

El Salvador Frees Woman Imprisoned for Decade Under Abortion Ban

By Elisabeth Malkin

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MEXICO CITY — A Salvadoran woman who spent almost 11 years in prison under El Salvador’s ban on abortion was freed Thursday after the country’s Supreme Court commuted her sentence.

The case of the woman, Teodora del Carmen Vásquez, underscores the punishment faced by Salvadoran women convicted of homicide after losing a pregnancy. El Salvador forbids abortion under any circumstances, even to save the life of the mother.

Ms. Vásquez, 34, was at her job as a school cafeteria cook in 2007 when she began bleeding and suffered a stillbirth in the last month of her pregnancy. She was convicted of aggravated homicide and sentenced to 30 years in prison. In December, the court that convicted her upheld the verdict.

But the Supreme Court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to show that Ms. Vásquez had taken any action to end the pregnancy and that for “powerful reasons of justice” and “equity,” she should be released.

Ms. Vásquez told reporters that she was eager to see her family, including her 13-year-old son.

El Salvador is one of six countries in the Americas that ban abortion, and its courts enforce it with severe penalties on women and doctors. In 2013, the Supreme Court rejected a plea to terminate the high-risk pregnancy of a woman whose fetus suffered an abnormality that would not have allowed it to survive. Doctors delivered the baby early, and it died.

The other countries that ban abortions are Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Suriname.

Two bills have been introduced in El Salvador’s Congress to permit abortion in specific cases, including to save the life of the mother, but they have yet to be considered by a congressional committee.

Women's groups have identified at least 28 women who have been imprisoned after experiencing complications in pregnancies. A coalition of women's groups has been working for the release of 17 women convicted of homicide after obstetric emergencies. Since 2014, four women, including Ms. Vásquez, have been released; a fifth completed her sentence.

“For me this is a sign of hope, that Teodora's life may improve,” said Morena Herrera, the president of one of the groups in the coalition. “She spent 10 years and seven months in prison. That is a lot of time for a crime she did not commit. But above all, it is a sign of hope for the other women who are imprisoned.”

Ms. Vásquez said her happiness was tempered by the knowledge that others remained in prison. “I am not complete,” she said. “I am committed to fight for them.”