

Where does the Mexico City public stand on abortion one year post-reform? Findings from abortion public opinion surveys

Background

April 24th, 2007 marked a key victory for reproductive rights in Mexico that echoed throughout the region. That historic day, the Mexico City Legislative Assembly approved a groundbreaking law legalizing elective abortions up to 12 weeks of gestation.

This new law is one of the most progressive in Latin America and the Caribbean. It stipulates that the Mexico City Ministry of Health (MOH) (*i.e.* public hospitals and clinics) must provide first-trimester abortion services at no cost for Mexico City residents and for a moderate fee for women from outside the capitol. To date, over 13,000 women have received elective abortion services in this program. That said, abortion continues to be legally restricted outside the capitol and is the 5th leading cause of maternal mortality in Mexico (CONAPO, 2000; WHO, 2006). In 2006 alone, an estimated 150,000 women were treated for induced abortion complications in Mexican public hospitals (Juarez *et al.*, 2006). The new law not only sets an important legal precedent for liberalization of abortion laws and services in Mexico and the region but also begins to address the urgent problem of maternal morbidity and mortality due to unsafe abortion (Sánchez Fuentes *et al.*, 2008). In this changing social and political climate, where does the Mexican public stand on abortion? To address this question, this paper will present results from two representative public opinion surveys on abortion conducted among Mexico City residents just prior to and one year after the passage of the new law.

Public opinion has played an increasingly important role in Mexican politics since 2000, including the most recent abortion law reform (Lamas, 2000; Garcia *et al.*, 2004; Sánchez Fuentes *et al.*, 2008; Garcia *et al.*, 2003). In the months leading up to the Mexico City law's approval, Legislators of the Federal District held forums to solicit public input on the issue. As Mexico and other countries in the region have moved towards more representative democracies, decision makers have increasingly turned to the opinions of their constituents to inform new legislation, especially on sensitive topics such as abortion (Yam *et al.*, 2006). Over the past two decades, approximately 11 public opinion polls regarding abortion have been carried out at the national, state, and local levels among various interest groups including women, lawmakers, and university students (Yam *et al.*, 2006; Singh, 1996). Well-designed abortion public opinion research can help shape legislation that ultimately affects a woman's access to safe abortion services. Public opinion surveys also highlight the extent to which public opinion aligns with existing laws and clarify prevailing assumptions; for example, that a majority Catholic populous would be unequivocally against legal abortion. A public opinion study conducted in Trinidad and Tobago in 2005 showed that despite the majority reporting being practicing Christians, 71% of respondents showed support for liberalizing the current abortion laws (Martin *et al.*, 2007; Catholics for Free Choice Report (CDD in Spanish), 2004). In legally restricted and newly legalized settings with significant stigma surrounding abortion, public opinion research should strive to capture the range of opinions that may not be unequivocally in favor or against abortion. National abortion public opinion studies conducted in Mexico in 2000 and 2006 demonstrated that the majority actually were in favor of abortion under some circumstances—a finding which would not have emerged had respondents simply been asked if they were for or against abortion (Garcia *et al.*, 2004; Palermo, doctoral dissertation under review).

We carried out and repeated the first ever large-scale abortion public opinion surveys among representative samples of Mexico City residents in April 2007 and April 2008, just before and one year after the passage of the watershed reform. The objectives are to describe public opinion about abortion in both time periods, assess changes in these variables, and finally, with a focus specifically on the post-reform survey to determine correlates of favorable abortion opinion. Findings from this study can be used to inform abortion advocacy, new legislation, and improved services delivery.

Methods

We contracted a survey research firm to conduct two quantitative public opinion surveys with household probability samples of Mexico City residents mid-April, 2007 (margin of error +/- 4.2, 95% confidence) and the beginning of April, 2008 (margin of error +/- 2.33, 95% confidence) just before and one year after the passage of the new abortion law. The pilot tested survey contained questions on knowledge of existing abortion laws, general opinions on abortion such as when it should be legal and who should decide, as well as sociodemographic information. Following standard written informed consent, trained interviewers carried out the face-to-face surveys, which took about one hour to complete. The majority of the questions on both surveys were identical except for a few on the post-reform survey that specifically dealt with reactions to a pro-choice media campaign launched that year. All survey data was entered into SPSS version 14.0 for analysis. We first performed univariate analysis on both datasets to get descriptive characteristics. Then we tested for variance between datasets using ANOVA and compared specific knowledge and opinion questions using independent t-tests. We conducted bivariate analysis using chi-square tests ($p < 0.05$) to assess associations between sociodemographic and select knowledge variables with abortion opinion variables in the post-reform dataset.

For the multivariate analysis of the post-reform survey, we entered all variables (simultaneously) that were significant in the bivariate analysis as independent variables into three multivariate logistic regression models. The outcomes were two key abortion opinion variables: opinion of the new law (in favor or opposed) and, whether the law should be extended to the rest of Mexico (yes or no). We chose these variables because they most directly reflect public opinion about the new law and relate specifically to one of the policy options under consideration in Mexico—other states adopting similar laws. We also tested the opinion variable “is the law an advance or step backward for Mexican society” as an outcome in a regression model but do not present this since the results were very similar to the second opinion question (results available upon request). We created a third regression model to assess predictors of knowledge of the new law (heard of the new law yes or no). In addition, we included two variables as covariates in the models-- whether or not women under 18 years should be able to have legal abortions in Mexico City and if they had ever heard of misoprostol for medical abortion. We chose these variables to explore whether they are markers of a sub group within the sample that have more progressive social views. We posited that if an individual is in favor of legal abortion for adolescents (and some participants may answer this question with themselves or daughters in mind), he or she would also agree with the new law that enables this age group, and all women, to get legal abortion services. The relationship between knowledge of medical abortion (now legal in Mexico City) and favorable opinion about the new law is more complex.

Greater knowledge about medical abortion may be a marker of a greater understanding of the positive impact of legalizing abortion on reducing clandestine abortions and maternal mortality, which would lead to a more favorable abortion opinion. On the other hand, knowledge of misoprostol may also indicate personal experience using the drug or knowing someone who has. This may affect abortion opinion either way depending on if that experience was a positive or negative experience.

Results

In total, 720 people completed the pre-reform survey and 1,010 people completed the post-reform survey. Though the samples were similar by sociodemographic characteristics, there were significant differences in education, sex, and employment variables between years ($p < 0.05$). The average age in both samples was 37 years (range 15-86 and 14-91, respectively). More women than men participated in 2007 (58%) and 2008 (52%). In both years, most participants were married/in consensual unions (59% and 59%), had a high school education or less (82% and 84%), and self-identified Catholic (80% and 72%). In addition, 35% in pre-reform survey and 26% post-reform reported knowing of a woman who had had an abortion at one point in her life.

The majority of respondents in both years were aware of existing abortion laws in Mexico City. In the pre-reform survey, 59% of the respondents answered correctly that abortion was legal under certain circumstances. In addition, 73% had heard of the proposed reform to legalize elective first-trimester abortions. At one year post-reform, 83% of respondents were aware of the new abortion law, which most had learned about through television (77%). We then asked participants their opinion on different aspects of abortion and the new abortion law. Among the pre-reform sample, only 38% said they would be in favor of the proposed Mexico City law, while 53% opposed it and 9% had no opinion. Interestingly, the majority (52%) agreed that the rest of the country should adopt such a law, while only 38% opposed that. In addition, 53% said that legislatures should consider the perspectives of women foremost when deciding on abortion law compared to that of society in general (28%), religious perspectives (8%), or scientific evidence (4%). Furthermore, 42% believed that the woman should make the final decision to have an abortion while 34% said that the couple should decide together (Tables 2A and 2B).

One year post-reform, 63% were in favor of the new law in Mexico City, while only 26% opposed it and 11% had no opinion. A strong majority (69%) also believed that the law should be extended to the rest of Mexico. Similar to the pre-reform findings, the majority believed that either the woman (46%) or the couple (34%) should make the final decision to have an abortion. Also, 59% thought that legislatures should consider the woman's rights to decide foremost before making abortion laws (society 24%, scientific evidence 5%, and religious views 4%).

Using bivariate analysis, we compared knowledge and opinion pre-and post reform (Table 2A, 2B). First, we explored the extent to which the public supported the legal circumstances under which abortion was legal in Mexico City pre-reform (*i.e.* in the case of rape, risk to the woman's life and risk to her health, fetal malformations, and artificial insemination against her will). There was consistently high support for abortion under the circumstances in which it was legal pre-reform and no significant change between years (Table 2A). The highest support for legal abortion was in the case of rape (93% and 94% in 2007 and 2008, respectively). Economic

hardship was the one circumstance where only a minority of the participants favored legal abortion (27% and 35% in 2007 and 2008, respectively). This could be explained in part because it was never been a legally recognized circumstance in Mexico City or that the majority simply did not believe that this was a legitimate reason to terminate a pregnancy. Interestingly, there was a significant decrease in the percent of respondents who incorrectly thought that abortion was illegal in all cases (39% to 26%, $p < 0.05$).

There was a statistically significant increase in knowledge and favorable opinion about the new abortion law in Mexico City law post-reform. Knowledge about the new law increased significantly from 73% to 80% ($p < 0.01$). Favorable opinion about the new law increased from 38% to 63% (26% opposed it and 11% had no opinion) and this difference also was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In addition, we observed significant increases ($p < 0.05$) from pre- to post-reform in several abortion opinion questions including: support for the law being extended to other parts of Mexico; the woman (compared to other people) should be the one to make the final decision about having an abortion; women from other states should be able to get legal abortions in Mexico City; adolescents (under 18 years) should have the right to legal abortion regardless of their parents' opinion; and, legislators should consider women's perspectives foremost when making abortion laws. The only significant decrease we observed was not related to abortion opinion but rather the percentage of participants who said they knew a woman who had had an abortion at some point in her life--from 35% to 26%. Interestingly, among the 26% in 2008 who responded affirmatively, 7% said that they knew of women who had had legal abortions in Mexico City after the law passed.

We then analyzed the post-reform sample in greater detail to explore correlates of abortion opinion in bivariate and multivariate analysis (Tables 3, 4). The bivariate outcome variables of interest were: opinion about the new law in Mexico City and, whether or not the law should be extended to the rest of the country. Bivariate analysis of sociodemographic variables showed that younger age (15-34 years), single status, more education (high-school or more), male sex, employment status (currently working outside the home), and less frequent attendance to religious services were all significantly associated with having more favorable abortion opinion for these variables (Table 3). We also assessed associations between abortion knowledge and abortion opinion with the assumption that people with more knowledge of abortion laws may have more favorable opinions on the subject (Model 3 in Table 4). Knowledge of the new law, knowledge of misoprostol for medical abortion, and support for a woman's right to abortion even if she is under 18 years old also were significantly associated with favorable abortion opinion (Table 3B).

Based on the bivariate results, we developed four separate multivariate models with bivariate outcomes, two which modeled correlates of abortion opinion and one that assessed correlates of knowledge of the new abortion law (Table 4 Models 1-3). The variables that remained significantly associated with at least one outcome variable were: marital status, education, sex, frequency of attendance at religious services; opinion about an adolescent's right to legal abortion; and awareness of misoprostol to induce abortion. Being in a union (married or cohabitating) was significantly associated with having nearly twice the odds of knowing about the new law (adj. OR 1.85, $p < 0.05$). Higher education remained significantly associated with some opinion and knowledge variables. Specifically, those with college education or more were

three and a half times more likely to know about of the new law (adj. OR 3.43, $p<0.01$). People with high school education were nearly one and a half times more likely to be in favor of the new law (adj. OR 1.47, $p<0.05$). In contrast, women were only three quarters as likely to be in favor of the new law compared to men (adj. OR 0.72, $p<0.05$). Furthermore, people who attending religious services more frequently also were only half as likely to support the new law (adj. OR 0.57, $p<0.01$). In other words, men and those who attended religious services less frequently were more likely to have favorable abortion opinion. In addition, participants who supported an adolescent's right to legal abortion also were four times as likely to support the new law and nearly seven times as likely to agree that it should be extended to the rest of Mexico compared to participants who did not support the right to legal abortion for adolescents (adj. OR 4.22, $p<0.01$; adj. OR 6.79, $p<0.01$). No other covariates were significantly associated with the outcome variables in the models.

Discussion

The Mexico City public has experienced significant change with respect to abortion laws and services over the past year and a half. The passage of the groundbreaking law legalizing elective abortion set in motion a new era for reproductive rights. Findings from this study suggest that a significantly greater portion of Mexico City residents knew about the abortion law one year after it passed compared to pre-reform. More importantly for policy makers and advocates was that favorable opinion about the new law significantly increased from pre- to post-reform (from 38% to 63%) such that the majority now supports the new law. We also observed significant increases in the view that the new law is an advance for Mexican society and that it should be extended to the rest of Mexico. There was consistently high support for the woman or the couple's right to make the final decision on abortion in both years. Finally, in the post-reform context, having higher education, being male, less frequent religious service attendance, awareness of misoprostol for medical abortion, and support for adolescents' right to legal abortion all remained significantly associated with favorable opinion about the new abortion law in multivariate analysis.

These findings support previous abortion public opinion studies in Mexico and the region (Garcia *et al.*, 2004; Becker *et al.*, 2002; Martin *et al.*, 2005; Palermo, unpublished doctoral dissertation). We found that more education, less frequent religious attendance, and being male are significant predictors of more favorable abortion opinion, which was also seen in the nationally representative abortion opinion study conducted in Mexico in 2000 (Garcia *et al.*, 2004). The first two predictors make sense. People with more education also may have a better understanding of the positive impact of legal abortion: that it helps reduce women resorting to unsafe abortions and risking associated injury or death. As reported in Garcia *et al.* (2004), Palermo (unpublished doctoral dissertation), and the Catholics for Free Choice report (2004), the vast majority of participants who had favorable opinions about abortion also self-identified as Catholic. This helps dismiss the assumption that all Catholics are unequivocally against abortion, as is the official position of the Catholic Church. Rather, our findings suggest that most Catholics in Mexico City do not agree with the Church's stance since the majority actually had favorable abortion opinions pre- and post-reform. Instead, frequency of religious service attendance appears to be a better proxy of (Catholic) religiosity than religious identity alone, since it did remain significantly associated with unfavorable abortion opinion. More frequent church

attendance may suggest that those people also are more likely to agree with the Church's negative position on abortion compared to people who seldom or never attend religious services. We also found significant differences in abortion opinion between men and women, which supports findings from a similar study conducted in 2000 (Garcia *et al.*, 2004). Men may be more supportive of legal abortion because they do not see themselves as having a major role in an abortion decision or hold a more pragmatic view about the need for abortion services as a legal option. However, these findings merit further exploration.

One non-sociodemographic variable that also was significantly associated with favorable abortion opinion was knowledge of misoprostol for medical abortion. This may be a proxy for higher education or prior abortion experience which may explain this association. Since legalization of abortion in Mexico City, providers in the public health system now use a standard misoprostol regimen for medical abortions; and, outside the capitol, the drug is widely available "off label" to induce abortion (Juarez *et al.*, 2008; Lara *et al.*, 2006). Finally, the multivariate results confirmed our hypothesis that people who agree that adolescents' should have the right to legal abortion also have more progressive views about abortion in general; they not only support the Mexico City law but want it extended to the rest of the country. It could be that those who support the new law also understand the importance of all women regardless of age or place of residence to access legal abortions. On the other hand, some participants may have responded favorably because they were imagining the situation where they or their daughters needed an abortion.

A greater percentage of people in our samples had favorable abortion opinions than in previous studies conducted in legally restricted settings. In those studies, the public appeared to favor legal abortion in more cases than the law actually permitted (Garcia *et al.*, 2004; Yam *et al.*, 2006; Martin *et al.*, 2005; CDD, 2004; Garcia *et al.*, 2007). In Mexico City, we now observe a better alignment between public opinion and abortion law, especially post-reform. In fact, the majority wanted the law extended to the rest of Mexico. One explanation for the difference between studies is the setting. Mexico City historically has had more liberal public policies and a stronger feminist movement than the rest of the country so it is not surprising that the public is largely favorable of abortion reform. Previous studies sample from more conservative states with very restrictive laws (e.g. Guanajuato, Baja California), which may be more reflective of majority public opinion on the national level (Garcia *et al.*, 2004). For example, an unpublished comparative study between the 2000 and 2006 national surveys reported only 10% and 12% of the participants supported abortion being legal in all cases (*i.e.* as it is in Mexico City now) compared to 38% in Mexico City in the pre-reform survey (Garcia *et al.*, 2004; Garcia, *et al.*, 2007; Palermo, unpublished doctoral dissertation).

Within Mexico City, we also saw a dramatic increase in favorable abortion public opinion within just one year. One reason for this could be that participants simply felt more willing to express their support for abortion now that it is legal compared to when it was legally restricted. This would also help explain why opinion studies conducted in more conservative states and countries also report less favorable abortion opinion. Another possibility is that by legalizing abortion it becomes more legitimate in the eyes of the public and therefore some people who would have been opposed to it under some or all circumstances have changed their minds between pre- and post- reform. We have seen evidence of this tendency in a study on medical abortion opinion in

Mexico City several years before legalization: while most participants said they supported this option, their main hesitation was the fact that it was not yet legal (Gould *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, participants in the 2008 survey had been exposed to at least a year of extensive media coverage about the law, most of it favorable. They also had ample opportunity to follow the both sides of the debate about the law that ensued several months afterwards. Once the law passed, conservative groups immediately filed a lawsuit in the National Supreme Court claiming that the Mexico City law was unconstitutional and jeopardized the rights of the fetus. After several months of widely publicized hearings on the issue, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Mexico City law in late August 2008 and nullified—at least by law--any further claims against the law's constitutionality anywhere in the country. Although this favorable decision came down after we conducted the post-reform survey, the public discussion in the months leading up to it may have further increased public support for the law and also helped assuage public doubt about the law's potentially negative effects on Mexican society (as forewarned by leading anti-choice groups). The legal and political challenges are not over. In practice, many states are disregarding the legal precedent and moving forward with new reforms to severely restrict legal abortion or ban it entirely (e.g. Baja California, Sonora)

This study also has some limitations. First, we report on cross-sectional surveys taken at two different points in time, so we cannot infer causality of abortion opinion. Also, we used two different, though representative samples, so we cannot make any definitive statements about individual level change in abortion opinion over time. Although we can speculate about why abortion public opinion shifted so dramatically between pre and post-reform, there likely are other factors that we could not measure than have contribute to that shift. Finally, rigorous qualitative studies may be better suited to answer some enduring questions that emerged from this study, such as why men's and women's views on abortion differ or why 26% of participants opposed the new law one year post-reform (Tatum *et al.*, 2006). Understanding the complexities of abortion public opinion will help enhance more appropriate and relevant abortion policies and programs in Mexico.

This study has important research and policy implications. This kind of survey research can help identify particular tendencies in public opinion that merit further exploration through qualitative studies and/or within specific groups such as adolescents or health care providers. In a legally restrictive setting, public opinion research can help inform advocacy arguments that in turn influence new legislation. In a newly legalized setting such as Mexico City, public opinion research offers important feedback to decision makers and program managers about the public's opinion of the law and legal abortion services. For the first time, abortion laws in Mexico City actually reflect majority public opinion (and vice versa). Mexico City's new abortion law presents a model for the country and region to move towards a climate more favorable to women's rights. Allowing public voices to be heard, through research and civil society action, will be an important part of this process.

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