

Thirty years of rebellion

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Monday, three in the afternoon, February 22, 2024. The sun rests over the space, bathing everything in light. Every poster in Lupe's office reveals that this is the operations center of a great battle. Books, pamphlets, posters, megaphones, and two glasses of water, necessary weapons to soften the 29-degree heat of Santa Cruz—fill a space that magically changes shape. Sometimes it is an office; at other times a meeting place. On certain Friday afternoons it becomes a party room, and it is always a refuge for the brave and the emboldened.

There sit Lupe Pérez and Carmiña Sanabria. Companions, weavers of shared phrases. "The word abortion tasted like salt in their mouths," a phrase that slips out with such force that one can almost see them in Plaza 24 de Septiembre unfolding meters and meters of green fabric. As green as the tide, as green as hope.

FROM FEAR TO A COLLECTIVE VOICE: THE HISTORY OF THE REBELDIA COLLECTIVE

In 2025 we celebrate 30 years of the Colectivo Rebeldía

Just as you choose the day your child will be born, we decided that the 8th of March, International Women's Day, would be the birth of Colectivo Rebeldía. That was nearly thirty years ago, driven by feminist women who came from the experience of the Foro de la Mujer. At that time, identifying as a feminist was neither friendly nor accepted. "How are you going to call yourselves that? Nobody will want you."

The collective was founded in Santa Cruz. It began as a group of women who gathered to discuss feminism and organize workshops. Two of them, Cecilia Moreno and María Eugenia Canedo, launched a project funded by the Dutch embassy to work with women in emerging neighborhoods of the city.

Two years after its creation, when I arrived in Bolivia, I joined. At that time the collective did not have the presence or resources it has today. We were rowing in the neoliberal era, with our eyes set on social and economic justice. Under that umbrella we began to work on reproductive autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights, issues that almost nobody dared to name in public.

Back then there were very few of us who spoke of abortion as a right. People looked at us as if we were strange, but we still went out into the streets to challenge the silence. Today we are no longer alone, although it remains necessary to strengthen arguments and open

spaces for debate.

The Campaign and the Collective: activism and essence

The September 28 Campaign arrived in Bolivia just one year after the birth of the collective. We joined immediately. Around 1998–1999, after an international meeting, CIDEM brought the Campaign to Bolivia and Ximena Machicado assumed its coordination. Since then, Colectivo Rebeldía has maintained its presence, gradually gaining recognition until consolidating itself as an institution.

Along the way there were formalities: legal registrations, institutional procedures, official recognition—necessary to survive in this environment. Yet the activist spirit always remained intact. That activism expresses itself through direct action, but also through research, strategic planning, and the production of knowledge. I cannot say that the collective holds a position different from the Campaign, because we have always respected the importance of strengthening the shared space without appropriating it.

Acting through consensus rather than imposition gave us legitimacy.

In Santa Cruz, if abortion is discussed, Colectivo Rebeldía inevitably enters the conversation. We have taken the issue into public policy debates, defended it in the streets, and argued it in public forums. For us abortion

is not an isolated medical matter, it is an anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial political issue.

It means questioning capitalism, which appropriates women's bodies as labor power. That is why we understand that the right to abortion is not won through institutions alone, but through social networks and collective organization.

Uterus, body, soul, life, and heart

Lupe and Carmaña often say that in Bolivia the September 28 Campaign exists because Colectivo Rebeledía has given it uterus, body, soul, life, and heart for almost thirty years. That dedication has allowed it to survive through crises and generational changes. Today several generations coexist: the founders, the middle generation, and younger activists, full of energy and conviction, though still with limited political resources to sustain the cause.

At the same time, new discourses centered on individual action have appeared, abortion "between friends" or "alone." We say: that may be an option, but not for everyone. How can a woman who lives in a single room with three children, her husband, her grandmother, and a shared bathroom four meters away have the conditions to abort alone with just a friend? Here class consciousness becomes visible. Not all women have the same possibilities.

Self-managed abortion may be an act of autonomy, yes, but we must recognize real contexts. That is why we insist that the State must guarantee safe and accessible conditions for all women and people who can become pregnant. Rights cannot depend on the house you live in or the money you have.

Everyday political advocacy

Another central axis has been advocacy with the State and the demand for public policies. This generated tensions, because many NGOs focused exclusively on lobbying for laws and regulations, leaving aside cultural struggles and awareness-raising work. For us it was clear: without a social base, no law can survive.

Twenty years ago, speaking publicly about abortion, in the press or on the street, carried enormous costs. Your reputation, your job, even your safety were at risk. Yet there have been advances.

Today we hear Indigenous women from eastern Bolivia raising clear arguments in favor of abortion, challenging the idea that motherhood is the only source of joy. That voice represents a rupture in a country where maternal mortality, child pregnancy, and adolescent pregnancy remain everyday tragedies.

Advances and setbacks: a constant back and forth

The September 28 Campaign emerged from specific initiatives brought by Ximena Machicado in the 1990s within a context of regional meetings and intense communication among activists. Supported by CIDEM, the proposal succeeded in articulating institutions and women from different regions.

Over nearly thirty years, things have settled, but also changed. Some activists withdrew for personal, political, or funding reasons; others due to disagreements within a living movement. These were not divisions between good and bad actors, but natural dynamics of feminist debate and Bolivia's political context. There were also NGOs that distanced themselves when funding sources changed or leadership shifted. Thus, the history of the Campaign and the collective has always been a movement of advances and setbacks.

Abortion: Penal Code, Constitutional ruling, and other struggles

Over nearly three decades we have accumulated multiple milestones. Among them: The failed Framework Law on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, The debate around Article 266 of the Penal Code, Constitutional Sentence 0206/2014.

That ruling eliminated the requirement of judicial authorization for abortion in cases permitted by law, an important advance. At the same time, however, it reaffirmed the constitutionality of the articles criminalizing abortion, a burden we still carry and rarely discuss.

The word abortion tasted like salt in our mouths

When the September 28 Campaign arrived in Bolivia, we broke a very heavy silence. Until then pregnancy was always celebrated, even when it was imposed, even when it caused pain. The first step was to speak about "unwanted pregnancy." Later we dared to pronounce the word abortion, which at first felt like salt in our mouths. There was fear, discomfort, shame.

In Santa Cruz we organized debates in places such as the Museum of Art, sending invitations with the official letterhead of the health department to give them a more formal appearance. Doctors, friends, allies, and even opponents sat together. We arrived determined to discuss a real problem, one of health and of lived experiences. That was our way of positioning the issue: research, activism, and the audacity to occupy public space.

The Campaign mobilizes us

Thirty years ago no one spoke about depatriarchalization. Today we understand patriarchy as a structure that controls our bodies, our energy, and our reproduction. The struggle for abortion rights is therefore structural—it concerns dignity and freedom. What drives us, says Lupe, is indignation.

A woman who wants to terminate a pregnancy but cannot is suffering humiliation. Think of a poor woman with few resources, no information, no support, facing an unwanted pregnancy alone. That is torture. That is why the Campaign is our shared space, the political subject that articulates anger and hope.

Abortion: the most complex right

Among all sexual and reproductive rights, abortion is the most difficult to discuss. With sexual diversity there

is at least the idea that “love is love.” With abortion, however, every emotional blackmail appears: life, guilt, motherhood as obligation. This is where the political right plays its strongest cards.

We therefore need a social fabric that is still fragile but growing. More women must be able to say aloud: “My freedom is not negotiable.”

Challenges and opportunities: bringing feminism into universities

One urgent challenge is reaching young people and bringing feminism and abortion rights into universities. Today young women are those who sustain and mobilize many causes. We see women who once remained silent now standing firmly before authorities and demanding to be heard. That is real change.

At the same time, we face an internal challenge: how to articulate different feminisms without fragmentation. Many agree that abortion decriminalization is essential, yet divisions and competition still emerge. The challenge is building a broad collective subject, not just a critical mass but a popular movement rooted in neighborhoods, universities, and communities.

The struggle as a reason to come together

The challenge is not only legal but political. Law is merely an expression of politics. Some younger activists

believe that fighting for a law is an end in itself. But in reality, the law is a pretext, a reason to mobilize, debate, and organize collectively. What matters is the political and social transformation behind it.

The risk: new generations starting from zero

Strengthening collective work around abortion is urgent. If we fail to build horizontally, share experiences, and practice generosity in dialogue, there is a risk that younger generations will have to start from scratch. That would mean losing accumulated knowledge, strategies, and memory.

The Pact still exists, but internal tensions remain

The Pact for Sexual and Reproductive Rights was born from the September 28 Campaign. At first it was a virtuous experience. Institutions contributed different strengths: some could lobby politicians, others mobilized people in the streets. Together we influenced debates around the Penal Code. Over time tensions emerged. Today the Pact still exists but is weakened by internal disagreements and institutional rivalries. Yet we believe it must not be destroyed. Alliances are complex, sometimes exhausting and painful, but they remain necessary.