

Argentina is about to debate legalizing abortion — despite being a very Catholic country

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By Mariela Daby and Mason Moseley

With the opening of a new legislative session on March 1, Argentine President Alberto Fernández announced his plan to introduce a bill in the lower house of Congress that would legalize abortion in the country. If the bill passes, it would make Argentina only the second democratic country in Latin America — the heart of modern Catholicism — to legalize abortion, after Uruguay in 2012.

Abortion has become a hot issue in Argentina, after decades of being treated as politically untouchable. The most recent legislative debate about abortion legalization took place in 2018 under President Mauricio Macri, who opposed legalization. Eventually, the bill passed in the Chamber of Deputies, Argentina's lower house, but failed by a narrow margin in the Senate. However, newly inaugurated center-left Fernández supports abortion legalization, and analysts predict a close vote in both houses.

Why Argentina is considering legalizing abortion now

In a recent paper, we examine why abortion rights movements emerge in unlikely contexts, with particular attention to Argentina. This is a majority Catholic country, and the homeland of Pope Francis, who is staunchly against legalizing abortion. Moreover, as the movement gained traction in 2018, a conservative president who opposed legalization was in office, and according to AmericasBarometer data, Argentines had become *more* religious in recent years. So why now?

The genesis of the current abortion debate in Argentina lies in an emerging feminist social movement called *Ni Una Menos* ("Not one (woman) less"), which sprang up in 2015 in response to gender violence. *Ni Una Menos* began after several grisly murders of young women. Launched with a hashtag, an education campaign, and a mass protest, the movement has been demanding the government take measures to reduce *machista* violence. And it had widespread support among Argentine citizens.

Uniting various feminist social movements, *Ni Una Menos* provided the organizational network necessary to mobilize women for abortion rights in massive demonstrations when it absorbed reproductive rights into its core set of claims. Through framing abortion decriminalization as an issue of social justice, and presenting evidence that clandestine abortions represent a leading cause of maternal mortality, abortion rights advocates persuaded many Argentine citizens to take up the cause. Feminist activists claimed that abortion must be legal to truly achieve "*ni una menos*." Only days after one of their largest rallies in February 2018, the conservative Macri announced he supported a "responsible and mature" debate about abortion.

Measuring the effect of Ni Una Menos

We analyzed AmericasBarometer data from 2012-2019 and found that, after the 2015 rise of *Ni Una Menos*, women got much more involved in protests and public opinion about abortion began to change. Former president and current Vice President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is the most high-profile example of that change, as she explained in a speech in August 2018, "If you want to know who it was that made me change my mind, it was the thousands of girls who took over the streets. It was seeing them become true feminists."

Arguing for public health rather than for a right to choose

In the United States and several other established democracies, pro-choice advocates often talk about the issue in terms of rights. The right to privacy provided the legal justification for the 1972 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, and "my body, my choice" has been a rallying cry at pro-choice marches for decades.

But in Argentina, activists focused on the public health consequences of abortion prohibition, particularly for poor women who obtained clandestine abortions in unsafe conditions. This made it harder for those against legalization to justify their positions. Public testimonies opened conversations about the reality of abortion and exposed how class differences translated into different abilities to get good health care, and ultimately made the difference between life and death.

The feminist movement that built upon *Ni Una Menos* anchored their demands in this inequity. Emphasizing the public health implications of abortion prohibition — particularly for poor women — appears to be the most successful strategy for convincing fellow citizens and politicians. This finding echoes what other studies of reproductive justice in Argentina and elsewhere have found as well.

In his speech on Sunday, Fernández said that the "existing jurisprudence is ineffective" in stopping abortions, and that the lives of "many women, generally of low resources," are risked during clandestine abortions. Fernández said that he could not live with his conscience, knowing that a poor woman might get hurt and even killed because of complications from an illegal abortion.

Linking freedom from gender violence with safe and legal abortion

Ni Una Menos began as a movement against gender violence, garnering widespread support among Argentines. Activists then adopted abortion rights as part of their platform on the basis that it was impossible to separate reproductive rights from other forms of oppression that disproportionately affect poor women. As one activist succinctly put it, “*Ni Una Menos*, legal, safe and free abortion, and the fight against machismo. For me all of these causes are one and complementary. They are a revolution against the patriarchy.”

The current abortion debate in Argentina is a testament to the power of mobilization. Without *Ni Una Menos*, which united millions of women in a common cause, politicians might not have had any reason to reopen a controversial issue. The Argentine case could have far-reaching implications not only for Latin America, but also for the United States, where abortion remains divisive and is rarely framed as a question of social justice or an issue of public health.

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