

Voices growing against abortion ban

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Thousands of protesters hold a rally at the Gwanghwamun Square, Seoul, Saturday demanding the Constitutional Court find unconstitutional a law criminally punishing abortion. Yonhap

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Thousands of protesters held a rally against the abortion ban over the weekend amid heated public discourse inching towards greater rights protection for women's autonomy.

Around 3,000 protesters _ 1,500 according to police _ varying in age, sexual orientation, marriage status and nationality gathered at Gwanghwamun Square, Seoul, demanding that the Constitutional Court find a law criminally punishing abortion, unconstitutional.

The group carried signs that read, "It is a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy," "Women are not reproductive vehicles," and "We denounce the government's attempt to control women's bodies."

The group sang a Christian song with revised lyrics and a sarcastic twist. "My life and my professional career are bound to be in tatters if I have babies indiscriminately. It's my body that wears out. It's me that gets blamed. Abolish abortion ban. We will triumph." Many demonstrators marched along the street from the square to Anguk Station near the court chanting slogans such as, "Abolish abortion ban that poses threat to women's right to health."

Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch physician and activist advocating for women's reproductive health rights, said it was time for change in Korea, a developed nation. She is a founder and director of Women on Waves, a Dutch pro-choice non-governmental organization established in 1999 to provide reproductive health services, particularly non-surgical abortion services to women in countries where they have limited or no access to "safe abortion service." She is also a founder and director of Women on Web, an online abortion help service for such countries.

“Abortion is legal in almost all developed countries,” she said. Why is abortion not legal in South Korea? It's a developed nation, it's time for change. Respect women's rights, social justice and legalize abortion. Until that is the case, Women on Web will make sure women in South Korea can access safe abortion pills. Abortion is a medical process. It should not be a crime, period.”

In Korea, abortion is illegal except in cases of rape, incest, or when a severe hereditary defect is found in the fetus or when the woman's health could be in danger. Women who have abortions are subject to a prison term of up to one year or a fine of up to 2 million won (\$1,800).

Abortion-performing doctors in theory could face up to two years in prison, but they usually get a 1- 2 million won fine or a suspended prison sentence. Men who impregnated the women are not under any such criminal liability. Ministry of Health and Welfare 2010 data estimated that about 168,000 abortions are carried out a year, but doctors say the number is at least 500,000 and up to 800,000.