

A review of abortion laws in Western-European countries.

A cross-national comparison of legal developments between 1960 and 2010

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Abstract:

The extent to which women have had access to legal abortions has changed dramatically in Western-Europe between 1960 and 2010. In most countries, abortion laws developed from completely banning abortion to allowing its availability on request. Both the timing and the substance of the various legal developments differed dramatically between countries. Existing comparative studies on abortion laws in Western-European countries lack detail, usually focus either on first-trimester abortions or second trimester abortions, cover a limited time-span and are sometimes inconsistent with one another. Combining information from various primary and secondary sources, we show how and when the conditions for legally obtaining abortion during the entire gestation period in 20 major Western-European countries have changed between 1960 and 2010. We also construct cross-nationally comparable classification of procedural barriers that limit abortion access. Our cross-national comparison shows that Western-Europe witnessed a general trend towards decreased restrictiveness of abortion laws. However, legal approaches to regulating abortion are highly different in detail. Abortion access remains limited, sometimes even in countries where abortion is legally available without restrictions relating to reasons.