

Weaving narratives for change: Building networks between feminist researchers and activists for free, safe, and legal abortion in Ecuador and Bolivia

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This special issue of “Conversations with” brings together nine narratives produced in collaboration with activists who struggle for free, safe, and legal abortion in Ecuador and Bolivia. It emerges from a process of research-collaboration among feminist researchers from Ecuador, Bolivia, and Sweden, and feminist organizations and activists in the two Andean countries.

We began this journey in 2023 with funding from the Swedish Research Council (VR) under the Research Networks call; funding that, unfortunately, was eliminated the following year by the right-wing Swedish government. The proposal sought to weave networks between researchers and activists, and to make visible and articulate feminist struggles for free, safe, and legal abortion.

Our colleague Paz Guarderas from Ecuador introduced us to the Narrative Productions methodology, which became the guiding thread of this work. Rooted in the epistemology of situated knowledge [1], this methodology proposes an embodied, situated, and politically engaged way of knowing, and is articulated through a “diffractive” approach that seeks not to linearly represent the object of study, but rather to produce new understandings from the relationships that constitute it [2, 3]. This was the horizon of our work.

Although this special issue presents part of the narratives developed within the framework of the project, the most substantive and meaningful aspect has been the process itself: shared learning, doubts, agreements and disagreements, encounters, co-editing, exchange workshops among participants, and the collective delivery of the narratives.

This editorial introduces the context in which these

narratives are produced, describes the methodological process, presents the authors of the narratives and the researchers who contributed to their production, briefly introduces the narratives, and concludes with lessons learned and our outlook for the future.

Context: abortion, rights, and activism in Latin America

Between 8% and 11% of maternal deaths worldwide are attributed to unsafe abortions, disproportionately affecting those living in contexts where abortion remains criminalized [3]. Far from reducing its incidence, criminalization does not lower abortion rates; on the contrary, in countries with severe restrictions, the proportion of unintended pregnancies ending in abortion increased from 36% (1990–1994) to 50% (2015–2019) [4]. Restrictive laws increase the number of unsafe abortions [5] and widen inequality gaps between those who can afford safe procedures or travel to countries where abortion is legal, and those forced to resort to dangerous methods [4,5].

The criminalization of abortion constitutes a violation of human rights and is closely linked to gender-based violence. Forced motherhood resulting from lack of access to safe abortion is a form of violence; and in countries where even survivors of rape cannot legally terminate a pregnancy, this constitutes a clear case of revictimization. Within the framework of sexual and reproductive rights, abortion is intertwined with access to contraception, adolescent pregnancy, secondary infertility, maternal health, and sexual education. Access to safe abortion is an indispensable component of essential sexual and reproductive health care [5].

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the rate of unintended pregnancies stands at 69 per 1,000 women aged 15–49, and the abortion rate at 32 per 1,000 [6]. These figures coexist with some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Four countries maintain total abortion bans (El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic) and women have been imprisoned on suspicion or charges of illegal abortion [6,7]. In 24 other countries in the region, abortion is legal only under very limited circumstances.

Within this landscape, Ecuador and Bolivia represent two relevant cases. Until 2021, Ecuador allowed abortion only when the life or health of the woman was at risk, or in cases of rape of a woman with a mental disability. That year, the Constitutional Court decriminalized abortion in cases of rape. In Bolivia, Plurinational Constitutional Ruling 0206/2014 (SCP 0206/2014) represents the most significant legal advance for access to abortion rights in the country, facilitating access to legal abortion in cases of rape, incest, or threat to the life or health of the woman, and eliminating procedural barriers such as judicial authorization and the initiation of criminal proceedings that are harmful to women.

In Latin America, only five countries have legalized abortion on request: Argentina, Cuba, Guyana, Uruguay, and some states of Mexico, joined by Colombia in 2022. However, even where abortion is not a crime, effective access faces obstacles such as stigma, conscientious objection, costs, and insufficient provision in public services [3,5]. This scenario is part of a broader and more recent global backlash, visible in the United States and in European Union countries such as Malta, Poland, and Hungary.

Still, not everything is discouraging. The region has seen decisive advances: Argentina (2021) and Colombia (2022) legalized abortion on request after decades of feminist mobilization, and Ecuador expanded rights in cases of rape. These achievements are the result of sustained struggles, not spontaneous processes. In this context, the defense of abortion rights can be understood as a form of “high-risk feminism” [7]. Activists and scholars face censorship, political hostility, smear campaigns, and even exile; despite this, the feminist movement in the region remains dynamic, diverse, and resilient, driving reforms in sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence prevention, and abortion decriminalization, with a focus on equal access to safe services [8].

The breadth of the movement entails a diversity of strategies. For some organizations, legal reform is central; for others, it is peripheral or approached with caution given the influence of international agencies and the limited effectiveness of judicial pathways. Some collectives focus on normative change, while others prioritize access practices under restrictive frameworks: anonymous networks of health professionals, telephone hotlines providing information on medication abortion, feminist accompaniment, among others. This generational and organizational plurality is expressed in mul-

iple forms of action: protests, mobilizations, strategic litigation, community work, political advocacy, institutional alliances, or, in some cases, the decision not to place abortion at the center of the agenda.

In Ecuador, feminist support for access to abortion was strengthened with the “*Salud Mujeres*” hotline, launched in 2008 by the Youth Coordination for Gender Equity, the first of its kind in the world [9]. Three years later, and despite prosecution by the Attorney General’s Office, more than 7,000 women had contacted the hotline. It is important to note that at the beginning of the millennium, Ecuador already had safe and clandestine abortion services from a feminist, rights-based, and non-profit perspective [10]. As a result of this work, in 2015 *Las Comadres* emerged as a collective implementing in Ecuador a strategy of support for medication abortion through feminist accompaniment [11].

In Bolivia, various feminist collectives advocating for abortion access are articulated in spaces such as the September 28 Campaign, among others. Likewise, activists for sexual rights, including physicians and nurses, promoted the introduction of abortion medication through the use of misoprostol. From 2000 to the present, this has been a “clandestine” practice: although misoprostol is publicly available to treat first-trimester hemorrhage, its use and distribution for abortion purposes are prohibited. Feminist groups and activists continue to seek ways to provide the pills and/or accompany women during their use.

The narratives presented in this special issue are situated precisely within this complex and vibrant landscape, focusing on Ecuador and Bolivia and on how different feminist activisms contest, transform, and reconfigure access to safe, legal, and free abortion in the region.

Theoretical approach and methodology: Narrative productions

The research process from which the narratives presented in this special issue emerged is grounded in the perspective of situated knowledge [1], which assumes the partiality and embodiment of knowledge and proposes a diffractive perspective that does not seek mimetic representation, but rather the generation of new relations of meaning [2]. The Narrative Productions (NP) methodology is based on the notion of generating shared knowledge that emerges through the connection between the researcher and those who participate in the research process [12–14]. This approach takes a critical distance from the rhetoric of “giving voice” to participants, as such a claim assumes a position of power over a passive subject; instead, and following decolonial critiques of academic representation [15], the objective was not to speak for participants, but to speak with participants. A diffractive logic was thus adopted, recognizing that the research apparatus itself interferes with reality and produces new patterns for understanding the phenomenon [16].

To operationalize this methodological stance, the procedure unfolded through a cycle of textualization and negotiation of meaning. The process began with recorded conversational encounters focused on the characterization of participants' organizations, their strategies for political advocacy, and future challenges. The treatment of this material departed from literal transcription; in line with the methodological assumptions of the approach, the research team transformed the oral accounts into a coherent written narrative, actively interpreting arguments and storylines. The resulting draft was returned to each participant, initiating what is known as the correction and editing "loop." At this stage, participants intervened with full authority to nuance, correct, or remove passages, transforming the document into an exercise of co-writing. The final version was reached only when the participant validated that the text faithfully expressed the political meaning of their experience, thereby turning the narratives into embodied theoretical contributions in which participants are recognized as authors [17]. In this way, participants exercised agency over the material throughout the process. For this reason, they are considered authors of the texts. Analytically, the

narratives were approached as theoretical contributions, recognizing participants as producers of knowledge.

After completing the narrative production process, we held a joint workshop with all authors to share the consolidated versions, exchange experiences, and discuss possibilities for collective publication. In this space, nine expressed their interest in publishing the narratives collectively in this journal, specified how they wished to be named, and requested a final review before defining the format of the narratives presented in this special issue.

Participants and ethics

Eleven narratives were produced between 2023 and 2025, some collective and others individual. The selection criterion for participants was their feminist activism related to abortion and their membership in organizations or collectives in Ecuador or Bolivia. A basic characterization is presented in Table 1. Two participants did not consent to having their narratives published collectively; therefore, this special issue includes only nine narratives.

Table 1. Characterization of participants

Participant name	Organization name	Type of organization	NP approval date	Country
A Escobar	Campaña 28 de septiembre	Campaign	February 2024	Bolivia
A Vera	Colectivo Surkuna y Comadres	Collective	April 2025	Ecuador
AM Kudelka, P Estenssoro	Católicas por el derecho a decidir	NGO	October 2024	Bolivia
A Terceros	Warmis en Resistencia – Vecinas feministas	Collectives	March 2024	Bolivia
Luna Creciente (9 participants from 6 provinces)	Movimiento de Mujeres de Sectores Populares Luna Creciente	Movement	April 2024	Ecuador
Bruja Rebelde	Kullakas ILE	Network	February 2024	Bolivia
L Pérez, C Sanabria	Colectivo Rebeldía	Collective	May 2024	Bolivia
MI Cordero	Sendas	NGO	July 2024	Ecuador
Beatriz	Warmi Ñawi	Network	December 2023	Ecuador

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad San Francisco de Quito for the process conducted in Ecuador (code 2023-115IN) and by an ad hoc committee in Bolivia. Participants signed an informed consent form prior to the narrative process and an additional document after the return of the draft to confirm their desired treatment in publications.

Narratives are created through conversation between researchers and participants/authors. In this sense, it is also important to situate the researchers who participated in the narrative productions. In Ecuador, these included Paz Guarderas (a feminist social psychologist who has long used the Narrative Productions

methodology in research on gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and psychosocial intervention), Erika Arteaga Cruz (a feminist physician and activist in the women's movement, member of the Plurinational Parliament of Women and Feminist Organizations), and Isabel Goicolea (a feminist researcher in critical public health based in Sweden, with strong ties to Ecuador). In Bolivia, the researchers included Cecilia Terrazas (a feminist social communicator working on the production and analysis of women's rights), María Dolores Castro, and Fernanda Wanderley, researchers and feminists based in Bolivia. The team also included Hanna Bäckström, a feminist researcher based in Sweden.

Introduction to the narratives

What follows are the nine narratives approved by their authors for collective publication. Rather than organizing the narratives by country, we chose to group them according to the form of activism that is most central to each account. This mode of classification is partial and situated; other readers might reasonably group the narratives differently.

We begin with the narratives of María Isabel Cordero (SENDAS, Ecuador) [18], Alexia Escobar (September 28 Campaign, Bolivia) [19], and Ana María Kudelka and Paula Estenssoro (Catholics for the Right to Decide, Bolivia) [20]. All are professionals who engage with abortion from the fields of medicine, health, the social sciences, and spirituality. Their narratives recount encounters and tensions within the movement; their long-standing activism allows them to trace the evolution of the field, from the days when there were “only a handful of women” in marches to the moment of mass mobilizations, generational shifts, and frictions between litigation and legal reform on the one hand, and the disruptive activism of younger generations on the other. Particularly relevant is Cordero’s critique [18], grounded in Cuenca, of capital-centric dynamics (Quito) and the barriers to access in provinces and rural areas. Along similar lines, Kudelka and Estenssoro [20] of Catholics for the Right to Decide Bolivia reflect on their work in rural communities.

The second block includes Ana Vera (Surkuna, Ecuador) [21] and Andrea Terceros (Warmis en Resistencia and Feminist Neighbors, Bolivia) [22], both younger activists embedded in national collectives with strong international connections. Vera describes changes and frictions, the evolution of national organizations, conflicts with anti-rights actors, and the paradox of visibility (crucial for ensuring access, yet opening the door to censorship, surveillance, and risk). Both navigate transnational spaces with confidence, combining strategic litigation with coalition-building for advocacy.

We then present the narrative of Lupe Pérez and Carmen Sanabria from the Rebeledía Collective [23]. They argue for the need to articulate the struggle for abortion with class struggles, offering a critique of individualistic solutions and liberal feminism.

Next are the narratives of Bruja Rebelde (Bolivia) [24] and Beatriz (Ecuador) [25]. They recount accompaniment practices: the former as an abortion companion (“abortera,” in her own words), and the latter through legal accompaniment in cases of sexual violence, legal abortion, and the defense of women criminalized for abortion. Both share an intersectional and community feminist approach, in which class and racialization are key to understanding limitations in access to abortion. They emphasize that accompaniment is embodied in their own lives: it is a necessity and an ethical-political commitment, without romanticization. Their activism disrupts sleep and family time, compromises economic stability, and demands personal sacrifice, yet remains

work they cannot abandon.

Finally, the Movement of Women from Popular Sectors *Luna Creciente* [26], in Ecuador, offers a collective narrative that brings together diverse voices from different territories: the capital city, urban southern neighborhoods, Andean and Amazonian communities, and Black women. For *Luna Creciente*, the struggle for abortion cannot be separated from other struggles and sovereignties: land, rights, and life itself. Here, feminism intertwines with the demands of Indigenous and peasant movements, sharing encounters and tensions with these movements and with other feminisms, from a critical, careful, and solidaristic perspective.

All narratives begin with a brief introduction written by the researcher who participated in each narrative. This short preamble situates the text both geographically and within the emotional context in which the narrative was produced.

By way of closing...

This special issue does not seek to close a debate, nor does it aspire to an impossible synthesis. On the contrary, this compilation was created with the intention of diffracting rather than unifying; of multiplying perspectives rather than reducing them; of showing complexity rather than smoothing it over. Activism for free, safe, and legal abortion in Bolivia and Ecuador has never been linear or homogeneous. Each narrative presented here, with its strategies, genealogies, wounds, victories, styles, and tones, confirms the radical diversity that constitutes the movement.

The voices gathered here do not always align with one another, and that is precisely their strength. Some are rooted in the streets, others in institutions; some speak from feminist accompaniment, others from strategic litigation, and others from long-term public advocacy. There are deeply personal accounts and others that analyze structures and systems; testimonies expressed through the body and others through political language. All, however, find points of articulation, even as they claim the differences and frictions that have historically shaped the movement.

Preserving these divergences, making them visible, naming them, and celebrating them is an essential part of this special issue. History is not built only through consensus, but also through conflict, tension, and open questions. The Narrative Productions methodology enabled precisely this: documenting the movement without asking it to become univocal, following the texture of each experience without flattening it to fit an analytical mold. Listening, accompanying, and allowing voices to unfold—this has been our commitment.

This special issue is also a reminder of the powerful, courageous, expansive, and creative role of the many feminist organizations that produce knowledge and research far beyond the marginal role often assigned to them by academia. If we have learned anything in this process, it is that academia can, and must, support, share,

learn, and contribute, while always ensuring that its voice does not overshadow the struggles it documents or occupy spaces that are not its own. Activism lives, moves, creates, sustains, and transforms. Academia accompanies; it does not lead, and it must continue to cultivate humility.

Looking ahead requires acknowledging that the context has changed, and not for the better. In the region, less progressive governments have come to power in recent years, in Ecuador and Bolivia as well as in other countries that were historically important allies, such as Sweden. Their effects on sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to abortion, are uncertain, but it is difficult to imagine them being favorable. The Global North is also experiencing a cycle of cuts to international cooperation and research funding, particularly in feminist agendas, sexual and reproductive health, and human rights. This contraction directly reduces the possibility of sustaining long-term processes.

Even so, or perhaps because of this, collectives remain tired but alive. Feminist abortion accompaniment models remain strong, networks continue to expand, marches do not cease, young people mobilize, and green scarves are still raised in plazas and markets, on buses and in universities. Political creativity remains intact. Women and pregnant people continue to have abortions together, accompanied, informed, and with dignity. And there, in that daily, persistent, and organized practice, the future also resides.

This special issue is therefore more than a compilation; it is an act of recognition. A gesture to honor the struggle of the *compañeras* who shared their stories, and of the many other organizations and collectives not rep-

resented in these pages but who sustain, day after day, the possibility of choice.

It is also an invitation to seek new forms of articulation, aware that no single strategy is sufficient on its own: neither the street without advocacy, nor advocacy without accompaniment, nor litigation without social organizing. The strength of the movement has always resided in its plurality. The challenge now is for that plurality to find, again and again, ways to walk together.

The future is not written, but it is populated by memory. And the memory that this special issue seeks to safeguard and share is what allows us to continue imagining and building a world in which deciding is not an exception, nor a permanent struggle, nor a privilege, but a full right.

Finally, this special issue acknowledges something that runs through all the narratives: the struggle to decide over our bodies cannot be separated from other struggles, nor stripped of its political content. There is no reproductive justice without territory, without land, without water, without community, without climate justice, and without the defense of dignified life in all its forms. The freedom to have an abortion is inseparable from the freedom to live in a world where nature is not devastated, where people are not displaced, and where life is respected.

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