

## Morocco confronts abortion taboo with proposed reform

March 30 2015, by Paul Schemm

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In this Wednesday, March 18, 2015 photo, Aicha Ech-Chenna, founder and president of the association Women's Solidarity, gestures in Casablanca, Morocco. The debate on abortion resurfaces address the crisis of illegal abortions resurfaced, prompting King Mohammed VI to take up the case. (AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar)

It was just 7 a.m. and Hoda was walking alone to a clinic in the Moroccan coastal city of Agadir. She skipped breakfast: the Senegalese doctor had told her that the abortion would be better done on an empty

stomach.

Four months pregnant by a man who didn't want to marry, she felt she couldn't have the child in a society that sees unwed mothers as little better than prostitutes. But as she approached the illegal clinic, something was clearly wrong.

Police escorted a handcuffed doctor out of the clinic as a crowd gathered outside. Inside, a woman had just died from a botched [abortion](#).

"She had hemorrhaged, there was blood everywhere," recalled Hoda, who spoke on condition that her last name was not used because of the sensitivity of the situation.

An estimated 600 to 800 abortions are performed every day in Morocco, where the operation is illegal except in cases of threat to the mother's health. Although the procedure is widely practiced underground, the subject has long been taboo.

Years of activism, however, have culminated this month in a new official move to reform the law to stem the tide of illegal abortions by making operations more accessible.

"Morocco's penal code on abortion is very restrictive, the law is not fair to women," Moroccan Health Minister Houssaine Louardi told The Associated Press. "It's out of date and doesn't take into account the reality that Moroccans live in these days—there is an urgent need to revise this law."

With the exception of Tunisia, where it was legalized in 1973, abortion in the Arab world is mostly illegal except in cases of fetal malformation or danger to the mother's health—though in most countries there is an informal "don't ask, don't tell" policy that makes the practice

widespread. Reform in Morocco could have wide repercussions for women around the region.

The issue is tied up with the unrest in the region. In Iraq, where the practice is illegal but rarely prosecuted, abortions are on the rise with Yazidi women who escaped from captivity from Islamic State radicals seeking them in large numbers.



In this Wednesday, March 18, 2015 photo, children of single mothers react in the nursery of the association Women's Solidarity in Casablanca, Morocco. The debate on abortion resurfaces address the crisis of illegal abortions resurfaced, prompting King Mohammed VI to take up the case. (AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar)

In neighboring Algeria, the developments are being watched with particular interest.

"For the last four years we have been working on getting it decriminalized but it hasn't moved forward much, it's a very sensitive question in country like Algeria," said Nadi Ait Zai, an Algerian lawyer and feminist activist. "We are certainly not indifferent to what is happening in Morocco, we will follow it closely."

In Morocco, calls for reform were sparked in December when Dr. Chafik Chraibi, head of obstetrics at Rabat's Maternity hospital and part of an organization fighting against illegal abortions, was fired after he gave an interview to a French TV program in which he condemned the laws that forced the practice underground.

A rare debate among intellectuals and political party leaders followed, culminating in Chraibi's reinstatement and Moroccan King Mohammed VI asking religious scholars and justice officials on March 16 to come up with ways to revise the law to reduce the number of illegal abortions.

Chraibi said his activism came out of years of working the hospital wards, when women and girls who tried to give themselves abortions would be admitted horribly injured and near death.

For Morocco's rich and the middle class, abortions are easily accessible, costing between 200 to 1,000 euros (\$220-\$1,100) in hospitals and clinics. But the poor resort to more "traditional" methods, such as poison or sharp objects.

Veteran activist Aicha Ech-Chenna, who runs an organization that gives job training to single mothers and provides daycare, scoffs at the objections of the religious.



In this March 16, 2015 photo, Dr. Chafik Chraibi, left, a prominent advocate for reforming the law on abortion, prepares for a debate with Health Minister Houssaine Louardi. in Rabat, Morocco There are an estimated 600 to 800 illegal abortions every day in Morocco where the operation is illegal but now there is a new official effort to reform the law to make it more accessible. (AP Photo/Paul Schemm)

Many of the young women at her center came from religious backgrounds and were persuaded by their boyfriends to enter into "customary" marriages that supposedly allow them to have sex—but have no legal standing.

"We have here single mothers who thought they were married and then as soon as she's pregnant, she is dumped," said Ech-Chenna from her center in Casablanca. "It's very nice to say no to abortion but then what will happen to the child afterward?"

Chraibi wanted the new law to broaden the definition of the mother's health to include psychological, physical and social aspects, so that cases such as rape, incest, poverty, age and other circumstances could be considered.

Religious scholars and the Justice Ministry could well come back to the king with a much more restrictive reform than either Chraibi or the health minister have proposed.



In this Wednesday, March 18, 2015 photo, a child of single mothers cries in the nursery of the association Women's Solidarity in Casablanca, Morocco. The debate on abortion resurfaces address the crisis of illegal abortions resurfaced, prompting King Mohammed VI to take up the case. (AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar)

Prominent imam Mustapha Benhamza has cautioned against calls for

abortion in cases of fetal malformation, and the moderate Islamist Party that heads the governing coalition is also reportedly against increasing access to abortion.

Hoda changed her mind and decided to have her child after what she saw in the Agadir clinic. But she had to leave Agadir for Morocco's commercial capital of Casablanca, and has had very little contact with her family who believe she has shamed them.

"My family hasn't accepted my son," she said. "To this day, they tell me never to bring him by."

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