

Tucumán: Girl, 11, gives birth to child of rapist after Argentina says no to abortion

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Campaigners condemn authorities who ignored girl's plea 'to remove what the old man put inside me'

An 11-year old girl who became pregnant after being raped was forced to give birth after Argentine authorities refused to allow her the abortion to which she was entitled.

The authorities ignored repeated requests for an abortion from the child, called "Lucía" to protect her identity, as well as her mother and a number of Argentine women's right activists. After 23 weeks of pregnancy, she had to undergo a procedure similar to a caesarean section on Tuesday. The baby is unlikely to survive.

The move has been described as the "worst kind of cruelty for this child" and has been blamed on an anti-choice strategy in the country to force girls to carry their pregnancies to term.

Lucía told the psychologist at the hospital to which she was admitted after two suicide attempts: "I want you to remove what the old man put inside me."

Lucía, the youngest of three sisters, became pregnant after she was abused by her grandmother's 65-year-old partner. She was placed under her grandmother's care in 2015, after her two older sisters were reportedly abused by her mother's partner.

Lucía discovered she was pregnant on 23 January at a first-aid centre in her hometown in the northern province of Tucumán. A week later, the child was admitted to the Eva Perón hospital outside the provincial capital city of Tucumán. Suffering from self-inflicted lesions resulting from apparent suicide attempts, she was placed in state care.

While abortion remains illegal in Argentina, a 1921 law allows it to be performed in cases of rape or when a woman's life is in danger. A doctor declared in court that Lucía faced "high obstetric risk" should her pregnancy be allowed to continue.

Gustavo Vigliocco, Tucumán's health secretary, insisted the child did not want an abortion - a claim denied by activists who had access to court proceedings. "I am close to both the child and her mother. The child wants to continue her pregnancy. We are considering the risks but she has a large contexture, she weighs more than 50 kilos," Vigliocco said in a radio interview.

Having delayed action until 23 weeks into Lucía's pregnancy, health authorities decided on Tuesday to carry out a caesarean section. The decision followed a court order to take immediate action, given the length of the pregnancy.

Cecilia Ousset, the doctor who performed the procedure alongside her husband and fellow physician, Jorge Gijena, said: "We saved the life of an 11-year-old girl who was tortured for a month by the provincial health system."

She accused Tucumán's governor, Juan Manzur, of using the child for political purposes.

“For electoral reasons they [the authorities] prevented the legal interruption of the pregnancy and forced the little girl to give birth,” she said. “My legs trembled when I saw her, it was like seeing my younger daughter. The little girl didn’t understand completely what was going to happen.”

Ousset said Lucía was in a good condition after the procedure, but she did not expect the baby to survive.

Women’s rights activists in Argentina were outraged by the case.

Writer Claudia Piñeiro tweeted on Wednesday: “There are those who tortured an 11-year-old rape victim in Tucumán. It’s dangerous they have such power and that we were not able to prevent it.”

Mariana Carbajal, the journalist and feminist activist who originally broke Lucía’s story in the progressive daily *Página/12*, tweeted: “Tucumán treated her like a receptacle, like an incubator.”

Soledad Deza, of the Women for Women Association, said Lucía’s case was not one of conscientious objection by doctors. “Regrettably, what we have here is a conservative action stemming from the executive branch,” Deza told *Página/12*. “Abortion is a legal option in the case of abuse or risk to life. The state has to ensure the procedure. Here there was the worst kind of cruelty with this child.”

Anti-choice campaigners said the case illustrated their motto: “Save both lives”, a rallying cry that has gathered strong support among anti-abortion activists.

“That defenceless and innocent human being is whom abortionists managed to pull from its mother’s womb in Tucumán, 24 weeks and premature. Now it lies with tubes attached and in risk of dying when 20 more days could have been allowed to pass to guarantee both lives. What bastards!”, tweeted Mariano Obarrio, a journalist for Argentina’s leading daily *La Nación*, a newspaper that has declared itself against legal abortion in Argentina.

Tucumán’s archbishop, Carlos Sánchez, recorded a message on Wednesday revealing Lucía’s real name and calling on Christians to “defend all human life”.

The “save both lives” motto was repeated in an official statement from the government of Tucumán on Tuesday after the court ruled that the decision was up to health authorities. The government ordered hospital director Elizabeth Avila to “continue with the procedures necessary to attempt to save both lives”.

An attempt to legalise abortion lost by a slim margin last August when Argentina’s senate voted to leave in place the longstanding law that penalises women who undergo an abortion with up to four years in prison.

The law has not stopped abortions. It has put the lives of poorer women who do not have access to good doctors willing to perform the clandestine procedures particularly at risk. An average of one abortion is performed every 90 seconds in Argentina, with as many as 450,000 unsafe illegal abortions carried out every year, according to estimates.

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P.S.

• The Guardian, Fri 1 Mar 2019 07.42 GMT First published on Thu 28 Feb 2019 14.28 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/feb/28/girl-11-gives-birth-to-rapists-child-after-argentina-refuses-abortion>