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## **Andorra's abortion rights revolution**

***Push to legalize abortion could tip country into constitutional crisis, opponents say.***

By Meg Bernhard

POLITICO (22.10.2019) - <https://politi.co/2N6qqi7> - There were no demonstrations in Andorra, until feminist campaigners took to the streets.

For decades, the mountaintop microstate was synonymous with winter sports and tax-free shopping — not political protests. Wedged between Spain and France, the independent principality, one of the world's smallest countries, has largely been spared the mass social movements that have rocked its neighbors.

The country's women's rights campaigners want to change that — they're pushing to overturn Andorra's strict abortion law, which forces women seeking to terminate their pregnancies to seek treatment outside the country.

In Andorra, which is not a member of the European Union, the "right to life" is enshrined in the constitution. Abortions are illegal in all circumstances, even when the woman's life is at risk.

Women who receive an abortion within the country's borders can face up to six months of house arrest; doctors who perform the procedure can be sentenced to up to three years in prison and barred from practicing medicine for up to five years.

Potential legal repercussions can easily be avoided — it's only a short distance to France or Spain, where the treatment is legal — but the stigma attached to the procedure is high. In some cases, women lose their jobs if their decision is made public.

"There's a lot of fear," said Vanessa Mendoza Cortés, whose feminist activist group Stop Violències is spearheading efforts not only to legalize abortion, but to shift the conversation around women's reproductive rights.

Breaking the long-held taboo is no easy feat in a country that is ruled — literally, Mendoza pointed out — by the Catholic Church, and is unaccustomed to grassroots organizing.

Speaking to a group of activists on a recent Saturday, Mendoza pulled up a PowerPoint slide, eliciting laughs and cheers from the audience. Above the faces of nine of Andorra's most powerful men — including members of the church and of parliament — Mendoza had written in bolded letters, Camps de nabs — "sausage fest."

Mendoza pointed to a picture of Bishop Joan Enric Vives Sicília, who together with the president of France, currently Emmanuel Macron, is one of the country's two "co-princes."

"This is the man who said we were the venom poisoning the tree of the institution," she said.

"If we don't have a little bit of humor here, we can't survive."

***For women living in Andorra, the process of arranging an abortion is often traumatic – and expensive.***

Some doctors require women to listen to their fetus' heartbeat, or look at ultrasound images before they agree to provide them with information on seeking an abortion abroad. Most women travel to France or Spain for the procedure, which will often cost them hundreds, in some cases thousands, in travel expenses and extra fees.

Last year, some 124 Andorran women got abortions in Catalonia's private and public health centers, according Catalonia's ministry of health. Data is not available for France, and Andorra does not collect statistics about women who leave the country to end their pregnancies.

The women make their journeys discreetly. "In Andorra, these things aren't usually talked about," said Tatiana Navarro, an Andorran journalist.

Joana Ferreira, a 16-year-old activist, said her friend described the experience of seeking an abortion abroad as "cold." "She didn't have help from anyone," Ferreira said. "She had to go the clinic alone."

The silence surrounding abortion in Andorra creates uncertainty over what, exactly, is legal.

Eric Sylvestre, an Andorran doctor who supports legalizing abortion, said it's unclear whether doctors can be punished for giving advice on abortion or recommending a woman visit a particular clinic abroad.

According to Eric Jover, a spokesperson for the Andorran government, giving advice is fine — but actively promoting and advocating abortion is not.

Opponents of the push to legalize abortion say their resistance is not motivated only by tradition and religion — the effort could threaten the stability of the country itself.

While Andorra's parliament makes laws, they must be signed off by one of its two co-princes before they can go into effect.

The French president has been reticent to make a statement on whether Andorra should legalize abortion, even if he has "always defended the right of women to their own bodies," as he said on a visit to Andorra last month.

The bishop, meanwhile, has made it clear he will not green-light any new abortion law passed by the government — and would resign if Macron were to approve it in his stead.

What would happen next is hard to predict, but abortion opponents say the standoff would tip the country into a constitutional crisis.

"You can't have legalization about abortion thinking that it wouldn't have secondary effects on our constitutional model," said Jover, the government spokesperson.

"If the Andorran people decided that the elements associated with the abortion law are more important than our institutional elements ... it could be done, but we would have to change our institutional model."

### ***The fledgling women's rights movement doesn't yet boast big numbers.***

Last year, 60 people marched on International Safe Abortion day; this year, a march in support of women's rights drew some 500 people.

But in the micro-state of only 77,000 people, their efforts have been loud enough to put the issue on the national agenda.

In a general election earlier this year, every major party took a public position on abortion. The governing party, Demòcrates per Andorra, for example, has pledged to create a support system for women who leave the country to receive abortions — a proposal activists and liberal lawmakers have slammed as hypocritical.

"The government says, 'This is a crime, but don't worry about it we'll help you do it another place,'" said Rosa Gili, a member of the Social Democratic party in the Andorran parliament.

Still, things are moving. Last year, the country's health ministry made emergency contraception available without a prescription — a move activists considered a major victory.

Many credit the massive turnout at last year's International Women's Day marches in Spain for inspiring Andorran women to stage their own protests. In March this year, hundreds of Spanish women traveled Andorra to lend their support to their demonstration.

For Mendoza, the heated debate is also personal.

She's been called a "feminazi" and received death threats. Once, a commentator wrote to her, "You'll know what it means to abort when they rape you."

But Mendoza maintains it's a fight worth fighting. After the meeting she held with activists, the group joined some 200 people at a nearby park, where they waited to begin a two-hour march into the capital, Andorra la Vella.

A few dozen had come by bus from Barcelona to offer support. "From the outside, you can't see what's happening in Andorra," said Remedios Merchan, an activist from Mataró.

Make noise, be seen, don't get hit by cars, Mendoza instructed the activists through her megaphone. The women headed down the highway in a sea of purple — the color of the abortion rights movement — shouting "If the pope were a woman, abortion would be legal" and "join the cause!"

As night fell on the outskirts of Andorra la Vella, the protesters stopped by a Catholic Church where worshippers were attending Saturday evening mass.

They leaned a white cross reading "Get out of our ovaries" against a stone pillar and tossed clothes hangers — each bearing the name of a woman who died from a clandestine abortion, not just in Andorra but around the world — on the ground.

“The best thing,” said Vicky Moreno, from Vilanova i la Geltrú, “would be for the church to go off into the mountain.”

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