

## Policy on Morning-After Pill Upsets Chile

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SANTIAGO, [Chile](#), Dec. 16 — President Michelle Bachelet of Chile is a feminist and physician who used to practice pediatric medicine at public clinics in poor neighborhoods. So it was hardly surprising that her government recently liberalized contraception policy by making the so-called [morning-after pill](#) available free at state-run hospitals.

But since Chile is perhaps the most socially conservative country in South America, the measure has generated complaints and challenges not only on the right, but even from some of her allies. Opponents of the policy are furious because girls as young as 14 are being allowed to have access to the emergency contraception without any requirement that their parents be notified.

“It is hard to understand the motive for such a reaction,” Maria Soledad Barria, the minister of health and a physician, said in an interview here this week. After all, she noted, the age of consent in Chile is 14, and the morning-after pill, also known as Plan B emergency contraception, has been available at private pharmacies catering to the well-to-do for five years and has survived court challenges.

According to government statistics, 15 percent of all births in Chile are to mothers 18 or younger, most too poor to afford private care. Ms. Bachelet has framed the issue as one of social justice, arguing that because “not everyone is equal and not everyone has the same possibilities,” her duty is “to guarantee that all Chileans have real options in this area, as in others.”

The influential [Roman Catholic Church](#), however, has condemned distribution of the pill as a form of [abortion](#) that encourages promiscuity and intrudes on personal freedoms. In a statement, the national conference of bishops said the government’s actions are “reminiscent of public policies established in totalitarian regimes, by which the state aimed to regulate the intimate lives of its citizens.”

The Rev. Marcos Burzawa, director of the family vicariate for the archbishop of Santiago, said the government had “failed to consult and converse adequately with parents and other sectors of society.” As a result, he said, “parents feel their views have not been taken into account and that these norms deprive them of their role as the primary educators and tutors of their children.”

Opponents have also expressed concerns that the morning-after pill is really “a Trojan horse designed to clear the way for the legalization of abortion,” in the words of Pablo Zalaquett, mayor of Santiago’s La Florida borough, who has filed a suit seeking to halt the policy. Abortion is outlawed in this nation of 16 million, though public health experts estimate that at least 150,000 abortions are performed each year.

Government officials dismiss such concerns as baseless, part of an effort by the right-wing opposition to divide the government. They say that abortion is not on the president’s legislative agenda, while acknowledging that some lawmakers in the coalition may disagree and act on their own against her wishes.

“We are not going to do absolutely anything in this area, which is not part of our governing program,” Dr. Barria said. When asked why, in view of Ms. Bachelet’s feminist and professional background, she replied, “We are in a coalition.”

Since the dictatorship of Gen. [Augusto Pinochet](#) ended in 1990, Chile has been governed by a center-left alliance whose main components are Ms. Bachelet’s Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats, who are more conservative on social issues. Though Socialists in Congress recently introduced a bill to legalize abortion, the Christian Democrats vehemently oppose such legislation and have expressed doubts about the morning-after pill policy.

“When we are talking about girls between the ages of 14 and 18, parental consent is important,” said Senator Soledad Alvear, president of the Christian Democrats and Ms. Bachelet’s main rival for the alliance’s presidential nomination last year. “They can’t vote or drive a car or even buy cigarettes until they are 18,” she added.

But Ms. Bachelet is also facing criticism for not pushing hard enough.

“The fact that we have a woman president is not enough to bring about the changes we need,” said Valentina Martínez of La Morada, a women’s group that runs a health center here. “Abortion needs to be decriminalized in Chile, but there are authoritarian voices on the right and in the church that have vetoed any kind of real debate or discussion.”

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear Mr. Zalaquett’s appeal of an intermediate court’s ruling permitting distribution of the pill. But some conservative mayors are saying their religious beliefs will not allow the pill to be

distributed at public clinics in their municipalities, no matter how the court rules.

In that case, the conflict could intensify. “We have a system of laws in this country that applies to everybody,” Dr. Barria said. “Public officials in particular have an obligation to implement public policy, whether they like it personally or not.”