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Study of Public Opinion about Abortion Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua

Claudia Dides C.
M. Cristina Benavente R.
Isabel Sáez A.

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Main Results.

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INTRODUCTION

The first public opinion poll about abortion in four Latin American countries: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua carried out by the "Social Inclusion and Gender Program" of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, campus in Chile, FLACSO-Chile between April and May of 2009 reveals that the traditional polarization of the ideological debate about abortion reflected through the positions known as "pro life" on the one hand, and "pro choice" on the other, does not reflect the attitude of the majority of the population of these countries have toward abortion. In effect, it is evidenced that a third position which favors the depenalization of abortion under certain circumstances related to pregnancy. Also, the results show a demand of more openness, debate and citizen participation in the public policy decisions of this matter, implying, as well, a flexibilization of the current regulatory framework about abortion in these countries.

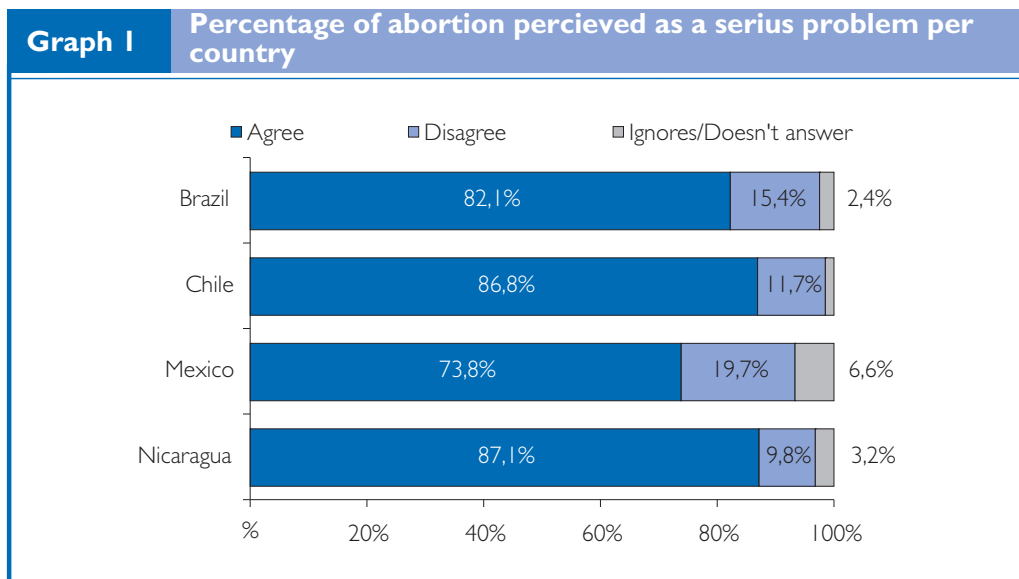
The main objective of the present study was to find out the perceptions, opinions, knowledge and expectations of the respective societies about abortion.

In every country there was a probabilistic sampling in every stage approximately of 1,200 men and women older than 18 years old, inhabitants of rural and urban areas.

ABORTION AS A TOPIC OF THE COUNTRY

In the four countries there exists a wide consensus regarding the fact that abortion is a serious problem in itself, with a 82.5% on average between all four countries. Nicaragua is the country where the agreement about this is majority with a 87.1%, followed

by Chile with a 86.8%. It is important to point out that both countries share in common the fact that abortion is found to be completely penalized. In Brazil and Mexico the percentage of agreement was 82.1% and 73.8% respectively. That is to say, there exists in the four countries the shared perception that abortion is a serious problem.

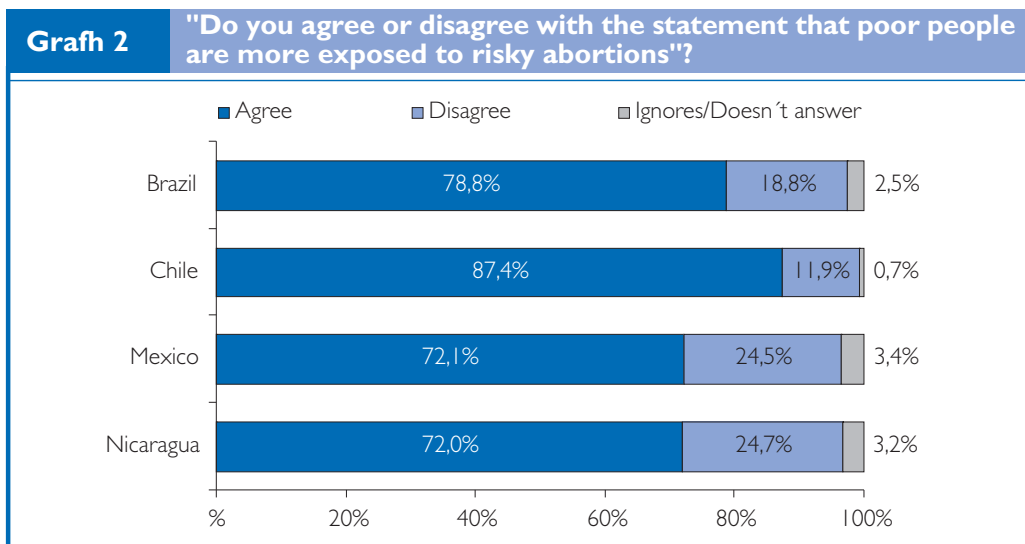


Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

The aforementioned is sustained also by the perception about the prevalence of female deaths due to abortion in these countries: of every 10 women who have aborted, 3.6 have died in Brazil, 2.8 in Chile, 3.6 in Mexico and 3.2 in Nicaragua. This may bring about a reinforcement of the consensed opinion that abortion is a public health problem, specially in Chile and Mexico, where 63.4% and 56.2% respectively agree with this affirmation.

People perceive a double disprotection for women who abort, since on the one hand the interviewed agree that clandestine abortions take place under precarious conditions, and, on the other hand, it is considered to be related to physical,

psychological or social consequences for women who have experienced an abortion. In the first case, 80% in Brazil consider that an adequate infrastructure doesn't exist to practice an abortion; in Chile 86.4%, in Mexico 76.9% and in Nicaragua 68.6% the same precariety is perceived, evidencing an ample consensus regarding this issue. Also, there exists the perception, shared by on average 78% between the four countries, that women who live under conditions of poverty have a greater risk of unsafe abortions. As a result, people perceive that abortion is a problem related to inequity regarding the access of a safe abortion, which would be significantly determined by stuctural and socio-economic characteristics of each society.

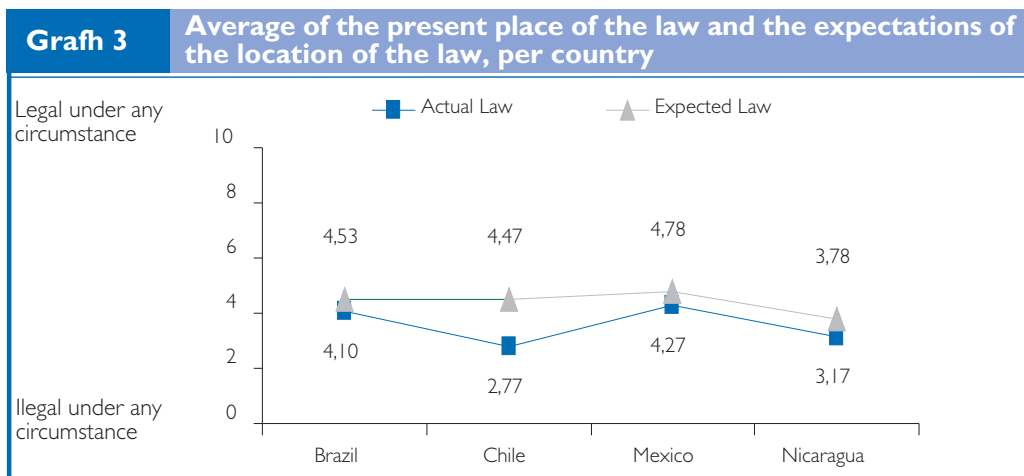


Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

ABORTION REGULATION

Consequently, regarding the above, in the four countries a more flexible regulation toward abortion is expected. The graph which follows next shows the average of the answers given by the interviewed regarding two questions enlaced to this interpretation: "On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that abortion is illegal under all circumstances and 10 is legal under all circumstances. Where

would you place the abortion law in your country?". And 2, "Using the same scale, where would you like for the abortion law to be placed in your country?" In all the countries the average location of the actual law vs. the average of the expected placement of the law is assigned by a gap which would give an account of expectations among the population of less penalization of abortion in comparison to the legislation that today rules in the four countries.

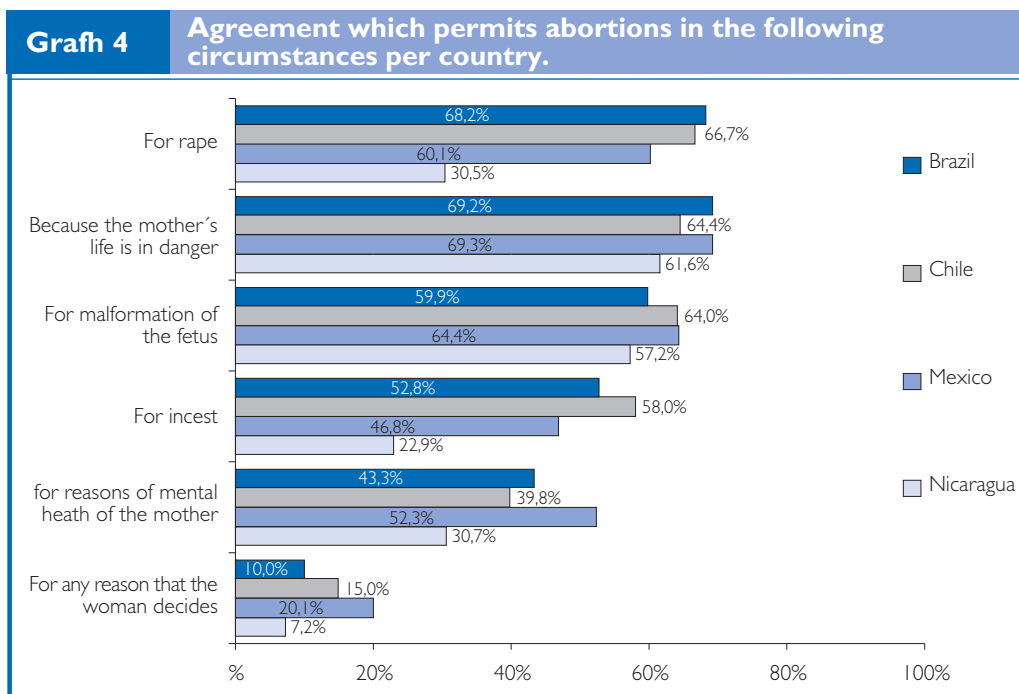


Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

According to graph 3 and in agreement with other results, people would not be in favor of complete depenalization of abortion, but they consider that abortion should be allowed under certain circumstances.

Therefore, the reasons of abortion which elicited the most consensus for depenalization are: when the life of the mother is in danger, with a 66% average between the four countries. The most ample support for this is given in Mexico with a 69.3% favorable, close behind is Brazil with a 69.2%, then Chile with a 64.4% and finally Nicaragua with a 61.6%. In the case of pregnancy as a result of rape the consensus between the four countries reaches a 56% on average; In Brazil it is to greater extent where abortion is supported under this circumstance with a 68.2%, then followed by Chile with a 60.1% and

finally Nicaragua in which there is no majority supporting this cause since only a 30.5% agree. The third reason mainly supported by the majority of the four countries is when there exists a malformation of the fetus with a 61% agreement on average between the four countries. However, it is interesting to note that the causes which people mainly accept for the realization of an abortion do not coincide with the reasons for which the respondents believe that women most frequently abort. For example, even though the main reasons people think that women are motivated to abort are the abandonment of their partner, or because the woman is a minor or lacks of the economic resources to maintain a child, are also the reasons they may give less support for being legalized. The agreement on such cases reached only 7.2%, 17.5% and 10% respectively.

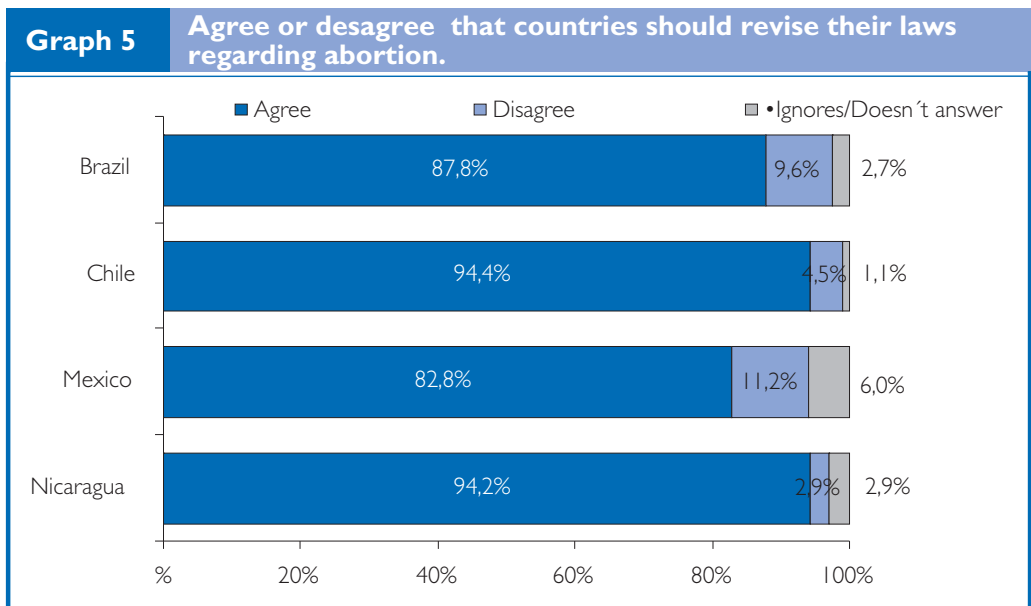


Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

PARTICIPATION AND DEBATE ABOUT ABORTION

In all of the countries the importance to open the debate and discussion about abortion laws on a national level is recognized. Thus, the affirmation "the respective governments should review

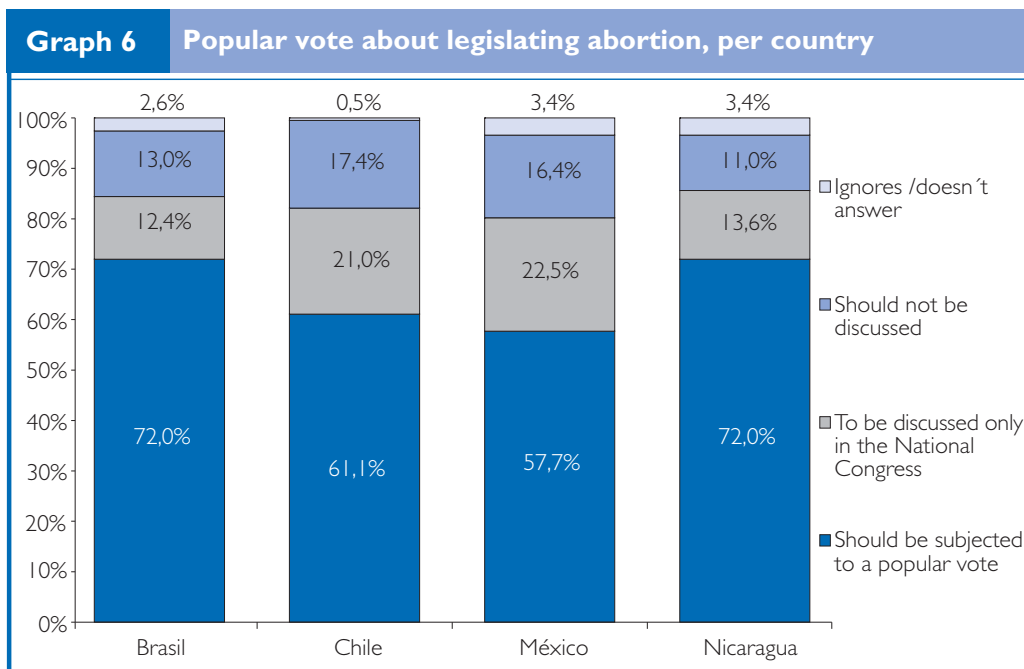
the legal framework that rules abortion" got, on average, a 90% of acceptance in the four countries. In the case of Chile and Nicaragua, where abortion is completely penalized, the level of support to the revision of the legal framework was higher than in the other two: 94.4% and 94.2% respectively.



Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

In the four countries a large preference can be observed for these topics to be debated publicly under the format of a popular referendum. On a lesser scale, people think this should be subject to legislation by the legislative power. In the first case, the level of support is on average 65.7%, which in

the second case, only reaches a 17.5% favourable between the four countries. In effect, in Brazil and Nicaragua a 72% agree with submitting the decision of legalization of abortion to a popular vote, whereas in Chile and Mexico the level of support was lower, reaching a 61.1% and a 57.7% respectively.



Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

INFORMATION AND PROXIMITY WITH ABORTION

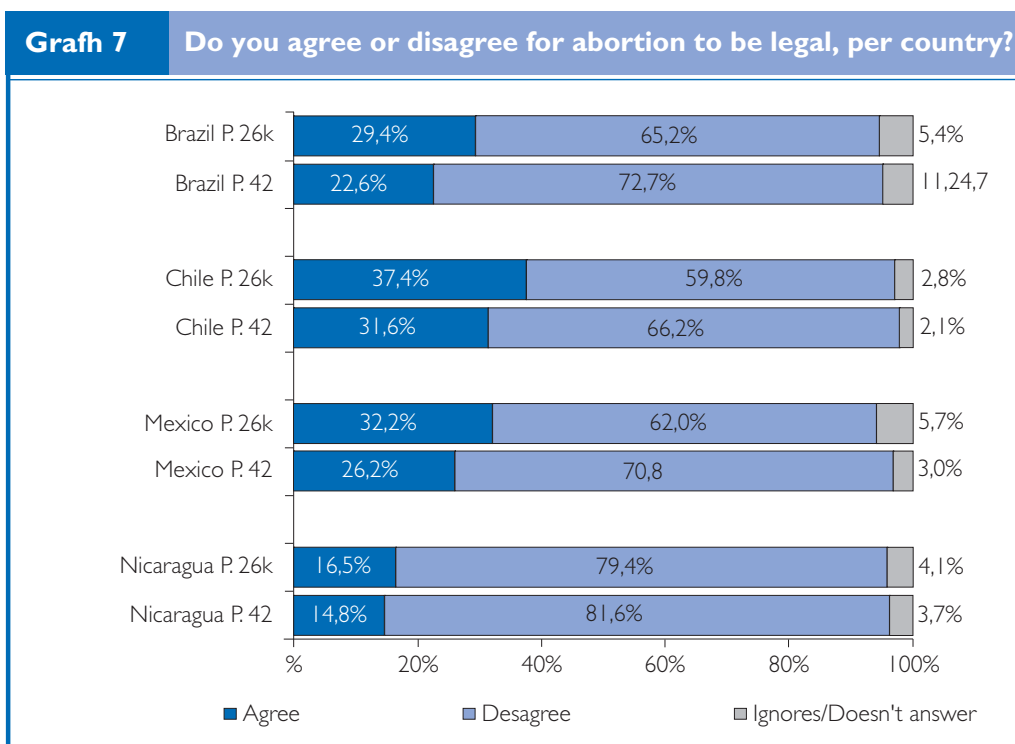
Regarding the level of information about the subject, people are considered to be ill informed with respect to the laws about abortion (86.7% points out to know little or nothing about this). Also we can point out that they rarely have seen or read news about this topic. They also haven't held discussions with friends or family as a daily topic of conversation. In relation with personal proximity or experience with situations of abortion, 34% of the population surveyed from Chile, a 38% of Mexico, a 45% of Nicaragua and a 52% of Brazil declared to personally know someone who has aborted. Namely, only in the former country the experience of abortion is recognized as being predominantly closer to its population in comparison with the other three in which the

majority declared not to have proximity with a woman who had an abortion.

The above could be linked to the minor support which presents a total depenalization of abortion that reaches an average support of 26.3% between the four countries. By contrast, there is a larger consensus for depenalization in relation to therapeutic abortion than in the former case, even when there is no major position in three of the four countries considered for this study. The average between Brazil, Mexico and Nicaragua of support to a depenalization of therapeutic abortion in a popular referendum is of 41.7%; Chile, however, constitutes the exception with a 65.5% of favorable votes to the mentioned reform. It must be said though that in the case of Brazil and Mexico, a 20,4% and 29,1% respectively answered to ignore the answer about their vote in a plebiscite

about legalization of therapeutic abortion. It is likely that this high percentage may imply that the concept has not properly permeated the discussion of abortion within both societies. In relation to "agreement with abortion as legal", the graph 7 shows that this is not largely supported in two

different instances of the application of the questionnaire, coinciding with the middle and ending of the survey. However, this predominant position is relativised with the discussion of therapeutic abortion or about the permission of abortion under certain circumstances as discussed above.



Source: Public opinion survey about abortion: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua. Social Inclusion and Gender Program, FLACSO-Chile, 2009.

CONCLUSIONS

Starting from the descriptive results of the “First survey of public opinion about abortion in four countries of Latin America: Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua” a distance is perceived between the main positions within the countries population towards abortion in relation with both, the current legislation, and the ideological debate of abortion characterized through the dichomatic positions “pro-life” and “pro-choice”. It seems that these two standpoints do not reflect the position of the majority of the population in the four countries studied. It is possible to consider that confronted to these polarized positions, people begin to question about the legitimacy of abortion when pregnancy is carried out under traumatic circumstances: “whose life: the woman’s or the fetus?”. This questioning may reflect upon the principle that endorses the depenalization according to causes related to the life and the health of women.

Also, some common features arise in the four countries studied, which are, on the one hand, the aspiration for a greater flexibility of the current legislation of abortion and, on the other, a greater participation on the debate and the decisions that address it. According to both, people demand more debate and democratic participation over these decisions, expecting a withdrawal of the

dominion of the elite in these issues, as they have always directed the discussion as well as the decisions about the topic of abortion.

In the spectrum which goes from the absolute penalization to the complete depenalization of abortion, in the four countries, a moderate attitude arises when the circumstances in which abortion may occur are critical. These are mainly when the life and the health of women are at risk. Also, an interpellation arises, putting into question not only the actual institutional frame, but also the political social and scientific elites of the four countries.

It could be said that the present results could be summarised into the question What circumstances are those that favor a depenalization of abortion and which do not?

So far the present study, as other previous ones, shows that social and economical reasons for practising an abortion (economic difficulties, abandonment of the partner and others) tend to favor attitudes of penalization of it by the citizens. By contrast, some traumatic circumstances associated to pregnancy (risk of the woman’s life, inviability of the fetus, rape, among others) are those which principally are linked with favorable attitudes towards a depenalization of the practice of abortion■

Main Results. Study of Public Opinion about Abortion. Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua

FLACSO-Chile is an autonomous academic intergovernmental organization whose mission is to contribute within the framework of complete respect for human rights, for the development within Latin American and Caribbean countries, promoting equality, democracy and governance. This mission is accomplished as a result of the production and diffusion of knowledge and formative programs in the field of social sciences, using the highest standards of academic excellence.

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- Aborto en Chile: Aspectos centrales de la regulación jurídica y normativa. Boletín N°4, diciembre 2010.
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- Desafíos en Salud Sexual y Reproductiva, VIH, Sida e ITS en Chile, noviembre 2009.
- Embarazo en la Adolescencia en Chile. Una guía para organizaciones basadas en la fe, noviembre 2009.
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Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Sede Chile
Av. Dag Hammarskjöld 3269, Vitacura, Santiago de Chile
Tel.: (+562) 290-0200 • Fax: (+562) 290-0263
www.flacso.cl • publicaciones@flacso.cl