

RAJYA SABHA PASSES MTP BILL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

The Rajya Sabha on Tuesday passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill, 2020 that increases the time period within which an abortion may be carried out.

Opposition MPs pointed out that the Bill still did not give women the freedom to decide, since she would need a nod from a medical board in the case of pregnancies beyond 24 weeks.

The Opposition's demand to send the Bill to a parliamentary Select Committee for detailed scrutiny was defeated by a voice vote.

Currently, abortion requires the opinion of one doctor if it is done within 12 weeks of conception, and two doctors if it is done between 12 and 20 weeks. The Bill allows abortion to be done on the advice of one doctor up to 20 weeks, and two doctors in the case of certain categories of women, between 20 and 24 weeks.

For a pregnancy to be terminated after 24 weeks in case of substantial foetal abnormalities, the opinion of the State-level medical board is essential.

The Bill was passed in March last year in the Lok Sabha.

Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said the amendments in the Bill had been made after studying global practices and after wide consultation within the country.

The amendments, he said, had been made pursuant to the rising number of pleas in the court. There are 23 petitions in front of the Supreme Court and many hundreds in the High Courts. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we will not frame any law which harms women. This is to preserve and protect the dignity of women," he said. The original Bill was framed in 1971.

During the debate, however, many of the Opposition members, while welcoming the Bill, pointed out the severe lacunae and problems with its approach. Congress leader Ami Yajnik, who opened the debate, said the medical board had to have specialists but government data itself showed a grave shortage in availability of doctors. "Should the State intervene when the pregnant woman is worried about her own life, about the well-being of the foetus, and also about the stigma involved?"

Shiv Sena leader Priyanka Chaturvedi said it was wrong to say the Bill was based on a "right based" approach. Instead, it had a "need based" approach.

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