

**Book review: Research Handbook  
on International Abortion Law  
(Cheltenham: Edward Elgar  
Publishing, 2023)**



# RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON **International Abortion Law**

Edited by  
**Mary Ziegler**



RESEARCH HANDBOOKS IN LAW AND SOCIETY

*Written by Mayela Celis*

Undoubtedly, Abortion is a hot topic. It is discussed in the news media and is the subject of heated political debate. Indeed, just when one thinks the matter is settled, it comes up again. In 2023, Elgar published the book entitled “**Research Handbook on International Abortion Law**”, ed. Mary Ziegler (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023). For more information, [click here](#). Although under a somewhat misleading name as it refers to *international* abortion law, this book provides a wonderful comparative overview of national abortion laws as regulated by States from all the four corners of the world and internal practices, as well as an analysis of human rights law.

This book does not deal with the conflict of laws that may arise under this topic. For a more detailed discussion, please refer to the post [Singer on Conflict of Abortion Laws \(in the U.S.\)](#) published on the blog of the European Association of Private International Law.

In this book review, I will briefly summarise 6 parts of this book (excluding the introduction) and will provide my views at the end.

This book is divided into 7 parts:

Part I - Introduction

Part II - Histories of liberalization

Part III - The promise and limits of decriminalization

Part IV - Abortion in popular politics

Part V - Movements against abortion

Part VI - Race, sex and religion

Part VII - The role of international human rights

## **Part II - Histories of Liberalization**

Part II begins with a historical journey of the abortion reform in Sweden in the

1930s and 1940s. It highlights the limited legalization of abortion in Sweden in 1938 and the revised abortion law in 1946 introducing a “socialmedical” indication. In particular, it underscores how the voices of women were absent from the process.

It then moves on to a comparative study of the history of abortion in the USA and Canada from 1800 to 1970, that is before Roe (USA) and Morgentaler (Canada). It analyses the distinct approaches of Canada and the USA when dealing with abortion (legislative vs. court-based). Furthermore, it provides a very interesting historical account on how the right of abortion came about in both countries – it sets the stage for Roe v. Wade (pp. 50-52).

Finally, Part II examines the situation in South Africa by calling it “unfinished business”. In South Africa, Abortion is a right codified in law: The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act 92 of 1996. However, this article argues that the legislative response is not enough. Factors such as lack of enough health facilities that perform abortions, gender inequality etc. are an obstacle to making safe abortion a reality.

### **Part III - The promise and limits of decriminalization**

This Part analyses several laws regarding abortion. First, it explores Malawi’s 160-year-old law that criminalises abortion based on a UK law, as well as the failed tentative attempt to adopt a new law in 2020. Interestingly, this article analyses CEDAW resolutions against the UK, which promptly complied with the resolution (pp. 92-93).

Secondly, it studies the recently adopted law in Thailand on 7 February 2021 that makes abortion available up to 12 weeks’ gestation period. However, this article criticises that the law creates a loophole as the abortion must be performed by a physician or a registered medical facility and in compliance with the law, greatly medicalizing abortion.

Finally, this Part examines Australian laws and policy over the past 20 years and while acknowledging the significant advances in reproductive rights, it notes that a number of barriers to abortion still remain. This chapter is better read in conjunction with Chapter 10, also about Australia.

### **Part IV - Abortion in popular politics**

This Part begins with an excellent comparative public policy study between France and the United States. In particular, it discusses the weaknesses of *Roe v. Wade*, underlining the role and analysis of the late justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It also puts into context the superiority of the French approach regarding abortion, which is proven with the reversal of *Roe*.

It then analyses abortion law in China, a State that has the most lenient abortion policies in the world. It discusses the Chinese one-child policy, which then changed to two and even three children-policy, as well as sex-selective abortions.

Subsequently, it recounts how South Australia became the last Australian jurisdiction to modernise its abortion laws and underlines the fact that laws in Australian jurisdictions on this topic are uneven and no two laws are the same.

Finally, it examines abortion history in Israel noting that apart from health reasons, abortions on no specific grounds are mainly intended for out-of-wedlock pregnancies. As a result, abortion is restricted to married women unless they claim adultery, a ground that must be reviewed by a Committee. Apparently, this leads married women to lie to get an abortion and go through the shameful process of getting approval by a Committee.

## **Part V - Movements against abortion**

This Part begins with abortion politics in Brazil and the backlash that occurred with the government of former president Bolsonaro who, as is well known, is against abortion. It recounts a case where a priest filed an habeas corpus in favour of a foetus who had a severe birth defect. Although the case arrived at the Federal Supreme Court, it was not decided as the child died 7 minutes after being born (p. 232).

Secondly, a history scholar recounts the pro-life movement across continents and analyses what drives them (*i.e.* gender and religion).

Finally, it deals with abortion law in Poland and Hungary and the impact of illiberal courts. In particular, it discusses the trends against abortion and goes on to explain an interesting concept of “illiberal constitutionalism”. The authors argue that they do not see Poland and Hungary as authoritarian systems but as illiberal States, an undoubtedly interesting concept.

## **Part VI - Race, sex and religion**

This Part begins examining the sex-selective abortions in India. In particular, the authors recommend an equality-based approach instead of anti-discriminatory approach in order to avoid recognising personhood to the foetus.

It then continues with an analysis of abortion law in the Arab world. The authors note that there is scant but emerging literature and that abortion laws in this region are – unsurprisingly – punitive or very restrictive. Interestingly, the position of Tunisia differs from other Arab States.

Finally, it discusses the struggles in Ecuador where a decision of the constitutional court of 2021 decriminalising abortion in cases of rape. It declared unconstitutional an article of the Ecuadorian Criminal Code, and in 2022 the legislature approved a bill based on this ruling. It also refers to teenage pregnancy and violence.

## **Part VII - The role of international human rights**

For those interested in international human rights, this will be the most fascinating Part of the book. Part VII calls for the decriminalization of abortion in *all circumstances* and it supports this argument by making reference to several human rights documents such as those issued by the Human Rights Committee (in particular, General Comment No 36 – Article 6: Right to life) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (referring to a myriad of general comments and concluding observations).

Subsequently, this Part challenges the classification of European abortion law as *fairly liberal* and provides some convincing arguments (including the setbacks in Poland in this regard and other procedural or legal barriers to access abortion in more liberal States) and some surprising facts such as the practice in the Netherlands (see footnote 60). The authors -fortunately- dared to say that this chapter is drafted from a feminist perspective as opposed to the current “male norm” in legal doctrinal scholarship.

Finally, this Part explains the history of abortion laws including the fascinating recent developments in Argentina and Ireland (referred to as “small island”!) and the influence (or the lack thereof) of international human rights law. In particular, it makes reference to the Argentinian Law 27,610 of 2020 (now unfortunately in

peril with the new government) and the repealing by referendum of the 8th Amendment in Ireland in 2018.

*Below are a few personal thoughts and conclusions that particularly struck me from the book:*

Starting from the beginning: the title of the book and the definitions.

In my view, and as I previously mentioned, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as “international” abortion law but rather abortion prompts a discussion of international human rights, such as women’s rights and the right to life, and whether or not national laws are compliant with these rights or are coherent within their own national legal framework. This is in contrast to international child abduction / adoption laws where international treaties regulate those very topics.

While perhaps counterintuitive, the definition of a “woman” has been controversial; see for example the Australian versus the Thai approaches. The Australian approach deals with gender identification and the fact that persons who do not identify as a woman can become pregnant (p. 124, footnote 1). While the Thai approach defines a woman as those capable of bearing children (p. 112). Needless to say, the definition of a woman is essential when legislating on abortion and unavoidably reflects the cultural and political complexities of a particular society. A brief reference is made to men and gender non-conforming people and their access to abortion (p. 374, footnote 2).

A surprising fact is the pervasive sex-selective abortion in some countries (sadly against female foetuses), such as India and China, and which arguments are invoked by scholars to avoid them, without falling into the “trap” of recognising personhood to the foetus.

More importantly, this book shows that the abortion discussion is much more than the polarised “pro-life” and “pro-choice” movements. The history of abortion is complicated, full of intricacies. And what is frustrating to some, this area is rapidly evolving sometimes at the whim of political parties.

Most authors seem to agree that a legislative approach to abortion is more

recommended than a court-based approach. Indeed, there is a preference for democratically elected lawmakers when it comes to dealing with abortion. This is evident from the recent setbacks that occurred in the USA.

Having said that, those expecting an in-depth analysis of the landmark US decision *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* 597 U.S. 215 (2022), which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, will be disappointed (only referred to very briefly in the introduction and Chapters 8, 11 and 13 ). Instead, however, you will be able to immerse yourself into a multidisciplinary study of abortion law, including topics such as politics, sociology, constitutional law, health law and policy, history, etc. In addition, you will read unexpected facts such as the role of Pierre Trudeau (former Prime Minister (PM) of Canada and father of current Canadian PM, Justin Trudeau – p. 56 *et seq.*) in abortion law in Canada or the delivering of abortion pills via drones (p. 393).

Because of all the foregoing, and whatever one's standpoint on abortion is, I fully recommend this book. But perhaps a cautionary note: people in favour of reproductive rights will be able to enjoy the book more fully.

I would like to end this book review with the words of the French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, which appear in her book entitled *The Second Sex* and which are also included in chapter 8 (p. 159) of this book:

*"Never forget that a political, economic or religious crisis would suffice to call women's rights into question"*

Full citation:

*"Rien n'est jamais définitivement acquis. Il suffira d'une crise politique, économique ou religieuse pour que les droits des femmes soient remis en question. Votre vie durant, vous devrez rester vigilantes."*