

## With faith and rebellion: Our journey for the right to decide

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Catholics for the Right to Decide has grown with a life of its own, in motion, like a tree that puts down deep roots while also opening new branches. Its path has been marked by change, learning, and challenges, always in dialogue with the times and with the women who give it life. The defense of the right to abortion has been its essence, but around that central cause other objectives, alliances, and purposes have gradually been added. Like a house, built brick by brick, its discourse has been constructed with patience, affection, and conviction, until it has become both a refuge and a trench. This narrative weaves together the voices of Ana María Kudelka and Paula Estenssoro.

The voice of Ana María Kudelka is at once gentle and firm. Within it lives a certainty that has become a banner: “tenderness is also revolutionary.” Her personal history of faith and doubt led her to confront her own struggles and to ask herself how to exist in the world with coherence. Activism accompanied her along this path, first in different organizations and collectives, until she found in Catholics for the Right to Decide a space to strengthen her commitment to women’s rights.

For Ana, abortion is not only a public health issue; it is also an act of resistance against patriarchal structures that have controlled women’s bodies for centuries. From this perspective, feminism must be inclusive and plural, capable of intertwining with other social struggles. Her activism is a call for collective and respectful action, one that accompanies others from different positions, even in disagreement. Because for her, deciding is both a right and an act of love toward ourselves.

Paula Estenssoro has followed a long path between reflection and action. Her restless spirit found in feminism both a clear voice and a community from which to live the struggle for women’s rights. She has built bridges between academia, activism, and feminist collectives, convinced that every dialogue opens the possibility of a different narrative—one in which deciding over one’s own body is heard as a song of freedom.

Today, at Catholics for the Right to Decide, Paula feels she has come home. There, her deepest convictions resonate within a collective of courageous women working shoulder to shoulder for a more just world. Her militancy is not a job but a life commitment: dismantling the fears surrounding abortion and transforming that right into a celebrated act of self-love and dignity.

### Feminism: A life commitment

We first approached feminism around 1999, in dialogue with activist and academic colleagues who opened new paths for us. At the beginning, many of us had our own resistances. It was difficult, for example, to accept that abortion could be a right, because our personal histories of faith had been shaped by fundamentalism.

It was our experiences in the field, our activism, and our contact with women that eventually led us to take a clear position in defense of legal and safe abortion. That conviction later consolidated in institutional spaces such as the Gregoria Apaza Women’s Promotion Center and later in Catholics for the Right to Decide (Católicas por

el Derecho a Decidir, CDD), where we felt that our work was not just a job but a place where our personal and collective convictions and struggles converged.

At CDD we have found the possibility of bringing together who we are and what we defend: SRR in their full breadth, including the right to legal, free, safe, and free-of-charge abortion. For us, that horizon is a life commitment.

### First steps: Articulating catholic faith with rights

CDD was founded in Bolivia in 1996, inspired by the regional Latin American and Caribbean network of the same name, and obtained legal status in 1999. We were

women of faith, feminists, and activists who decided to bring together spirituality and human rights in order to defend the most vulnerable, above all, the right to decide.

From the beginning we had clear objectives: to promote women's rights from a Catholic, secular, theological, feminist, and progressive perspective; to defend the right to decide over our bodies; to fight gender-based violence; and to promote dialogue between faith and human rights.

In the early 2000s, we contributed significantly to the development of a framework law on SRR. Although the proposal did not pass in 2004 for political reasons, it opened the path to a national debate.

Later, during the 2009 Constituent Assembly, we played a key role in the constitutional recognition of Sexual and Reproductive Rights (SRR) and the secular state, achieving the separation between church and state and eliminating the notion of an official religion. This was a historic milestone achieved together with other movements, but with a distinctive voice: that of us, Catholic women defending freedom of conscience and the principle of secularism.

Since then, we have been part of alliances that have helped secure important laws, such as Law 348 against violence toward women and Law 243 against political harassment and violence. In 2015 and 2016 we joined the National Pact for the Decriminalization of Abortion, which achieved progress in the Penal Code approved in 2017, although it was unfortunately repealed the following year due to political and social pressures.

Today we continue promoting a draft Comprehensive Law on SRR that recognizes Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (VIP). However, the political context has prevented it from being debated in the Legislative Assembly, so the current legal framework continues to rely on Constitutional Ruling 0206/2014, which regulates legal abortion under specific circumstances.

At the same time, we face a strong offensive from conservative and anti-rights sectors seeking to roll back achievements such as Law 348. For that reason, our work has a double purpose: to push for new advances while also defending what has already been won.

### **Beloved prodigal daughters of the goddess**

We were also born in dialogue with international milestones such as the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). From the beginning we proposed a comprehensive view of sexuality, far from taboos and reductionist perspectives.

We placed bodily autonomy at the center, because without autonomy there is no real possibility of exercising other rights, reproductive, economic, or social.

Our voice has been uncomfortable and controversial. In a feminist movement that often excluded voices of faith, we dared to call ourselves "Catholic," with all the

weight that this implied. But that decision was strategic: to be a divergent voice capable of challenging church hierarchies, denouncing patriarchy, celibacy, the secrecy of confession that protects abusers, and the exclusion of women from positions of power within the Church.

This is the paradox of CDD: for some we are "the prodigal daughters loved by the goddess," while for others we are those who deviated from the literal reading of the Bible. In reality, what we do is open a path for all women who want to live their faith in coherence with human rights.

### **An alternative, theological, liberating, feminist voice**

At CDD, we have always responded to the realities and contexts in which we live. Over these 28 years we went through a phase of consolidation, during which we strengthened ourselves as one of the few organizations that openly spoke about SRR and abortion, eventually becoming a reference point on these issues. Achieving that early positioning was a historic step.

This initial stage was marked by political moments, opportunities, and also challenges. It lasted close to twenty years: a period of growth, positioning, and planting deep roots. Later we went through an internal process of financial recovery and institutional management from which we emerged transformed, with a broader and renewed agenda.

During that period, we faced a critical moment lasting two or three years, when many of the processes we had initiated could not be sustained. It was part of a global crisis that reduced the resources available for women's rights agendas. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the gender perspective was gaining prominence and resources were relatively abundant. Over time, however, funding declined. Not all donors were willing to support gender equality or the struggle against violence. As interest in promoting and exercising sexual rights diminished, we were forced to pause, restrict our activities, and restructure.

Over the past decade we have experienced phases of renewal. The first involved institutional reorganization: we redefined our structure, established cyclical mandates, strengthened administrative management, and developed a more solid strategic plan. The second phase, which we have lived through in the last eight to ten years, led us to build a renewed CDD: with new leadership, stronger governance systems, and an agenda that expanded toward secularism, freedom of conscience, the right to live free from violence, and the right to decide.

Our voice has become consolidated as an alternative voice, one that is theological, liberating, and feminist. A voice that does not fear dissent from ecclesial hierarchies or from anything that oppresses women.

To understand this process, it is important to look back at feminism in the 1990s. At that time the term "woman" was still used in the singular, and approaches were deeply paternalistic, strategies designed from spaces of privilege that did not include women them-

selves as agents of change. Over time, gender perspectives evolved toward more diverse frameworks, allowing us to construct a vision much more connected to women's realities, recognizing them as protagonists and active subjects, even within accountability processes.

In the last decade we have also learned a great deal about governance. We stopped being only middle-class, white women designing strategies and instead embraced an intersectional perspective. I sometimes smile when organizations speak about intersectionality as something new. More than twenty years ago, scholars such as Cecilia Salazar were already urging us to think about the intersections of class, ethnicity, and gender. The challenge has always been translating those ideas into real practice.

Today we know that our grassroots colleagues, local organizations, and diverse communities offer perspectives that are far more sensitive and responsive to current challenges. For that reason, we have committed ourselves to transformation and innovation, even after years of repeating strategies that produced good results but were not always the most effective.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point. It forced us to rethink everything, and we discovered that we could do things differently to achieve better outcomes. That capacity to reinvent ourselves, to listen, and to create is what sustains our voice today: a feminist voice rooted in faith, liberation, and profound humanity.

### **Abortion: From legal decriminalization to social decriminalization**

In the early 2000s the issue of abortion began to be heard more loudly in Bolivia. We must recognize the pioneering role of the September 28 Campaign, which from the grassroots, through defenders and community promoters, opened a path that later gained strength among organizations and NGOs across the country.

This momentum was also accompanied by regional and international agreements, such as the Montevideo Consensus in 2013, which positioned legal, safe, and free abortion as a right within the public agenda and affirmed the principle of secularism. Earlier, during the Cairo Conference in the 1990s, conversations about abortion were held with great fear and caution.

At that time we began gathering in the streets every November 25 and every September 28, establishing dates of memory and struggle. Today our shared space is the National Pact for SRR, formerly known as the National Pact for the Decriminalization of Abortion, which allows us both to make our struggle visible and to protect ourselves publicly. It is a diverse space with common ground but also important differences.

One of those differences revolves around Constitutional Ruling 0206/2014. For some, it was a tool to strengthen access to legal and safe abortion; for others, the strategy should have focused on reforming the Penal Code. The Penal Code, on one hand, criminalizes abortion, but on the other it allows legal exceptions un-

der specific circumstances. The ruling reduced some of the requirements for accessing legal abortion, but at the same time it left a lock in place: abortion continues to be classified as a crime.

Another delicate issue has been gestational age limits. Within feminist activism there are certain consensuses, but among some sectors focused primarily on human rights, and less explicitly feminist, there is still fear or reluctance to discuss this topic openly. Silence creates space for doctors and conservative associations to impose restrictive interpretations.

Since our founding, abortion has been part of our agenda, although initially with little support and little public discussion. We participated in the September 28 Campaign when only a few feminists openly raised this demand. In those years many people said: "everything except abortion." Today the issue is more visible, but differences within the feminist movement remain.

For this reason, our main contribution has been to insist that the struggle is not only about legal decriminalization but also about the social decriminalization of abortion. Because changing the law is not enough if stigma, guilt, and social condemnation toward women persist.

### **A text without context is a pretext**

We live in deeply conservative societies that understand sexuality and reproduction through taboos, moral panic, and religious dogma. The Catholic Church, along with new neo-Pentecostal and evangelical movements, has reinforced this moralizing perspective. In this context, our contribution from the beginning has been to advocate for social and cultural decriminalization, freeing consciences, removing guilt, and dismantling stigma.

As part of the regional network Catholics for the Right to Decide in Latin America and the Caribbean, we have trained in canon law and reinterpret biblical texts through feminist theology. One phrase we often repeat is: "a text without context is a pretext."

This reinterpretation allows us to speak from faith about issues that the Church has turned into taboos or sins. The Bible itself contains references that allow dialogue about surrogate motherhood, sexual diversity, and abortion. Through this perspective we challenge the ecclesiastical institution that has historically persecuted women, filling them with guilt and limiting their right to decide.

More than thirty years ago, CDD warned about the advance of neoconservative and fundamentalist movements that today we see expanding in Argentina, the United States, Brazil, and even in countries that describe themselves as progressive. These movements have instrumentalized religion to roll back hard-won rights.

Our "click" as Catholics has been not to limit the feminist agenda but to broaden it: giving voice to women of faith, opening spaces for dialogue between spirituality and rights, and challenging ecclesial hierarchies and their silence in the face of violence and abuse.

Today our strategic plans align with that horizon: contributing to the full exercise of SRR, including the right to abortion, pleasure, decision-making, a life free of violence, and comprehensive autonomy that recognizes bodies as sexual, vulnerable, and reproductive.

That is the path we continue to follow: protecting what we have achieved, advancing toward new horizons, and remembering that the decriminalization of abortion is won not only through laws but also through collective consciousness.

### **Advocacy in communities to counter conservative discourses**

Throughout our journey we have learned that advocacy is not built only in the corridors of political power, but also in the everyday lives of women. That is why we generate evidence: we have an observatory that allows us to produce data and solid arguments to support our struggles.

We believe that evidence is key to opening paths in public policy. It allows us to promote initiatives such as a comprehensive SRR law, developed together with other civil society organizations—that includes voluntary interruption of pregnancy, and to train public officials and health personnel in the application of Constitutional Ruling 0206/2014.

For a long time, advocacy meant only lobbying: knowing whom to speak with and how to reach decision makers. Today we understand that advocacy is much broader. It also means ensuring that institutions apply rights that have already been recognized, strengthening narratives, and countering the discourses of anti-rights groups.

Religious and conservative fundamentalist groups have gained space as social movements. This poses a new challenge: repeating our arguments is no longer enough. We must renew our language and narratives to respond to the moral and bioethical dilemmas they present, often attempting to oppose women's right to life with the notion of the "unborn" as a rights-bearing subject.

Here our dissenting voice as Catholic women becomes a unique contribution: who, if not us, can challenge from within the faith those discourses that claim to monopolize morality and religion?

### **Building new narratives and new leadership**

Responding to these threats also requires forming new spokespeople and leaders. We have learned that the most lasting changes occur when women are empowered to speak with their own voices. Our aim is not simply to replicate workshops or training sessions; rather, we seek processes of personal transformation that later multiply in everyday life.

We see this in simple but powerful testimonies: women who say, "now I can talk about these issues with my mother," or young women who dare to discuss SRR with a neighbor, a sister, or a friend. This

capacity to transmit what has been learned in a close and community-based way is what truly works.

This work is not new, but today we approach it with greater awareness and strategy. We understand that leadership should not be concentrated in a few individuals but rather in grassroots women, in young women, and in those facing the greatest vulnerabilities.

Their perspectives and experiences give coherence to our struggles, because the right to decide is never an isolated issue. It is intertwined with other needs such as health, education, justice, and economic autonomy.

### **The pandemic and the possibility of reconnection**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point that forced us to rethink ourselves. For months we could not go out into the streets or meet in person, yet this crisis also opened the possibility of reconnecting in different ways.

It pushed us to look at women's struggles in all their complexity. How can we speak about bodily autonomy if economic dependence continues to bind women? How can we talk about SRR without also addressing the right to live free from violence, or the intersections of different forms of oppression?

During that period, we responded creatively. While many organizations were paralyzed, at Catholics for the Right to Decide we managed to adapt and generate new initiatives. We created spaces such as women's circles, which continued even during the most difficult months of the pandemic, and we launched projects that promoted comprehensive autonomy.

One of the most valuable outcomes was the training of around one hundred women entrepreneurs who, in addition to starting their own economic initiatives, connected their businesses to the defense of SRR.

Behind each of these initiatives are life stories that show how the struggle for the right to decide is linked to the possibility of building independence, dignity, and a future.

The pandemic taught us that we cannot work on one issue without addressing the others. SRR are tied to economic justice, the eradication of violence, and the possibility of living a full life. For that reason, we continue forward with the conviction that our responses must be comprehensive, sensitive, and innovative.

### **Communication hand in hand with women**

One of our strongest pillars at Catholics for the Right to Decide is communication for development. We believe that telling the stories of what we do is itself a way of transforming reality.

We do not speak from outside but alongside our compañeras, showing the real impact of our struggles.

Over the years we have promoted campaigns on social media, radio, and at times also on television. One campaign we remember vividly showed a woman standing in front of a church asking: "If I have had an abortion, can I still enter the church?" That single image created

a powerful shock because it gave voice to what many women feel but remain silent about.

Today we continue along this innovative path but with an additional step: we do not only produce campaigns for women, but with them. For example, we have worked with more than two hundred rural women who were trained on the right to decide and who now produce their own communication materials. They tell their stories in their own voices and from their own perspectives, while we accompany the process.

Our communication is also expressed in the streets: at fairs, in the batucadas we bring to mobilizations, and in creative ways of occupying public space that break the silence.

### **Alliances and collective articulation**

From our origins we have understood that we cannot act alone. That is why we have participated in, and often helped to create, different coalitions at the local, national, and regional levels.

We have been part of the September 28 Campaign since its creation more than three decades ago. We also joined the National Pact for the Decriminalization of Abortion, now known as the National Pact for SRR.

These alliances bring together activists, collectives, NGOs, and institutions with a shared commitment to advancing the right to decide.

In some cases we have led processes ourselves, such as the creation of Alerta Montevideo, a network of more than twenty organizations that monitors the commitments made in the Montevideo Consensus of 2013, particularly those related to legal, safe, and free abortion.

Another initiative we helped promote is the Pro-Secularism Committee, which works to defend the secular state and freedom of conscience.

Regionally, one of our greatest strengths is our participation in the Catholics for the Right to Decide Network in Latin America and the Caribbean, present in ten countries. In recent years the regional coordination was shared between Bolivia and El Salvador, allowing us to advocate collectively on international agendas.

We also participate in initiatives such as Mira que te Miro, a social monitoring platform for the Montevideo Consensus.

These spaces are not always easy. There are tensions around interests, visibility, and leadership. But we have learned to maintain a clear principle: the goal matters more than individual recognition.

### **Feminism: Is it still a bad word?**

In many of the spaces in which we participate, the question still arises: are you a feminist or not? We experienced this ourselves in a Latin American regional coalition where a strategic plan was being developed and there was debate about whether we should explicitly identify as feminist. We thought that issue had already been resolved, yet some organizations still did not define themselves that way.

For us, an anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial, and anti-racist feminist perspective is the common ground that unites us beyond organizational forms.

We know that the September 28 Campaign was born out of feminism, with a clear agenda deeply connected to the feminist movement. However, within the National Pact not all participating organizations identify as feminist, and this creates differences when defining alliances or a shared agenda. This remains one of the most fragile points within the coalition.

Issues of power, resources, and personal connections also generate tensions. Sometimes those with greater access to political spaces or key decision makers, such as during negotiations around the draft law on SRR, end up occupying more visible roles. In such moments, whether or not feminism is explicitly named can provoke disagreements.

We also recognize that the feminist movement is shaped by the political and social fractures of our country. Some feminists distanced themselves from one another around the political conflict of 2019, fraud for some, a coup for others, and many are still searching for ways to reconnect. All of this adds to the broader social fragmentation we face.

### **Many women now put their faces and bodies on the line to defend abortion rights**

Feminist positions on abortion are diverse. Some collectives advocate for absolute autonomy: self-managed abortion and safe accompaniment without asking permission from the state. We recognize the value of these practices, but we also know they remain illegal and carry risks of criminalization.

Others, like us at Catholics for the Right to Decide, prioritize advocacy in public policy and the creation of legal frameworks that guarantee rights. We believe that, even if imperfect, the state is ultimately responsible for ensuring that legal, safe, and free abortion becomes part of public health and the full exercise of rights.

These debates sometimes appear as tensions between a more anarchist or anti-state feminism and another that focuses on institutional change. For some, the struggle is to achieve autonomy outside the state; for others, the state must assume responsibility. Both positions coexist within the movement and are often intertwined with issues of class, generation, and political identity.

Today we see a powerful shift: fifteen years ago, very few young people spoke publicly about the right to abortion. Now thousands of young women put their bodies, faces, and voices into the streets, strengthened by the energy of the Green Wave movement.

Feminism itself has diversified into many identities and voices. Some women speak from community feminism, from Abya Yala perspectives, or from ecofeminism. Others challenge what they see as a white, academic, middle-class feminism. Indigenous women, Afro-descendant women, women with disabilities, and sexual minorities all bring their own perspectives.

Their message is clear: “Do not speak for us—let us speak for ourselves.”

Despite these differences, informal alliances and solidarities often emerge—in a workshop, in the streets, or during a march. Many times we hear people say, “It’s good that you came, compañeras.” These are not always institutional alliances but personal relationships of trust built through shared struggles.

Networks that accompany safe abortions using medication have also emerged alongside legal advocacy efforts.

For us, these tensions do not weaken the movement; rather, they reveal its vitality and diversity. Even if we speak from different places, we share the certainty that the right to decide is non-negotiable.

### **The challenge: Women of all colors, forms, and voices**

Putting oneself in the shoes of abortion companions and recognizing what they go through to support a woman seeking an abortion is very difficult. From the outside it may sound simple to say “we work with companions,” but when we hear their stories, we understand the magnitude of the risks and courage involved.

Many have been persecuted or judged without financial support or institutional backing. Their paths of resistance deserve recognition with dignity.

There is one space that unites us all: the streets. In mobilizations we see increasingly diverse women participating, not only young urban women, but also women from peri-urban and rural areas, Indigenous women in traditional dress who previously were rarely seen in marches on September 28.

Now we also see women with disabilities, lesbians marching bare-chested, and groups playing drums and batucadas. These are powerful expressions of demand and freedom that broaden the faces and bodies of this struggle.

Yet within institutional spaces economic and political power still carries weight. For that reason, one of the major challenges is to democratize these conversations and open them to grassroots organizers and community collectives.

For a long time, we felt these spaces were “ours,” the same people attending meetings and conferences. Today we understand the need to share them. Otherwise, they risk becoming elite spaces where decisions are made without the voices of Afro-descendant, rural, Indigenous, or working-class women.

At the same time, we must protect the institutional structures that allow our organization to exist. Because of our visibility we are also targets of attacks from anti-rights sectors. During debates over the Penal Code reform, for example, our organization was publicly accused in newspapers of promoting abortion.

This double challenge, protecting the institution while opening spaces, is always present. If we speak about democratization, we must also practice it.

Only then will this movement truly belong to all women.

### **Challenges and a transnational adversary**

Over time our understanding of the political context has evolved. In the past we believed the main pressure came from religious groups. They remain powerful, but today we recognize a broader threat: a coordinated neo-conservative political movement advancing across Latin America.

These actors do not operate alone. They are supported by large churches, foundations, and transnational networks that finance anti-rights campaigns.

Religion and politics are deeply intertwined in this movement. They have their own organizations, messaging networks, and coordinated campaigns under banners such as “Project for Life.” In Bolivia we have seen initiatives arriving from Argentina linked to far-right political actors.

Their agenda is clear: attack SRR and roll back other social advances as well. One strategy is to portray laws against gender-based violence as “laws against men,” undermining consensus that once seemed firmly established.

The narrative of so-called “gender ideology” has become a central mobilizing tool, bringing together conservative sectors from different religious traditions.

Catholic hierarchies often seek to delegitimize us. If a Bolivian bishop is asked about our organization, he will likely say that we are not truly Catholic. In Peru and Brazil our colleagues have even faced legal cases attempting to remove their legal status and name.

These attacks are not isolated incidents; they are part of a transnational movement that places us constantly at the center of confrontation.

At the same time, we have also seen how progressive governments sometimes negotiate with religious conservatism. In Bolivia, alliances with evangelical groups in the early 2000s opened space for deeply conservative actors in government institutions.

These experiences remind us that threats do not come only from the extreme right but also from sectors that describe themselves as progressive.

Religious fundamentalism is a many-headed monster. It operates not only from pulpits but also from parliaments, media outlets, and public policy.

### **Strengths and threats looking toward the future**

One of our greatest strengths is our membership in the regional network of Catholics for the Right to Decide across Latin America and the Caribbean. This alliance sustains us and reminds us that our struggle is shared with sister movements throughout the region.

Another strength is that we are recognized as a reference organization on these issues. This visibility opens doors and gives legitimacy to our work. At the same time, it demands that we broaden our perspective.

Bodily autonomy cannot be understood in isolation; it is deeply shaped by poverty, structural inequality,

ties, and multiple forms of dependence experienced by women.

Our greatest challenge is therefore to build a comprehensive agenda that links the right to decide with dignified living conditions, economic autonomy, and the eradication of all forms of violence.

At the same time, we face serious threats. One of them is the sustainability of our organization. International cooperation has increasingly restricted funding, forcing us to constantly reinvent ourselves.

Often people are surprised that such a small team can accomplish so much. While that is a source of pride,

it also carries personal and professional costs. Limited resources continually raise the question: how can we sustain this commitment over time while also caring for ourselves?

The future will not be easy. Yet we know that our strength lies in conviction, creativity, and our ability to weave networks of solidarity.

We have survived difficult contexts before. That resilience, organized tenderness, gives us confidence that we will continue defending women's lives, dignity, and rights.