

Abortion: Facing facts

From the Editors in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

When President Bush spoke last month at a major antiabortion rally, he endorsed the activists' cause but admitted that their primary goal—making abortion illegal—is not likely to be achieved anytime soon. He added that “a true culture of life cannot be sustained solely by changing laws. We need, most of all, to change hearts.”

Bush was speaking perhaps more accurately than he knew. Around the globe, the presence or absence of legal restrictions has relatively little to do with whether women decide to have an abortion. The countries with the lowest abortion rates in the world are Belgium and the Netherlands, where abortion is legal and covered by national health insurance. Those countries each year report seven abortions per 1,000 women of child-bearing age. By contrast, in countries such as Peru, Brazil, Chile and Colombia, where abortion is restricted by law, the abortion rate is about 50 per 1,000 women. Those figures are more than twice that of the U.S., where the rate is about 22. (For data, see the report for the Guttmacher Institute by Amy Deschner and Susan A. Cohen at www.guttmacher.org.)

Judging by abortion rates, one would have to conclude that what Bush (following Pope John Paul II) calls a “culture of life” is actually flourishing more in Western Europe than in Latin America. And there are reasons for this. Belgian and Dutch women are well educated about contraceptives and have access to them, which is not the case with Latin American women. The Belgians and Dutch can also rely on generous government provisions for health care, child care and parental leave, which means raising a child is a more sustainable prospect.

The impact of contraceptive programs in cutting abortion rates has been dramatically demonstrated in the former Soviet Union. Abortion was legalized there in the early 20th century, and it functioned for decades as the primary form of birth control, with virtually no moral stigma attached to it. If ever there was a “culture of abortion,” it was in the Soviet Union. But since the widespread introduction of contraceptive practices in the 1990s, abortion rates have dropped by as much as 50 percent.

Such evidence suggests that most people will choose against abortion if other ways of regulating family size are available. They will also choose against abortion if they have some confidence that the community around them will help them with medical care and child care. (On this point, see Glen Stassen's article [Supporting parents](#).)

Ironically, Bush's so-called pro-life policy entails withholding funds from international family planning programs and limiting the family planning services covered by Medicaid—a policy which has the direct effect of increasing the number of abortions.

The low abortion rates in Western Europe should prompt Americans to ask how one actually fosters a “culture of life.” Couldn't one create a culture in which abortion was a legal option that women rarely felt compelled to choose? Such a culture would feature hearts that welcome children, yes—but also widespread education about sex and contraception, and practical supports for the welcoming of new life.