

Mexico City considers legal prostitution

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MEXICO CITY --

The leftist party that has already legalized gay unions and abortion in Mexico City said Wednesday it wants to make prostitution legal in the capital of this overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country.

Mexico City legislator Juan Bustos of the Democratic Revolution Party, who submitted the bill on Tuesday, said the move is necessary to protect prostitutes from abuse and regulate the sex industry.

Corrupt police frequently use the current law not to arrest sex workers but as a threat to shake them down for bribes or sexual favors.

"These are issues that we are going to bring forward as part of a political platform, because we feel it is part of our duty to society," Bustos said Wednesday.

However, he expects opposition. Spokesmen for the Roman Catholic church, which led marches against the abortion bill approved in April, were not immediately available for comment.

But President Felipe Calderon's conservative National Action Party said it had problems with aspects of the bill and that the goal should be to get women out of prostitution.

"We have to discourage this (prostitution), so that more women will not even think about becoming sex workers," said Mariana Gomez del Campo, head of National Action in Mexico City. "We have to try to recover values."

In most Mexican cities, prostitution is considered the equivalent of a misdemeanor. In Mexico City, it is punishable by 12 to 24 hours in jail and fines equal to about \$51 to \$93.

Some cities have informal red-light zones where prostitution is tolerated, such as the border city of Nuevo Laredo. But none appear to have gone as far as the Mexico City proposal, said Carolina Velazquez of Mexico's Women's Information Center.

The bill would legalize prostitution in designated areas at least roughly 1,000 feet from schools, parks, churches and apartment complexes, though pimping would remain a crime. It also would require prostitutes to adhere to health standards or face punishments similar to those under the current law.

The new law would guarantee prostitutes' rights and make them eligible for government services, Bustos said.