



CONVERSATIONS WITH

Abortion: Justice means it must be legal

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We meet at El Cafecito, one of those places that has resisted the many changes in the La Mariscal neighborhood. It is an old house, the kind that in the 1970s hosted the city's well-to-do families. Since then, this space has been a site of dispute and, as Ana recalls, also a place where feminist processes first began to take shape.

At our first meeting, we look for a quiet table, comfortable enough to sustain the recording. Ana arrives, greets us firmly, and soon brings us straight to the point. Her frequent glances at the clock remind us that every minute counts. There is no time for detours; we must get directly to the matter at hand. As soon as we ask the first question, her account unfolds with force and moves into the terrain of memory.

Her light-colored eyes convey a vividness that becomes evident in every gesture. Her easy but brief smile occasionally softens the intensity of what she recounts. We are captivated by the precision of her words and the way she manages her pauses. They are rare because there is so much to tell. She slows down only when she notices us taking notes and waits for us to finish. In that moment, her voice fills the space and envelops us, making it feel as though everything else disappears and the only thing that exists is her words.

PATHWAYS INTO ACTIVISM

I dream of a future where what we now call rights are no longer a privilege

My engagement with abortion began at university, at the same time as my interest in gender-based violence. I became involved through my political alliances, my identity, and my understanding of feminism. I came to understand the importance of bodily autonomy as a territory of women's identity, and how the threads of patriarchy are intertwined with capitalism, racism, and colonialism. I was always struck by how we, as women, have been denied the right to decide, beginning with the concealment of the most basic knowledge about our bodies, about reproduction, territory, and life projects. I dream that what we call rights will cease to be a privilege.

This issue passed through my own body and those of my comrades. At university I had an unwanted pregnancy. I was able to access a supported feminist abortion because I was a feminist, because I was part of the movement. I know it was possible for me, but I also know that for many other women it is much harder: women living in poverty, without access to information, without support networks, without social or cultural resources.

It was there, together with my comrades, that we began to think about the urgent need to create alternatives and political proposals that would allow every woman and every pregnant person to make their decisions safely and with support.

In my case, abortion was one option among several. As a student at a private university, with the support of my parents, I was able to decide. Had I chosen to have that child, I would not have been alone; I would have had support, including financial support. But not everyone has those possibilities. For some women, abortion is the only way out given the life they have, and for that reason it should be possible under dignified conditions.

Feminism taught me to think of ourselves collectively, to understand that transformation is not only about changing the macro level as if what is wrong were always outside us, but also about questioning our own practices. That is how I began to recognize myself as part of a collective place: we were students, feminists, leftists, thinking about the power inequalities produced by this capitalist, racist, and colonial world.

Around 2005 I became involved with the Youth Political Coordination for Gender Equity (Coordinadora Política Juvenil por la Equidad de Género, CPJ). The first

major struggle I took part in was the defense of the Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP), when people were trying to ban it by claiming it was abortive. The challenge was to defend it without falling into the trap of repeating “it is not abortive,” because the issue was never whether it was or not, but the right to decide. Later I participated in several youth spaces, such as the “National Agreement for the Constituent Assembly,” formed in 1998, where we became strongly active alongside organizations such as Salud Mujeres, youth groups from El Oro, and Mi Cometa in Guayaquil in advocacy around the 2008 Constitution.

Later I worked at the Ministry of Public Health as an adviser on sexual and reproductive health within the National Intersectoral Strategy for the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy and Family Planning (ENIPLA). I also took part in the accelerated strategy for reducing maternal mortality. There we promoted important changes: the first clinical practice guideline on therapeutic abortion, the first guideline on miscarriage, Regulation 2490 to guarantee access to contraception, and a ministerial agreement to prevent human rights violations in clinics offering “addiction treatments” that in fact continued to practice conversion therapies aimed at “dehomosexu- alization.” It was intense work, which I eventually decided to leave because of differences with the government’s political line.

THE STRUGGLE FOR ABORTION

The abortion information hotline: an Ecuadorian initiative

In 2008, through the Youth Political Coordination for Gender Equity, we launched the first safe abortion information hotline in Ecuador, Salud Mujeres. It was also the first hotline in Latin America and the Caribbean. Later we decided to take this experience to the region: we shared lessons with comrades in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, and Venezuela, thereby strengthening a regional movement. We had the support of Women on Waves, especially Rebeca Wompers, Susan Davis, and several Dutch comrades who had already promoted these initiatives in Portugal and other European countries. There is even a film, *Vessel*, documenting the launch of the hotline in Ecuador. It was a process full of hope, strength, and resistance.

From that experience, several comrades traveled to Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, and Venezuela to establish other hotlines and “Latin Americanize” the process. We tried to build a regional platform of abortion hotlines, which ultimately did not fully consolidate, but we did manage to maintain communication, exchange information, and weave shared learning among the different groups.

In Ecuador we held three public launches of the safe abortion hotline. The first was in Quito, with a symbolic action using the image of the Virgin Mary. We asked ourselves what we wanted to convey and understood that the religious issue was crucial. We decided to re-

signify it: the angel Gabriel asked the Virgin whether she wanted to be a mother, and she accepted. It was her decision. So, we launched the message: “Even the Virgin decided; we also have the right to decide.”

The second launch was in Guayaquil, together with comrades from Salud Mujeres, CEPAM Guayaquil, Mi Cometa, and the National Agreement for the Constituent Assembly. We launched the hotline from the Guayaquil lighthouse. The third took place in Machala, with the Women of El Oro movement and youth and LGBTIQ+ collectives from that province, from the municipal government building. Each place had its own strength, but in all of them we reaffirmed the same thing: the right to decide should not be a privilege.

That same year we organized a camp called “Esmeraldas, Land of Freedom,” reclaiming the history of Afro-Ecuadorian resistance: a place where enslaved people who had been shipwrecked managed to reach shore and found a free town. For us it was a symbol of what we were seeking: we, too, wanted freedom.

Inserting abortion into feminist agendas

In 2008, during the Constituent Assembly process, we supported a key discussion through the CPJ: abortion. It was then that the Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion in Ecuador was formed, a strong and diverse alliance. Our main argument was to show how the criminalization of abortion was directly linked to poverty. Abortion is punished when women and adolescent girls are poor, when they arrive at a health center not knowing what to say or how to defend themselves, and end up criminalized. By contrast, when a woman has money, she can pay for a safe clandestine abortion, and there is no criminal prosecution. With these arguments, we showed that criminalizing abortion means discriminating against and criminalizing poverty.

In those years we spoke with larger organizations, and between 2012 and 2013 national feminist meetings were organized to define the movement’s priorities. In one of those spaces, abortion in cases of rape, though not yet the elimination of the crime itself, was included as one of the twenty-eight priorities of the feminist movement. It was an important step, although for many of us that goal always fell short.

Houses as spaces of collective reflection

Between 2003 and 2009, spaces flourished that became true political and cultural refuges: El Café Feminista, La Libre, Casa Colectiva, which later gave rise to Casa Feminista de Rosa, and Pukana: House of Urban Cultures. In these houses, fundamental processes for the feminist and social movement were born. They were also sustained, in part, by the Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion, which found fertile ground there for thinking, creating, and resisting.

Out of these spaces emerged a large and plural front, the Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion, made up of Mujeres de Frente, Flor de Guanto, Casa Feminista de Rosa, Fundación Desafío, Luna Creciente,

Mujeres de El Oro, CEPAM Guayaquil, among many others. There we always argued for more radical positions. We did not want to stop at demanding abortion in cases of rape; our horizon was the elimination of the crime of abortion. And although there were strategic nuances, they were never irreconcilable differences, but different ways of pushing along the same path.

We were also part of the National Front for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, together with organizations such as Desafío, CEPAM Guayaquil, Salud Mujeres, and SENDAS. All of us sought to support women not only around abortion, but also in the broad exercise of their sexual and reproductive rights.

The impacts of information and the misoprostol rallies

Another intense experience in those years was the so-called “misoprostol rallies.” These were organized through Salud Mujeres. The idea was to go from pharmacy to pharmacy buying the medication and mapping where it was available, at what price, and under what conditions. In 2008 it was still accessible; by 2014 the situation had changed: restrictions increased, an illegal market appeared, prices skyrocketed, prescriptions began to be required in many places, and overpricing emerged. We had not foreseen that consequence: the spread of information generated greater demand, and access became more difficult.

We also discovered a great deal of social confusion between legality and criminalization. Many people believe that the existence of the crime of abortion prevents women from aborting, but that is not true. The only thing illegality achieves is that women end up in prison or are put at risk for having abortions. People do not agree that women should go to prison for abortion, so they are not truly in favor of the existence of the crime, but rather of adequate regulation. Yet this confusion in terms is precisely what allows criminalization to continue.

In the midst of this process, we analyzed hospital discharge data. We saw that with the use of misoprostol, unsafe abortions with severe complications dropped dramatically, and the statistics began to change. Records no longer referred to “unspecified abortions” and instead registered many more “spontaneous abortions.” The medication produces similar symptoms, and no woman arriving at a hospital will say, “I induced an abortion.” What she says is, “I’m bleeding, what should I do?” That is the only way to protect herself from being accused of a crime.

In this sense, we can say that misoprostol has improved the epidemiology of abortion and reduced risks and complications. Nevertheless, many women still go to hospitals because they lack information about how misoprostol works after experiencing normal bleeding, which shows the need to continue spreading information for the health care of those of us who decide to have an abortion at home.

THE ORGANIZATION SURKUNA

Research on the criminalization of women for abortion

Between 2013 and 2014, more cases of women being criminalized for abortion began to appear. We decided to investigate, and from that process came our first study: Patriarchal Codes Building Inequalities. There we demonstrated, using data from the Prosecutor’s Office and the Judiciary, that the criminalization of abortion disproportionately affects impoverished, young, racialized women, in other words, those with the least access to information, resources, and support networks. With those data, we sought to position the issue internationally, securing recommendations from international committees on respect for professional confidentiality and proper care in health services to prevent criminalization.

Along the way, we encountered concrete stories: women who were persecuted and prosecuted and who not only needed defense in abortion cases, but were also survivors of sexual violence, femicide, or other forms of gender-based violence. So, we understood that research alone was not enough: we had to create an organization that would provide legal defense for these women and make the problem visible in Ecuador. That is how Surkuna was born, with a threefold objective: to conduct research and generate legal proposals; to promote feminist, accompanied access to abortion; and to defend women criminalized for abortion from a feminist perspective.

At the same time, other legal support organizations emerged, such as Idea Dignidad, CEPRODEG, and CEPAM-Quito. This allowed us to maintain our line of work on violence while placing a strong focus on abortion. Since then, we have maintained a research line on sexual and reproductive rights, access to services, legal barriers, and the criminalization of abortion. Studies such as *Our Rights, Our Voices* with adolescents, or reports on obstacles to access to legal abortion, have been part of our contribution. From the outset, we have walked in close sisterhood with LGBTIQ+ struggles, because we believe that law is a tool for social transformation.

Two political projects: legal defense in abortion and accompaniment in abortion and gender-based violence

In 2014 we established Surkuna and Las Comadres. On the one hand, we took on the defense of women criminalized for abortion, carried out strategic litigation, and produced research and advocacy on abortion; on the other, we created a feminist abortion accompaniment group, worked to prevent criminalization, and facilitated access to medication. We were inspired by the experience of Socorristas en Red in Argentina and felt that it was no longer enough simply to provide information: it was necessary to accompany women on their own terms, in the face of a health system that continued to criminalize them and amid lack of access to medication. That is how Las Comadres was born, officially in 2014, and in 2024 we celebrated 10 years of existence.

Surkuna has focused on legal accompaniment in abortion cases within the public and private health systems, on international litigation, on research, and on building standards that allow for legal and social change.

Las Comadres, by contrast, seek to ensure that abortion is a feminist, caring, and supported process. Our strategy moves from the impersonal to the close and intimate: it is not only about giving information, but about knowing each woman's story, her conditions and needs, so that she can live the process on her own terms. Accompaniment helps dismantle guilt, which does not arise from the decision itself, but from the social discourses that condemn it.

At Surkuna we have also created an information line on abortion for women, pregnant persons, health professionals, and those facing criminalization processes. Alongside this, we have another line dedicated to gender-based violence: "Together We Care for Ourselves." There we weave a network of companions who provide initial legal aid, support with filing complaints, and assistance with protection measures. We connect with allied organizations to guarantee psychological and legal accompaniment, always from a feminist perspective, because we know that behind every case there are concrete bodies, lives, and pains.

These are our two major political commitments: to fight so that access to safe abortions is not a privilege, and to accompany survivors of violence. We do this collectively, taking care with who speaks publicly and sustaining the strength of network-based work.

Resignifying imaginaries

Our struggle is not only legal. In addition to eliminating the crime of abortion and securing access, we also seek to transform the imaginaries, narratives, and discourses surrounding the body as a social space. We discovered the power of telling stories: when a woman speaks in the first person, people respond, they show solidarity, and that is vital for victims and survivors. In a world dominated by social media and hyper-publicity, the construction of imaginaries becomes a political terrain.

When we ask in workshops or meetings, "Who knows a woman who has had an abortion?", most people recognize someone close to them: a friend, a cousin, a sister. And they almost always justify that decision. Then the reflection emerges: what makes you understand your cousin's abortion, but condemn Juana's or Josefa's? That is why we insist on working on abortion in the first person, narrating it as a lived, concrete, and diverse experience.

Back in 2008, from the CPJ, we published *I Decided to Have an Abortion*, a book of women's testimonies. Later we released *Crazy Lilacs in Color*, a storybook about feminism and abortion. With these publications, we sought to break with the idea of abortion as tragedy and show it also as an empowering decision that can bring relief, happiness, and strength to move forward.

We are committed to ensuring that every woman can have the best abortion possible, whether in the public system, the private system, or through feminist accompaniment networks, because the way that experience is lived profoundly shapes how it is processed and remembered.

We have also worked on the stigma and shame surrounding abortion. There is still much to be done there. Criminalization is not only expressed in the courts: being singled out is enough to radically change your life. We came to know stories of women who had to leave school, move away from their communities, or sever all their social ties after being accused. That is another form of violence we seek to transform: that no woman be persecuted or stigmatized for exercising her right to decide.

DIVERSE WAYS OF DOING POLITICAL ADVOCACY

Advocacy in the legislative and judicial spheres

At Surkuna we have learned that advocacy has many faces. We work in the legislative sphere, in the judicial sphere, and also before the Executive, always with our focus on abortion, reproductive rights, and the struggle against violence.

We understood that, although politically we may ask for everything, within the justice system it is crucial that demands be technically grounded. The clearest example is the legal category of femicide. Politically, we wanted the State's responsibility in the killing of women to be recognized, but in criminal law that would create a great deal of impunity because proving it in a trial is almost impossible. That is why we pushed for the category of femicide, which identifies individual responsibility and allows for effective punishment. The same happens in rape cases: one has to act quickly to collect evidence, but without ever neglecting the needs of victims. Our political strategies must not become our own trap.

We often live with the tension between the political and the penal. For example, in the area of domestic gender-based violence, politically we see the power structures that oppress women, girls, and children and generate power inequalities; in criminal law, however, the law we have ignores this and assumes that all people in a household are equal, so a woman can be prosecuted for gender-based violence against a man, disregarding the existence of patriarchy as a system and of historical structures of discrimination. That is why law must be thought through with technical rigor, so that strategies do not become obstacles. When the criminal offense is framed as violence against women and other members of the family nucleus, it actually reinforces and reproduces gender inequalities and even the criminalization of victims. That is what we cannot allow.

In that line, we work with international standards and comparative legislation. We ask: if Colombia managed to make progress, what can we learn from its process? That exchange gives us solid arguments before

judges, prosecutors, and institutions.

Advocacy before the Executive, by contrast, has to do with public policy: ensuring that laws not only exist, but are implemented in a way that is consistent with the Constitution and with rights. The major problem in Ecuador is not the lack of norms, but the lack of implementation.

One example was the civil society initiative *Mira que te miro*, in which we analyzed how the Montevideo guidelines were being applied. On paper everything looked perfect: protocols, laws, legal frameworks. All green. But when we looked at practice, we found enormous barriers. That double face gave us more strength to denounce what was happening in hospitals and ministries, showing evidence of how processes were denied and rights violated.

Advocacy in the judicial sphere follows another logic. It is not about sitting down with judges to persuade them, but about designing strategic litigation that sets precedents and opens the way to new rights. Many times what we say as *Surkuna* does not interest them, but when we show that the Inter-American Court has established standards, then they listen. So we combine strategies: national cases, international arguments, social and political pressure. In that way, we seek to ensure that each judicial process does not remain an isolated story, but becomes a tool for advancing justice and rights.

Working with health professionals

We realized that most women are criminalized because of what happens in health services. Often it is not because of evidence, but because of prejudice. We have heard health professionals say, “I reported her because she wasn’t crying,” as if not crying were synonymous with having had an abortion. We also saw the case of a sex worker who was reported simply because she was a sex worker. Stigma operates strongly: it is enough for a woman to say, “I was in pain, I took a pill,” for the doctor to immediately suspect misoprostol and trigger a report.

The law also contributes to stigma and criminalization. The existence of the crime of consensual abortion means that the first response from health personnel is almost always “no.” That crime generates fear: in women, who back away or remain silent, and in professionals, who feel that any action may put them at risk. Out of that fear come multiple forms of obstetric violence: from leaving a woman alone waiting for hours, to denying her painkillers, pricking her multiple times, using painful procedures, violating her confidentiality, stigmatizing her, or reporting her. In deciding to have an abortion, many women face not only the risk of criminalization, but also the possibility of being abused by those who should be caring for them.

That is why one of our core lines of work is with health professionals. We offer trainings so they know what is legal and what is not, how to act without exposing themselves, how to protect patients, and how to guarantee rights. We discovered that most are not conscientious objectors; they are simply afraid of being

stigmatized as “abortionists.” When we provide them with legal tools, many feel freer and more legitimate in offering care.

Another difficulty is that safe abortion procedures are not taught, because abortion is treated as a crime. So many doctors only know how to perform curettage and even feel ashamed. That is why our trainings and legal guidance are so important: legal abortion, professional confidentiality, consent in girls, everything that helps reduce criminalization and open pathways to access.

In our direct work we have also seen the confusion that exists around risk. Many professionals believe that if they do not report and something happens to the woman, they will be accused of malpractice. But in practice they almost never face proceedings of that kind. What does happen is that clandestinity feeds the idea of abortion as an extremely dangerous procedure, when the World Health Organization says it is safer than childbirth if performed under adequate conditions. The problem is that from a biomedical perspective it is presented as the last option, a resource only for serious cases, and women are stripped of the power to decide.

Today, however, we also see progress: there is greater knowledge about legal grounds and more awareness among part of the health workforce. It is a slow path, but it shows that working with health professionals is key to guaranteeing rights and reducing stigma.

MOTHERHOOD AND ABORTION IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Girls, not mothers: preventing forced motherhood

We took part in the regional campaign *Girls, Not Mothers*, which seeks to expand and legitimize access to abortion in all cases involving girls, and through them in all cases more broadly. It was linked to the Regional Blow process, in which five girls forced into motherhood brought complaints against their States before the United Nations: two from Nicaragua, one from Guatemala, one from Ecuador, and one from Peru. The aim was to denounce how, despite the existence of legal grounds for abortion, States systematically deny this right to girls, forcing them into motherhood and at the same time denying them access to justice, while impunity for their aggressors remains the norm. The campaign sought to challenge the social imaginary around what it means to be a girl and the right to grow and develop without being forced into motherhood.

In Ecuador, this strategy has made it possible for the health grounds for abortion to be applied more broadly in cases involving girls. Together with other organizations, we have accompanied situations such as that of a 13-year-old girl who was 20 weeks pregnant, where access to abortion was achieved because the impact on her comprehensive health was recognized. Victories like this are direct achievements of the *Girls, Not Mothers* campaign, but they also respond to a long history of struggle by the women’s movement to broaden the understanding of the health ground.

Girls who are mothers: working with girls who are already mothers

During the development of the campaign, we asked ourselves: what happens to the girls who have already been forced into motherhood? One thing is preventing new cases of child motherhood, and quite another is accompanying those that already exist. Making visible what it means for a girl to be a mother is only the first step; the challenge is to generate awareness, public policy, and legal change that guarantee non-repetition and provide real protection for them and their children.

Some small advances have been made, but in this struggle, we always have to remain alert so that we do not lose ground, and that means keeping a close eye on State action in this area. For example, SENESCYT previously allowed victims of violence to access university through a special mechanism, without depending on the general lottery. Now they only grant additional points, which reduces the possibility of access. We are fighting to restore the previous system. We have also promoted differentiated educational measures, similar to those once applied only in disability cases, to ensure that girls who are victims of violence do not lose the school year and receive special support.

Another challenge is what happens when girls turn 18 and have to leave shelters. There a huge gap opens up: what happens to them and to their children if they have no family, or if their aggressor is part of that same family? Some shelters foster autonomy by teaching them how to take a bus, get internships, rent a room, but not all do. We have proposed that the State guarantee measures such as savings accounts funded by the human development bonus, so that when they leave they have an economic cushion to survive while finding work. Today that bonus is often collected by the aggressor himself, even from prison, due to lack of data sharing, or it is simply not given to the girls because the State says that being in a shelter would amount to double benefits. There is tremendous blindness to the situation. It is brutal revictimization.

In addition, we face complex situations involving girls with disabilities or with problematic substance use, who are not accepted into shelters because they are not prepared for such cases. What happens to a girl with severe intellectual disability? Should she remain in an institution for her whole life? We have looked at experiences in countries such as Peru, where there are apartments accompanied by social workers to foster autonomy in people without families. We would like something similar here.

I remember one especially painful case: a 12-year-old girl pregnant as a result of rape. Her mother, grandmother, and sisters all had different severe disabilities. It was not a lack of love or willingness to care for her, but a real incapacity. Custody was taken away from the mother, who suffered deeply from being separated from her daughters. Situations like this challenge us: what does the State do in cases where the family wants to care,

but cannot? What mechanisms can it guarantee so that that mother can live with her children without putting them at risk?

These experiences show us that forced motherhood in girls has lifelong consequences. Even when they manage to take on the care of their children, they live it in constant tension: deep love mixed with frustration, pain, and despair. Because being a mother is difficult for any woman, and even more so when you are only a child.

CRITICAL KNOTS, CHALLENGES OF ACTIVISM Internal organization and the abrupt growth of the feminist movement

One of the greatest difficulties within the movement has been maintaining coordinated strategies. That lack of articulation weakens us, because when we arrive with two different proposals, the authorities take advantage: from the outside, they do not see us as solid or strong.

This has several roots. When we began doing feminism, almost nobody wanted to identify as feminist; it was a word loaded with rejection. At university, for example, only one friend and I dared to say it out loud. There was no feminist theory in the classroom; we had to fight for it to be included. Harassment in classes was invisible, something normalized that was not even named. Today things are different: students report it, it is made visible, everyone wants to call themselves feminist, and that shows how much the landscape has changed.

Movements such as the Green Tide, Vivas Nos Queremos, and Ni Una Menos radically transformed the scene. We went from a time when nobody wanted to be feminist to another in which everyone wanted to be. That brought a diversity of perspectives and positions, which is a richness, because feminism is not a single voice or an authoritarian one. But it was also overwhelming. The best example was the first Vivas Nos Queremos march: we expected a few dozen people, and seven thousand arrived. We did not know how to react, what to say, or how to organize ourselves in the face of something so massive. For those of us used to mobilizations of 50 or 100 people, that was a turning point.

Disputes over recognition: the traps of patriarchy in our own practices

With the growth of feminism and its political visibility, tensions also emerged. I will say it plainly: it became a space of dispute over recognition, over power, and that affected the collective fabric. Instead of cooperating and distributing efforts, at times we ended up competing with one another.

Funding logics also feed this dynamic. Instead of promoting collaborative projects, we are often made to compete among organizations: "compete and see who wins the project." That capitalist-patriarchal dynamic is corrosive for the movement, because it fragments us and places us in a logic of rivalry that builds nothing.

Added to this is the struggle for recognition, which further complicates relationships, because some are

more visible than others, and of course that can be unfair and generate frustration, but that is how this world works, a world of personal recognition. Yet this is understood as disloyalty, as theft of one's work, and it creates serious ruptures. It is painful and even personal. The same happens with trips, and that is unfortunate, and something we need to work on. There are comrades with whom dialogue is possible and others with whom it is not, who without even speaking to you already blame and stigmatize you. Then it becomes impossible. Even if one is open to criticism, if that criticism is not spoken and the other is not listened to, collective construction becomes impossible.

There are political differences that cannot be overcome

Over time I came to understand, painfully, that there are political differences that cannot be bridged, and that is why there will never be a single unified movement. There are things that are non-negotiable for some and not for others. There are debates that, even when approached openly, end in dead ends.

In our case, feminist legal defense means putting the victim at the center. If we had the most strategic case in the world, the one that could open the door to eliminating the crime of abortion, but the woman did not want to continue, our position would be to respect her decision, even if it meant giving up "the case of our lives." For other organizations, by contrast, what is strategic weighs more than the victim's will, and that is where ruptures occur.

Another point of divergence is between minimums and maximums. We believe in aiming for the maximums. Of course, sometimes we yield, but we find it very difficult to accept concessions that make rights more precarious. That is why we found it insulting that, on an issue as basic as abortion in cases of rape, more barriers and requirements were added. For us that was unacceptable, while other sectors saw it as partial progress. That difference marks different paths.

Different views in the political arena: the individual versus the collective

Today we also live with tensions between the individual and the collective. I was formed on the left, and there I learned that political commitment is built collectively, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. I recognize that this vision often denied the individual, and that was a mistake. Feminisms have helped transform that, leaving behind the idea of sacrifice as destiny and opening space for care and for the right to have one's own life.

However, we have now gone to the other extreme. Many young women do not want to join collectives; they prefer to engage politically as individuals, to join platforms without giving up any of their autonomy. And of course, that raises questions: how do we build something common if everyone wants to keep their individuality intact? I think this phenomenon intensified with the massification of feminism, and we are still learning how to manage it.

In the Free Abortion initiative, we wanted to replicate something similar to what happened in Argentina: a broad campaign uniting organizations and individuals from different cities to demand the elimination of the crime of abortion and to change imaginaries. We said: education to know, contraceptives to enjoy, and free abortion to decide. We wanted to show abortion as a legitimate option, beyond merely surviving or not dying.

But tensions emerged there too. There were organizations and there were individuals, so how are decisions made? Does one person's voice carry the same weight as that of an organization with 60 members? Some comrades said, "if you represent 60, then let the 60 come." These kinds of debates show the frictions between different organizational logics.

I think there have still been learnings. In Vivas, for example, we decided to choose spokespersons and train them, to avoid all of us having to expose ourselves in the same way. Before, everything was issued under collective identities: Vivas, Surkuna, Comadres. Today there are more "self-organized" processes, without logos or structures, and that equalizes recognition, though it also raises questions about who is actually sustaining the processes.

Looking at Colombia's experiences, we see that they articulate through platforms based on common principles. The principles are immovable; everything else is negotiable. Perhaps that is one key to allowing the individual and the collective to coexist without breaking the fabric.

Different political logics and lack of agreements: we ended up completely broken!

One of the hardest critical knots we have experienced is internal division. We struggle greatly to reach agreements and, even more, to sustain them over time. The most painful example was the debate over abortion in cases of rape: we ended up completely broken, completely broken, because we had very different political perspectives.

For us, accepting a time limit was an aberration; we could not compromise on that. For other comrades, by contrast, it was a lesser evil, a necessary negotiation. That difference broke us apart. Here the logics of minimums and maximums intersect: while some believe it is necessary to accept what is possible, we believe it is necessary to demand what is desirable, even if it is harder. Many times I have been challenged with the question, "why do you sacrifice the possible for the desirable?"

I remember one meeting where we tried to put our hearts on the table and reach a common agreement: not to back down, not to accept time limits or requirements, to ask for everything. That was the collective commitment, and we defended it strongly. But later, in the political arena, some organizations supported the majority report that did include time limits, and even held press conferences in its favor. We said, "not even dead." There

we felt betrayed. I suppose from their side there will be another narrative: perhaps they will say they tried to talk, or that they simply could not sustain that position. In the end, there were failures of communication. It is not that some of us are the good ones and others the bad ones; rather, we think differently, and that hurts.

On top of all that are emotions: we are people, we get angry, we hurt one another. If I fight with you and no longer want to see you, that also has political consequences. Feminism sometimes overwhelms us because it is too important in our lives, and the system itself reinforces competition and takes away our possibility of cooperating.

We lack spaces for political reflection: we are always running

Another major problem is that we lack spaces for political reflection. Life in activism is like a steamroller: we are always running. That means we do not have real time to stop, think together, and process our differences. We may not agree, but at the very least we should be able to understand one another.

The last national meeting of the movement was in 2014. Since then we have not managed to create broad spaces for feminist debate like those organized, for example, by comrades in Argentina. We tried a virtual one, but it was not the same. Ideally, we should meet in person, see one another, listen to one another on a large scale.

In addition, feminist activism is never limited to a single issue. It is not the only thing we do. Many of us are also part of broader human rights networks. For example, I am part of the Alliance for Human Rights, which emerged during the 2019 uprising and brings together 18 organizations. While Surkuna does not work on prisons, when the comrades from Mujeres de Frente need legal support, we go. If we do not work directly on extractivism, we still submit an amicus on prior, free, and informed consultation. That solidarity forces us to multiply ourselves.

And although at times it is heavy, it is also what strengthens us. In the struggle for abortion in cases of rape, we managed to gather more than 70 amicus briefs. Who supported us? Precisely those sister organizations. So when they ask us for support, we are there too. It is a network sustained by reciprocity, but it also demands much more from us than we can give.

Voluntary activism and the precarization of life

Although there are many of us, our level of involvement in activism is not the same. There are different levels of commitment and responsibility, and the truth is that, given the magnitude of the tasks we sustain, sometimes we feel that we are too few. Most feminists are volunteer activists, which means that the time we can dedicate depends on our living conditions. If you work all morning and only have a few hours in the afternoon, your level of participation is shaped by those limitations. Those of us who work in this are also overwhelmed: we

work 15 or 18 hours a day, it is madness, and of course we carry more demands because we are the ones who receive a salary to work on the issues of our political commitment.

The precarization of life directly shapes activism. The harder survival becomes, the less space remains for the collective. Mothers experience this even more intensely: it is not only about earning a livelihood, but also about finding someone to care for the children, sustaining networks, stretching resources. I myself, who have a strong family network and only one child, sometimes feel overwhelmed. Imagine what it means for a woman with five children.

Anti-rights groups as Goliaths

Amid this precarity, we also have to confront anti-rights groups, which are true Goliaths in politics. They have enormous amounts of money and resources. We have learned that their strategies are not always direct: they often include references to “the unborn” in economic or tax laws. That is why we carry out constant legal monitoring, anticipating risks and developing technical inputs together with collectives and working teams.

The inequality of forces is immense. They have millions in resources, legitimacy, and a long history of political power. It is a painful paradox: in Chile, for example, those who defended “life” were the same ones who supported the dictatorship that killed and disappeared people. We have seen this here too: the power of the Episcopal Conference is so strong that even two years after the abortion ruling, they went so far as to excommunicate the judges of the Court.

In addition to economic and political power, they hold the hegemony of the moral and spiritual sphere. That is a terrain we have not always known how to contest. As feminists, we often tend to be atheists, agnostics, or to have different spiritualities, but we sometimes forget how important faith and hope are in societies so deeply wounded. Latin America will never be completely atheist: we are people of Pachamama, we do cleansing rituals, seek out shamans, pray, or give thanks to life in different ways. That too is part of our culture.

Today we are living through a strong conservative backlash: we see it in the governments of Italy, Spain, Argentina, Chile, and even in Ecuador, with a vice president who came to power despite her anti-rights discourse. It is an advance that combines political and economic inequality with moral legitimacy. That is why we believe we still need to strengthen that front: to tell people that one can be feminist and believe in God, that one can be feminist and beautiful, that freedom also includes living one’s own spirituality without guilt or prohibition.

New scenarios of political militancy

In January 2024 we built a new platform called Just Freedom, with the aim of eliminating the crime of abortion through a national movement. Comrades from different territories participate, with joint decision-making

but also autonomy in each territory. Through this platform we filed a lawsuit to eliminate the crime, submitted two legal briefs, requested amicus curiae briefs, and organized an international seminar at the Central University, as well as a concert and a march. All this in the midst of a context that felt like a national apocalypse, with fires and power outages. Even so, 500 to 600 people came out to the march.

But we are also facing a context of greater criminalization and greater risk to the lives of activists. There are threats, assassinations linked to business interests, invisible forms of violence in border territories such as Lago Agrio or Esmeraldas: femicides, transfemicides, social cleansing practices that often do not even make the news in the city. Simply by existing, people are already living at risk.

The Court, in social matters, has advanced women's rights, migrants' rights, euthanasia, and abortion, but in economic matters it yields to major powers. It ends up validating unconstitutional measures, such as Ministerial Agreement 754, which enables repression and manipulated consultations, and remains in force even though it is unconstitutional. This leaves us with fewer legal tools in the face of overwhelming economic power.

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA: MAINTAINING OR TRANSFORMING

There are many forms of academia, just as there are many forms of feminism

I know there are many forms of academia, just as there are many forms of feminism. For me, academia can either transform or maintain what is established. Its strength lies in showing what cannot be seen, in helping us look beyond the obvious, like that "Sword of Omens" from the Thundercats series. When research is done with critical methodologies, it can open cracks in what we take to be natural and place uncomfortable truths on the table.

I believe in an academia that dialogues with social movements and with life, that comes closer to activism when needed, that carries out participatory action research, and that never disguises itself as neutral. Absolute objectivity does not exist: what I think and what I feel runs through any research, even the most quantitative. And it is okay for that to be so.

I have seen how academia confers legitimacy, and what that implies. I researched the criminalization of women starting in 2014, and six years after Human Rights Watch published on the same subject, the impact was different, stronger, because it had academic backing. That inequality makes me ask what kind of academia I want to build.

Extractivist practices make me uncomfortable, situations in which people write from positions of privileged salaries and disqualify other spaces of knowledge production. I prefer an academia that thinks from the collective, from criticism of its own privileges, from a Global South that seeks transformation rather than dogma. Because, just as there are many forms of feminism, there are many forms of academia: some sustain power and others challenge it.

Academic violence delegitimizes other forms of knowledge

Today we are living in a time of strong backlash. Advances in rights provoke resistance from those who are losing privileges. Men, regardless of ideology, align with one another to push us back into positions of submission. And universities are another field of dispute.

Academic violence seeks to delegitimize feminist and gender knowledge. We saw it in a trial when a judge asked an expert witness whether her analysis was "science or gender ideology." That is the strategy: to cast doubt on the validity of our knowledge. The same thing happens in harassment complaints, such as those involving Boaventura de Sousa Santos: the lukewarm responses from allied academic sectors show how the status quo is protected.

In Ecuador, when comrades denounced violence at the Andean University, they were accused of being "Correístas." That is the mechanism: lynch the person who reports instead of listening. Academia, which should be critical, ends up reproducing disciplinary logics.

That is why there is so much resistance to gender, trans, or LGBTI studies: because they unsettle things, they move structures. In this ultraconservative context, those resistances are no accident. The aim is to normalize hate speech and unethical strategies. And that affects children growing up in this environment, absorbing attack as a common language.