmaids recently demonstrated on the steps of the country's congress, and in June, Atwood herself waded into the country's abortion debate with a string of tweets directed at the country's vice-president Gabriela Michetti.

Margaret E. Atwood(@MargaretAtwood)

Vicepresident of Argentina [@gabimichetti](#): don't look away from the thousands of deaths every year from illegal abortions. Give argentinian women the right to choose! [#AbortoLegalYa](#) [#QueElAbortoSeaLey](#)[#NiUnaMenos](#) [#AbortoEnSenadoYa](#) [@cdnwomenfdn](#) [@equalitynow](#)

[June 25, 2018](#)

A few days later, Michetti said that she would like to ban abortion entirely - even in the case of rape. "You can give the baby up for adoption and no harm's done," [she told the daily La Nación](#).

In an essay for Santa Fe's *Uno* newspaper, [Atwood wrote](#): "Women who cannot make their own decisions about whether or not to have babies are enslaved. Enforce childbirth if you wish, Argentina, but at least call that enforcing by what it is. It is slavery."

Donda, the legislator, was born in a dictatorship prison in 1977 and handed over to a military family after her real mother was murdered; she only discovered the identity of her biological parents in 2003.

She described the vote as a turning point for the country. "Societies don't change magically overnight because abortion has been legalised, but legalisation does grant women a better chance," she told the *Guardian*.

More than a million women are expected to join the demonstration outside congress on Wednesday. Among them will be Cuevas, the mother of Ana María.

"I have been fighting for legal abortion since my daughter died," she said. "Young girls gather to

hear me everywhere I speak. I don't want any more women to die my daughter's pointless death."

Uki Goñi

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