

Stories of activism in Southern Ecuador

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Entering *Sendas* is like traveling back in time. You can feel the atmosphere of the nineties, when the effervescence of feminist movements was anchored in non-governmental organizations. Being there is like being in the offices of *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* in La Paz. Pamphlets and books flood the meeting room.

As María Isabel recounts the history of *Sendas*, I imagine the place filled with young people. It is Saturday, and only the two of us are there. When I see her, I feel a sense of familiarity; we share that generational space that places us in between younger feminisms and those of our elders. Her gaze is penetrating and vivid. Her gestures and tone are calm and measured. We turn on the recorder, and her words begin to flow. The way she narrates evokes images. My mental photographs take me through the university, and I imagine the lecture hall in that traditional part of Cuenca. I see young women contesting spaces on the bridge, one that is already ours, even though I am a foreigner in that city. I barely notice the passage of time.

After a while, I contact her via WhatsApp to send her the narrative. She takes some time to send it back. She is concerned about taking away protagonism and about being fair to those who have participated in this process. She edits the narrative and sends us the version with which she feels comfortable and at ease. Her hope is that the feminist movement will manage to unite after the tensions that emerged around abortion. She asks to be identified in her narrative.

SENDAS: CONVICTION, RESOURCES, AND RESISTANCE

Sendas was founded 33 years ago, on March 5, 1991, with a clear conviction: to work from a human rights, feminist, and sustainable development perspective. From the outset, we committed ourselves to structural transformations, recognizing diverse identities and needs, especially those of women, girls, and adolescents.

Our four areas of focus, gender, environment, participation, and interculturality, have been the compass guiding our work. Through them, we have sought equality, justice, and dignity, directing our efforts toward young people, rural women, Indigenous women, and LGBTI populations, always placing a gender perspective at the forefront.

Sendas' strength has been its versatility. We have never limited ourselves to a single issue. For three decades, we have spoken about climate change with rural women who, after migration processes, became heads of household and managed to sustain agricultural production under adverse environmental conditions. We have also linked water and sanitation with

sexual and reproductive health, and promoted women's economic autonomy as a pathway to confronting violence. This capacity to weave together unconventional thematic intersections has undoubtedly allowed us to remain steadfast over time.

My connection with *Sendas* began through the *Red Cántaro*, a network of NGOs working on citizen participation, environment, and development. I was a communications specialist and assistant editor of *Cántaro* magazine, a forward-thinking publication that reached sociologists, political scientists, and other development professionals. When the magazine and the network moved to another organization, I remained at *Sendas*. I joined the sexual and reproductive health team, working with young people on HIV prevention and adolescent pregnancy prevention. That marked the beginning of a journey that now spans 25 years and finds me today serving as the organization's Executive Director.

Introducing the issue of abortion in dialogue with national organizations

Sendas began engaging with the issue of abortion around 2005–2006, when *Línea Salud Mujer* was created in Quito. Until then, our sexual and reproductive health agenda had focused on HIV prevention, prevention of unintended pregnancies and maternal deaths, and work with the “user committees” established under the Free Maternity and Childcare Law (LMGYAI). We also conducted research with the University of Cuenca on maternal mortality, unnecessary cesarean sections, and obstetric violence.

At that time, speaking about abortion was difficult: uncomfortable, illegal, clandestine. We avoided it and limited ourselves to discussing prevention. However, through *Línea Salud Mujer*, we began political dialogues with colleagues from other organizations about the consequences of clandestine abortion in women’s lives. We asked ourselves how to sustain accompaniment in cities and territories without support networks, who would respond to these needs, and what resources would be required.

The colleagues staffing the hotline were already using misoprostol as part of the protocol, at a time when access was less complex. From my position, I supported the effort through workshops, youth gatherings, and dialogue spaces, but also through feminist accompaniment for women who decided to terminate their pregnancies, in a city where no one else was doing so. The hotline later became *Las Comadres*, which has now been accompanying women for ten years.

STRATEGIES

Local political strategies: Networks, ordinances, and sensitizing health providers

In 2012, we began receiving support from Planned Parenthood Global (PP Global), not directly to work on abortion, but to advocate for public policies on sexual and reproductive rights at the local level. From this impetus emerged the *Red Sex* in Cuenca, composed of public institutions and civil society organizations. Backed by a cantonal ordinance, this network secured a fixed budget allocation: 2% of the 10% designated for social investment. These resources funded programs across three areas: prevention of adolescent pregnancy, prevention of gender-based violence, and HIV prevention among LGBTI populations.

The experience was so solid that it was soon replicated in six other cantons across the country, always with PP Global’s support. Through these local ordinances, the issue of abortion, particularly abortion on health grounds, and the prevention of clandestine abortion also began to be addressed indirectly.

In Cuenca, we achieved a strategic step within a provincial ordinance on LGBTI rights: the Provincial Government committed to remaining vigilant until abortion in cases of rape was decriminalized. It was a clause we carefully preserved as a political tool and one that

demonstrated both the potential of local-level work and the political commitment of the then Vice Prefect of Azuay.

Over time, we came to understand that significant advances in social decriminalization and in sensitizing service providers can occur at the territorial level. We mapped professionals who could offer support in emergencies, though the path was difficult. In Cuenca, referring an abortion case was, and continues to be, virtually impossible. I have had to send women as far as Guayaquil because no one here was willing to treat them. We have two allied physicians, yet even one of them, trained in MVA (manual vacuum aspiration), admitted at a critical moment: “No, I can’t.” Only in obstetric emergencies would colleagues take on a case, and they did so without asking questions.

This has been one of the greatest challenges of working outside the capital. Here, the struggle operates according to a different logic. We cannot be at the National Assembly every day, nor at national technical roundtables. Our work is local, close to decision-makers and public servants in the territory, opening doors little by little, often “disguising the issue” so that it can be heard.

Sendas took on a research role

From the beginning, *Sendas* has been clear about one thing: our way of engaging in political advocacy is by generating evidence. We know that research can open spaces for debate and facilitate the social decriminalization of abortion.

In 2013, we conducted a national study to understand public opinion on abortion. The results showed that 65% of respondents supported decriminalization in cases of rape. From this emerged the campaign “*Yo soy 65*” (“I Am 65”). From then on, we began working with data and science, combining strategic communication in alliance with other organizations, especially youth groups.

During those years (2012–2014), the *Frente Nacional por los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos* (National Front for Sexual and Reproductive Rights) was formed, with each organization taking on a specific role. We contributed scientific evidence; *Fundación Desafío* explained from a medical perspective why medication abortion is a safe, simple, and low-cost process; and *Surkuna* approached the issue from the legal front, working to reduce the criminalization of women. It was truly alliance-based work, because nothing is achieved alone.

In 2015, we participated in a study on the costs of omission in sexual and reproductive health, alongside the Ministry of Health, Planned Parenthood Global, UNFPA Ecuador, and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). That research, available on *Sendas*’ website, was key to influencing the development of the Clinical Guidelines for Abortion Care on Health Grounds, approved during the tenure of Minister Carina Vance. The process required five years of patient and sustained work.

The challenge was enormous: the research relied on medical records, but in hospitals, records were often altered. An abortion would be registered as hemorrhage or urinary infection, forcing the UNAM team to change data sources and redesign the methodology. Even so, the findings were conclusive: for every dollar invested in prevention, the State saves 17 dollars on care. Treating an abortion with misoprostol costs 23 dollars, while a uterine curettage costs 230 dollars.

These figures allowed us to quantify what we had always known: that a woman's life should not be at risk because of an unsafe abortion, and that prevention costs far less than repair. Thanks to that evidence, we were able to open spaces for political advocacy and sustain arguments in the face of those who refused to acknowledge the problem.

Articulation with other organizations

Sendas was also part of the *Red Nacional de Jóvenes por los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos*, alongside *La Pájara Pinta* and other institutions. From there, we served as the focal point in Azuay for the Ecuador Adolescent project and later participated in spaces such as the *Red de jóvenes por la Asamblea*. This participation strengthened our work with youth and allowed us to deepen our focus on sexual and reproductive health.

In 2014, we joined the *Consortio Latinoamericano contra el Aborto Inseguro* (CLACAI) and began consolidating what we had already been building: experience in accompaniment, political advocacy, and training. It was not a new path. Since *Sendas* was created, we had been linked to the *Red de Salud de las Mujeres de América Latina y el Caribe* (RMSLAC), and in 2006 we participated in the global sexual and reproductive rights network meeting in Nicaragua, where we met Women on Waves. They trained us in the use of the misoprostol protocol and shared strategies. Their proposal was unusual but effective: ships in international waters where women could access safe abortion with medication or surgical procedures. I remember thinking, "Wow, that's the solution."

That return from Nicaragua is marked by an anecdote I always recall. I was carrying materials: publications from *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* in Mexico on spirituality, information from Women on Waves about abortion and psychological effects. At the airport, my suitcase was stopped. They asked why I was carrying so much information, and I replied: "Information is not a crime." They confiscated the pamphlets but did not realize I was carrying several boxes of misoprostol. When they asked what it was, I improvised: "It's for a chronic illness, ulcers." The paradox was obvious: what they considered dangerous were the papers, not the medication.

We learned along the way — No one taught us

Exchange with organizations from other countries (Colombia, Mexico, Argentina) was essential. I remember that after returning from Nicaragua, the women from the *Línea* told me: "Chabela, can we put your number

in a newsletter so people in Cuenca can call you?" And I replied: "Sure, nothing will happen."

The newsletter went out, and suddenly I began receiving thousands of calls: threats, insults, all kinds of violence. We kept a handwritten log of the numbers because caller ID did not exist. Today we laugh about it, but at the time it was extremely hard. From that experience, we learned to protect ourselves better.

However, not everything was threats. Women also began calling for help. So we took the step: from *Sendas*, we offered information and accompaniment, supported by a Dutch NGO that funded part of the project. At the same time, with colleagues from *Línea Salud Mujer*, we received minimal resources for workshops and trainings, along with protocols and guidelines.

Accompaniment was provided by phone or in person: we explained how to use the medication, what to do before and after, and how to act in case of complications. What is now called feminist accompaniment, we were inventing at the time, guided by persistent questions: What if a woman comes several times a year? What if she arrives with her partner? What if a man requests the information? How do we ensure the decision belongs to the woman? How do we act in cases of disability or rape?

Sendas' prior experience in gender-based violence gave us tools: psychological first aid, emotional support, and the ability to listen. Because often abortion was surrounded by violence or experienced in a state of shock. It was an intense, powerful process, but also exhausting. That is when we discovered that self-care is essential in abortion accompaniment. We created institutional spaces to share experiences, release emotions, cry, and also find closure. That allowed us to continue.

When *Las Comadres* officially assumed responsibility for accompaniment, *Sendas* stopped providing it directly. In reality, however, we continue to be a point of reference. Many women come to our office or call us when they cannot reach them. We refer cases, but we do not deny support. Access to misoprostol has become increasingly restricted, yet the feminist accompaniment network continues to hold.

Chair in sexual and reproductive health

In 2014, we began engaging in advocacy around the debate on the Organic Health Code. At the national level, we built alliances with the Medical Association of Cuenca and the University of Cuenca, with the aim of preventing setbacks in sexual and reproductive rights. From that effort, between 2011 and 2012, the Chair in Sexual and Reproductive Health was created in the Faculty of Medicine at the University.

For us, this was as much a political strategy as an academic one: training physicians from a rights-based perspective. We tried to replicate the experience in other universities, but it was never institutionalized. It was an elective course, and a couple of years ago SENESCYT closed it, citing lack of resources. A letter notified us

after ten years of work, more than 800 students trained, and a formal agreement between the Ministry of Health, the University, *Sendas*, and the Women's Council (Cabildo de Mujeres).

The effort had been enormous. Every Saturday, we taught classes without receiving a single dollar, while the dean (a medical ally) and other organizations completed the modules. *Sendas* was responsible for the regulatory framework on sexual and reproductive health care, with emphasis on abortion on health grounds. The Cabildo addressed prevention of gender-based violence; other organizations covered LGBTI issues. On average, 80 future doctors per year went through this experience.

The Chair also opened a space for research and social oversight. During their clinical rotations, students reported whether regulations were being complied with: access to contraceptives, provision of emergency contraception, care for adolescents, and implementation of abortion on health grounds. This information (data we could never have gathered on our own) allowed us to advocate before local authorities and demand compliance. It was simultaneously a pedagogical, political, and citizen oversight exercise.

Advocacy before the Constitutional Court

In the legal arena, the most decisive step was learning to use the *amicus curiae* mechanism and to build on prior experiences. Before the debate on abortion in cases of rape reached the Court, Ecuador had already experienced two key precedents: equal civil marriage and the Satya case on same-sex parenting. Both processes marked a path forward, and from *Sendas* we were also present in those struggles, thanks to the regional project "*Adelante con la Diversidad*," which we implemented alongside *Pakta* in Quito.

From those experiences, we learned that the Constitutional Court, though not always recognized as such, could act as a legislator. Dialogue with colleagues from other countries was crucial: they reminded us that Ecuador had ratified international treaties and that we had the right to demand their enforcement. Organizations such as *Surkuna* and CEPAM-Guayaquil strengthened the legal axis, while the feminist wave from Argentina expanded the struggle into public space.

For *Sendas*, working from Cuenca rather than Quito always meant arriving later to decision-making spaces, but also contributing technical and legal inputs that other organizations could use. Seeing our research, *amicus* briefs, and arguments circulate was confirmation that the effort was worthwhile, even if frustration remained at not being at the decision-making table.

The result is bittersweet. We achieved the decriminalization of abortion in cases of rape, but the process became distorted: the National Assembly approved a law that President Guillermo Lasso later gutted, vetoing 41 of its 48 articles. Today, implementation is fragile. Progress comes through rulings of unconstitutionality, amid continued obstacles and criminaliza-

tion. The achievement stands, but its permanence depends on the balance of forces in the next Constitutional Court. The lingering question is what will happen when its composition changes, and who the candidates will be that determine the immediate future of this right.

Social mobilization

Social mobilization gained strength after the severe political setback we experienced under President Rafael Correa's government in 2013 and 2014. I especially remember 2013, when legislator Paola Pabón—our main ally at the time—was sanctioned after introducing the proposal to include rape as a legal ground for abortion. It was a heavy blow. In advocacy strategies, having allies within decision-making spaces is essential; they are the ones who bring demands into the legislative arena. But this time it did not work. That failure forced us to refocus locally and concentrate our energy on territorial work and accompaniment.

In Cuenca, the first September 28th mobilization emerged from a 2017 youth leadership training process we ran called "*Líderes en crecimiento*." From there, the collective *Femininjas* was born, twelve young women with remarkable clarity and conviction. The final assignment of that training school was to organize a public act of activism, and they chose to focus it on the right to abortion. So, with barely twenty of us in Parque Calderón, we held the first 28S in Cuenca.

It was not common in this city to take to the streets for this issue. Here, people commemorated March 8, November 25, and sometimes May 28, the Day of Sexual and Reproductive Health. But September 28? Nothing. What we did was a rupture: small in numbers, enormous in meaning.

While in Quito activism was already stronger and debates were unfolding in the National Assembly, in Cuenca we were planting a seed. Today that seed has grown. Public presence has increased, groups have strengthened, and social decriminalization is part of our daily work. We craft messages, share information, engage in conversations, and remain constantly present in the media, positioning the issue and breaking silences.

OBSTACLES TO ABORTION ACTIVISM

Criminalization and anti-rights forces

Within *Sendas*, not all of us initially agreed on providing accompaniment in abortion cases. It was a long debate in our assembly. Some colleagues were more focused on environmental or broader human rights issues and would say: "What if you're reported? What if you end up in prison?" That fear was always present, especially after the failure during the Constituent Assembly process, when we felt institutional doors closing and the scenario becoming even more hostile toward sexual and reproductive rights.

Persecution and criminalization were never abstract; we experienced them firsthand. We received threatening phone calls and, as a result, had to create security protocols: who could enter, what we would ask, not allowing

bags inside, ensuring no one recorded or took photos. We knew there were infiltrators.

And it was true. On more than one occasion, people came to us under false pretenses. We ourselves carried out exercises of infiltration to understand how clinics offering “alternatives” operated. I remember a young colleague who posed as a pregnant woman. During the ultrasound, they showed her a 16-week fetus that did not exist. They told her: “Look, there’s your baby. Don’t abort. Give the baby to us when it’s born.” It was all staged. She left in tears. It was brutal to witness the emotional manipulation and violence inflicted on women.

At the same time, we began confronting anti-rights groups directly. In Cuenca, campaigns such as “*Con mis hijos no te metas*”, the “*Marcha Blanca*,” and the “*Día del No Nacido*” gained momentum. One of the first marches, we later learned, was led by a woman who would go on to become a city councilor and later a direct advisor to the mayor. That forced us to map actors and discourses, to recognize them as an organized political force with real influence. We attended their events to observe and understand their narratives. Simultaneously, we strengthened our own strategy: constant media presence, a sustained communications plan, and a clear dispute over the public narrative. That became one of our key local bets.

Decriminalization in cases of rape: A massive challenge

When the debate over decriminalization in cases of rape began, everything became more complex. As a local organization, we observed with sadness the fragmentation of the feminist movement in the country. Even more painful was seeing that division replicate in Cuenca. Feminism, we learned, does not save us from ambition, ego, or struggles for protagonism.

Within the National Front for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, we discussed the issue and worked on a Shadow Report for the Universal Periodic Review. The United Nations recommended that Ecuador move toward full decriminalization, improve health care, and reduce maternal mortality. On paper, the path seemed to be opening. In practice, however, the fight over the rape ground fractured alliances. We tried repeatedly to mediate and build agreements, but commitments were signed and then disregarded. Eventually, factions emerged, and each group went its own way.

For me, this was the most critical knot: the inability to sustain a shared space to place interests, needs, and mutual recognition. At *Sendas*, we have always supported total decriminalization, without incremental steps. But the strategy of advancing ground by ground divided the movement. The lack of coordination scattered efforts, like throwing grains of sand against a wall.

In Cuenca, discussions became particularly harsh. I recall the case of the “*Puente Vivas Nos Queremos*” during the city festivities. CIDAP proposed an artistic installa-

tion in that commemorative space. We sought dialogue and consensus—an altar, participation of artisans, a tone of memory and respect. But one group opposed it outright. In the end, nothing was done. Paradoxically, the bridge was occupied by commercial flags and beer advertisements. The confrontation shifted toward us: we were labeled “institutionalized feminists,” accused of being “co-opted” for engaging with authorities. I would ask myself: have we not advanced precisely because of this strategy of political advocacy? Has that not allowed us to open doors and gain formal equality, even if substantive equality remains pending?

Some younger activists argued that the only legitimate path was radical and confrontational occupation of public space. Our response was: “Do it, if that is your strategy. But you cannot delegitimize what has also produced results.”

While organizations like *Surkuna* and *Fundación Desafío* maintained the legal front before the Constitutional Court, we focused on alliances, *amicus curiae* briefs, letters, and media strategies. Yet in some sectors we were dismissed as part of the patriarchal system. These ruptures hurt deeply, especially when debates arise over who counts as a “real” woman or which bodies can represent feminism. In Quito, some representatives of a women’s coalition argued that only cisgender women (those who menstruate or give birth) are “the real ones.” Such radicalizations empty political content and create absurd exclusions.

What is needed, in my view, is more serious debate, more reading, more analysis. Feminisms can differ and still be valid if they seek the same horizon: expanding rights and freedoms. What we cannot allow is for internal differences to weaken us in the face of a State and anti-rights groups that know how to articulate and advance together.

Anti-rights forces attacking on multiple fronts

Anti-rights groups have resources, power, alliances, and contacts that allow them to occupy decision-making spaces. Civil society does not enjoy that privilege. They have abundant funding and invest it in a clear political strategy: launch attacks on multiple fronts, trusting that we will be unable to defend them all simultaneously.

Under the current government, they have grown even stronger. President Daniel Noboa has sought to protect his popularity during this initial phase yet still introduced a sweeping package of measures during Carnival, hidden among festivities. That gesture was only the tip of a broader anti-rights agenda.

One example is the proposal within the Comprehensive Criminal Code to replace the legal category of femicide with feminicide. The inevitable question follows: how do you imprison the State? With that change, the entire conceptual and legal construction around femicide is hollowed out.

Another case is the attempt to recriminalize intentional transmission of sexually transmitted infections,

including HIV, a debate that had been settled more than twenty years ago. How does one prove intentionality in transmission? Under such logic, half the women in the country would have to report their husbands for transmitting human papillomavirus.

The Organic Health Code will also return to debate. There, the risk concerns restricting adolescent access to contraceptives. Although we succeeded in including mifepristone in the national essential medicines list, the State never purchased it. As a result, it remains impossible to properly implement abortion on health grounds or in cases of rape, since the protocol requires mifepristone plus misoprostol. This is one of many silent strategies used to stall rights.

Meanwhile, feminism has grown and become more visible. Precisely because of that, anti-rights groups have also strengthened; they understood that the movement was gaining force and decided to escalate their attacks. Today, the central antagonism is clear: feminism versus anti-rights.

In this context, infiltration is also a risk. In our training processes, we carefully review who enters, yet sometimes someone slips through. And then, in the middle of a session, it is often the participants themselves who stand up and ask: "If you don't believe in what we are discussing, if you don't share this path, what are you doing here?" That collective clarity is also part of our strength.

Academia: Between possibility and obstacle

Our relationship with academia has always been ambivalent. On one hand, it presents itself as a space of critical thought and legitimization of feminist discourse; on the other, it often reproduces the very power structures it claims to question.

In Cuenca, for example, there is a bachelor's degree in gender studies that does not exist anywhere else in the country or in Latin America, except Costa Rica. It could be a reference point, a seedbed of new perspectives. But the reality is different: the university hosting it sustains anti-gender practices internally. It appropriates the discourse outwardly, yet internally does nothing. There are no clear policies to prevent harassment or sexual violence; the Chair in Sexual and Reproductive Health was canceled; and when asked to take a stand, the response is always the same: "That does not correspond to academia."

The case of Abigail, victim of kidnapping and femicide, illustrates this contradiction. Initially, the rector expressed full support. But when some faculty members were accused of sexual harassment, the same authority defended them at the violence roundtable. She defended

the institution, not the students. She claimed her hands were tied. I would think: "Pay the compensation and dismiss them!" A dean from another university had said it clearly: if structural change is desired, one must invest, and sometimes that investment means paying the severance of a professor who perpetuates violence. Who says that man is indispensable?

Instead, they hide behind arguments about "administrative costs." Meanwhile, a professor with twenty years at the institution continues with impunity, marrying an 18-year-old student, having a different girlfriend each academic cycle, humiliating them afterward. And the university did nothing.

For me, academia should play a different role: not merely repeat discourse externally but embody it internally; generate serious research; construct preventive practices; invest in real transformation. If the university cannot transform itself at home, it will hardly serve as an engine of social transformation.

STRENGTHS: Conviction and resource management

If something sustains us, it is conviction. We did not arrive at this issue out of fashion or political calculation, but out of deep certainty: abortion must be fully decriminalized. We understand it as part of our broader struggle for equality, autonomy, and the right to decide. That conviction has become collective strength. In recent years, a critical mass has grown, young people who speak clearly about feminism, abortion, and rights, with defined awareness of the horizon they seek.

Accumulated experience has given us solidity. We have learned along the way, building good practices, sharing results, and weaving valuable regional alliances. Nothing here is improvised; it is the product of years of sustained processes, resistance, and persistence, even when the landscape seemed adverse.

But conviction alone is not enough. Without resources, sustaining this struggle would be impossible. Training, information, and creation of spaces (even the Chair in Sexual and Reproductive Health) began thanks to funding, before political will existed. The difference is that while the anti-rights movement commands enormous resources, four hundred times more than ours, and a perfectly structured political agenda, we depend largely on international cooperation. That resource management has been essential to keeping the work alive, albeit always under unequal conditions.

The challenge now is to sustain what has been won and continue pushing toward what remains unfinished. Because despite the obstacles, we know that full decriminalization will come. It is not naïve optimism; it is an inevitable horizon. One day, it will be law.