

Alive and rebellious: The story of a feminist activist

Beatriz^{1*}

¹Warmi Ñawi, Ecuador

*Corresponding author: beatrizjuarez946@gmail.com

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We meet in a restaurant inside a shopping mall located in what is now the financial heart of the city. The valley plateau turns out to be a central place for the three of us. Our meeting point lies halfway between Pichincha, where Victoria lives, and Loma de Puengasí, where we work. She arrives late, which gives us time to find the right place to record her. When she arrives, the space fills with her presence. Her smile, marked by dimples, sets the tone of the conversation. When they appear and deepen, the story is joyful; when they disappear, her eyes fill with tears and the narration moves through places of deep pain. Victoria is generous with her words and opens her heart and her story. It seems she needs to speak about what remained silent for years. We are deeply moved and allow what feels like a torrent to flow.

THIRTY YEARS OF STRUGGLE, SUPPORT, AND RESISTANCE FOR THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE AND WOMEN'S FREEDOM

I am 53 years old. I consider myself a woman of the people. I am a feminist and an activist, and I support other women through their own processes. For a long time, I remained silent. Today I feel the need to speak, to open my heart and share my story. Some memories make me smile, while others still make me cry, but all of them are part of who I am and what has brought me here.

Supporting, educating, and fighting

At Warmi Ñawi, the organisation where we participate, we carry out three fundamental actions: supporting, educating, and fighting. We support women who are victims of gender-based and sexual violence. We are a team that provides psychological and legal support, and we also defend women who have chosen abortion and have been criminalized. Most of the cases we receive involve reports of sexual violence against girls.

Our process is called legal first aid. It serves as the entry point for identifying those who have experienced sexual violence and informing them about their rights, including abortion. We have ten phones and organised shifts to respond. First, there are the compañeras who receive the call and identify the need; then we refer the case accordingly: to the legal team, the emergency response team, the childhood and adolescence team, or the psychological support team. Even when the case

is not considered an emergency, we still try to respond within the first 24 hours.

When we receive a case, we complete a basic intake form and always ask what the person needs at that moment. We do not impose what we believe; instead, we provide information about all available options. If they decide to file a complaint, we accompany them either in person or virtually. Our work ends when protection measures are issued and the case is transferred to the Prosecutor's Office. In cases involving abortion, we provide guidance on the legal procedure and coordinate with "Las Sororas" (pseudonym). Since abortion in cases of rape was decriminalized, this support has become essential to making the right effective in practice.

The name Warmi Ñawi now carries weight within the justice system. Of every ten women who call us, nine obtain administrative protection measures, and several achieve legal rulings in their favour. We have built alliances with law firms and universities to sustain this work. We also support women who cannot afford an abortion. We believe it should not be an elitist right, but one that is free, accessible, and available to everyone. For this reason, we work with "Las Sororas," who provide information on the use of abortion pills and guidance on where to obtain them. When a girl or young woman cannot afford them, we organise community collections among ourselves, use support chats, and gather the necessary resources.

Another line of work involves partnerships with health services and collectives. Many times, we learn

about the rape of a girl through a hospital, and from there we help facilitate access to abortion. Little by little, we have extended this work into health centres, where staff already know they can contact us or Las Sororas.

Training was essential for me. It was an intense two-year process. We learned how to support, how to become more sensitive, and how to listen to what the woman wants without imposing our own views. To ask something as simple and as radical as: Do you want to report it? Do you want protection measures? Do you want an abortion? Do you simply want someone to listen to you? That training gave me tools that continue to sustain me in every case I accompany.

I joined through an open public call. They did not ask for degrees or credentials, only willingness. Thirty of us entered that way. In June, we completed our first year of accompaniment work, and by December a second cohort had already graduated: more diverse, with more adult women, migrants, women with different educational backgrounds, and even LGBTIQ+ compañeras. For me, that is the greatest success: opening the door to all who want to join.

Our struggle is for free, safe, and accessible abortion. Our director presented a bill along these lines, and it even reached the National Assembly. The Constitutional Court has already ruled in favour of abortion in cases of rape, which is progress, but there is still a long way to go. For me, it is not justice that we only have rights if we can prove we were raped. It is as if they were telling us: if you enjoyed it, now you must endure the consequences. True justice will come when we have the right to decide over our own bodies without having to prove anything.

I know that some analysts say we have achieved nothing, but I say the opposite: we have already succeeded in making abortion in cases of rape a recognized right. It is a step forward, and every step matters. The challenge remains ensuring that abortion is free, safe, and accessible without restrictions. That is the horizon guiding both my struggle and that of many others.

When we are all rebels: Mobilization in the streets

I have had the pleasure and the honour of taking part in these demonstrations with my daughter, with my little girl. For me, it is a way of giving the struggle back to others and not remaining passive with my arms crossed.

Our organisation has spent many years working for women's rights and has become a leading voice in this cause, creating impact because we have been there, standing with the green flag.

What creates the greatest impact is making the movement visible. We organise press conferences, marches, sit-ins, and social media campaigns. All of this becomes especially visible on September 26th, the day for the decriminalization of abortion. On that day, we also coordinate with movements across Latin America and affirm that deciding over our own bodies is a life choice.

Part of our struggle has also been empowering

women criminalized for abortion, accompanying them, and helping them regain their freedom. I remember 2019, when we arrived at the National Assembly and they did not want to let us in. We carried our green paint, closely following what was happening inside. We were only a few women from different organisations, but we managed to enter. For me, it has been a privilege to take part in those struggles.

I also had the opportunity to participate in the last Feminist Congress as a speaker, presenting our training and accompaniment project. Our experience was later published in a journal. Life has been good to me: it has rewarded me with the opportunity to be present in these spaces, to raise my voice, and to share what we do.

Between lawyers, volunteers, and the women we support

In the organisation, we have two types of participants: paid professionals and volunteers. The lawyers are responsible for legal counselling because, of course, that work must be paid. They handle the most serious and long-term cases, offering reduced fees when women need them. They are criminal lawyers and highly trained academics, always up to date, and they lead the legal processes.

We, the volunteers, support and advise each other up to a certain point. We help women obtain administrative protection measures, accompany them during marches, and work under the support of the lawyers. We call ourselves *las de a pie*—the women on the ground. We carry the green flag; we are the grassroots who struggle, fight, throw stones, sing, and shout. We are that beautiful part of the mobilization.

Among the volunteers there is every kind of woman: five older women and many very young women. Some are lawyers, other psychologists, others are students, homemakers, or employees of the electoral tribunal. We are diverse.

The women we support are also diverse. However, we have realised that we still need to reach more women from working-class communities. Many do not use Instagram or Twitter, which tend to be more elitist platforms. Most communicate through WhatsApp, and that is where we can truly reach them. Because of this, I feel that, until now, the profile of the women we mostly support tends to be middle class and above. The challenge we face is to democratize information so that both knowledge and rights also reach women from poorer communities.

Selling green scarves to raise resources

Many times, the only way we have been able to generate resources for our mobilization has been by selling green scarves. During marches, we sell them or organise donations for victims of violence.

The organisation also receives support from international organisations through projects and consultancies funded from abroad. There are also national donors

who have enabled us, for example, to obtain the phones that are our key tool for accompaniment work.

At one point, we had a gardening project that was really more of a pretext to talk about rights: economic rights, women's rights, and the right to a dignified life.

In other feminist spaces where I also participate and have taken leadership roles, women have created additional strategies to sustain ourselves. We support one another through small businesses, learning to make pastries, soaps, disinfectants, and chocolates—anything that helps us resist while at the same time keeping the cause alive.

EXPERIENCES MAKE US FEMINISTS

Women have to fight for our rights here in Ecuador. Sometimes with stones, with shouts, even by taking off our clothes. We have had to make ourselves visible, protest, and even turn against our own femininity so that, finally, someone will listen to us. Women have to rebel.

From survivor to advocate

My arrival at the organization was a cry for help. One day I saw on Facebook that they were offering a training program to support victims of sexual violence. I did not want to be left out. I wrote and called again and again, with the persistence of someone who knows they need to be there.

I used to support women who were victims of domestic violence, but I had never worked with survivors of sexual violence. That was exactly why I was interested: because my daughter and I had lived through it too. I was seeking justice for her and for myself.

Talking about this still upsets me, but now I can tell you: my father raped me from the age of fifteen. I had two pregnancies as a result of those abuses. I didn't have an abortion; they forced me to, twice. The first time was hell. It was in a doctor's office; they gave me an injection. I didn't know what they were doing to me. The second time was worse, in a horrible office; I still remember the sounds. My father took me because I was his son. And my mother... my mother judged me; she thought it was because I was "wandering around." She didn't know the truth.

She only found out when I was twenty-eight years old. I lived angry with her, thinking: how did she not notice? That question haunted me. But I came to understand that she also had her own blind spots. From then on, all I wanted was to protect my daughters, to care for them so they would never repeat my story.

That is why I speak out. That is why I say this openly. If I had been given the opportunity to decide, yes, I would have chosen abortion. It was not fair for me to be forced to carry that violence. My mother opposed it; she said I had to give birth. But I knew I deserved another possibility.

When the organization's call for applications appeared, I felt that there I could find a path forward. I knew what it meant to support someone: for years I

had walked alongside women filing complaints about gender-based violence. I know that process inside and out, and I know that sometimes a woman does not need a lawyer; she needs a hand to hold her up.

Curiously, my connection to feminism came through my mother. She worked at the Ecuadorian Institute of Sanitary Works, and there she met a messenger named Pamela García, who invited her to a training session at the National Assembly. That friendship planted new ideas in them, and little by little she began sharing them with me. What I am today is partly the "fault" of my mother's friend.

And so, almost by chance, feminism became part of my life. How could I not stay alert and fight for a law that would allow me, and allow my daughters, to report these crimes? Twenty-five years have passed since then. Twenty-five years of activism, struggle, and defending rights. In the end, it is our experiences, our wounds, and our resistance that make us feminists.

What we now call feminism, we used to call community

I took part in many marches. Not only feminist ones: I was also present during the Indigenous uprising. I went to bring food to the people who were fighting. That was our contribution.

The experience of the marches truly feels like community. It does not matter what color you are or what scarf you wear. Here, we identify ourselves through scarves: green, purple, orange, each one representing a cause. Except the blue ones, of course, the pro-life groups (laughs).

But there are also struggles that are born in the neighborhoods, in the places where we live. When I arrived in mine thirty-two years ago, there was no water, no electricity, no roads, no transportation. No services at all. I insisted on staying there because I wanted to build a place for my daughters.

I remember one day I went to speak with a man who delivered water by tanker truck from five or six blocks away. I asked him to bring it a little closer. He replied: "You want me to leave water there? Open a road to your house." I said to him: "How am I supposed to open a road to my house?" He sent me to the municipality.

I went alone, with my wawas (children), and filed the request. I needed water to cook for my daughters and my family. Sometime later, from a neighbor's rooftop terrace, I saw machinery approaching.

"The machines are here!" she shouted.

We ran downstairs. The man said to me: "I assume this is because of you, since nobody else is here." And there we stayed all day: with tractors, shovels, carrying water, cooking... 99% of us were women.

We cooked and helped carry water, all so that they would give us a road. Later that afternoon, an engineer arrived and told the machine operator that this was not even the place where he was supposed to be working (laughs). But they opened the road anyway, and wa-

ter could finally be delivered closer to our homes. The neighbors were happy, truly happy.

Eventually, the road was completed and water started arriving nearby. The joy among the women in the neighborhood was enormous. The same thing happened with electricity: we were told that if we wanted utility poles, we would have to bring them ourselves from the forest. Women among trees and branches, asking men for help to move the poles. And we did it. We got electricity.

Today we have an organized neighborhood, with water, electricity, and sewage systems. But there is something we lost along the way: before, we were more supportive of one another. If I did not have water, the neighbor would give me some. If someone got sick, everyone went to help. Now we build walls and stop being who we once were. We gained infrastructure, but we lost something human and communal.

This is what I call community feminism. Today people call it feminism; before, it was simply community. I did not know I was a feminist. I did not know the word... until one day I found it and understood that all this work, all this struggle, this whole life, was feminism.

DIFFICULT CONTEXTS

Between the criminalization of abortion and cultural norms

For several years, we had to live under the criminalization of abortion. Women would arrive at health centers in the middle of a miscarriage or abortion, and, in their "infinite wisdom," doctors would decide it was not spontaneous... and call the police. Before even receiving medical care, these women were already facing criminal proceedings that could send them to prison.

It was precisely because of the lack of lawyers with a gender perspective that my organization's work emerged. These women needed someone who understood them, who would not judge them, who would accompany them in the midst of their anguish. In Ecuador, there is still a long way to go before the justice system truly incorporates a gender perspective.

Now that abortion is legal under certain circumstances, conscientious objection still remains. A doctor can say: "I won't treat you because it goes against my beliefs, against my religion." This happens even though they swore to protect your life.

Cultural norms continue to be another barrier. They limit access to abortions even in the cases allowed by law. In Indigenous communities in the Amazon, there is more openness than in the Highlands. There, reporting abuse is somewhat more possible, and some women have been able to access legal abortion. In contrast, the influence of religion means that, in many places, pregnancy is seen as a "blessing from God," and society covers up rape.

The reality is that, even when regulations exist, they are not enforced. Doctors delay treatment, and if a woman passes the twelve-week limit, the abortion can no longer be performed. Everything depends on political

will... and no president is willing to "take that burden on."

They turned their backs on us: Legislative disputes

Faced with so many limitations, we gathered our courage and sought reforms. We engaged in political advocacy. We spoke with legislators and built alliances. We hoped that some women representatives would support us. But on the day of the vote, those same women who had promised support... were not there. Their absence hurt.

The Indigenous movement also turned its back on us. They had enormous representation, and yet they told us directly: "We neither agree nor disagree." And when the time came to vote, they simply did not show up. That "neutral" position reflects the fact that there are evangelical factions within the movement. Of course, there are women comrades who do support us, who speak about women's rights, but they do not have enough power. Machismo still carries weight within social movements, especially in the Highlands.

They even sprinkled holy water on us!

Today, anti-rights groups remain extremely radical. During the Lasso government, they gained even more strength. For us women who fight for abortion rights, there is always a stigma: we are seen as sinners, as enemies. The influence of the Church can be felt everywhere. To take office, you have to swear on the Bible; for any official act, the clergy must be present. The First Lady, who belonged to Opus Dei, directly supported these groups.

And behind all this, there is money, a lot of money: resources from Caritas, the Episcopal Conference, foundations, and sects such as Juan 23, which mainly target lower-income communities.

There should be a separation between church and state. But in some official events, the clergy are deeply involved.

It was very revealing that during the Indigenous strike, the Catholic University did not open its doors to women from Indigenous communities who arrived with their wawas (children). This also happened during the Lasso government, although during the previous strike they had offered support. This shows the economic power behind these anti-rights religious groups, and how they have gained influence within ecclesiastical and political power structures.

Meanwhile, I have spent thirty years in activism and have never received a single cent. They, on the other hand, do receive funding. They have even gone so far as to invent claims that feminist organizations receive international funding for "selling fetuses." Those are the kinds of lies we are up against.

Recuerdo muy bien, el 26 de septiembre de 2022. Éramos un grupo de verdes y en frente los antiderechos con cruces e imágenes de la virgen de Guadalupe. Nos lanzaron agua bendita como si fuera un exorcismo.

Claro, es su derecho, pero la violencia simbólica pesa y duele.

Violence and risks faced by organizations working on abortion

Working on this issue involves risk. We know that it exposes us to violence and legal complaints. That is why we have learned to protect ourselves.

Among ourselves, we call each other “the Sororas” (Sisters in Solidarity). We change our phone numbers frequently because there is always the possibility that someone will report us, or that the family of a young woman will blame us, that someone will say: “My mother found your number. Now you are responsible for what happened, for what could happen to her.”

During our training, we learned that we cannot give out our personal phone numbers. We have also changed the way we meet with women: we no longer accept blind meetings or meet in closed spaces. We always meet in open places and, if possible, in pairs.

At first, we did not see the danger. We believed that the urgency of the cause was enough, that it was enough just to show up and help. We did not realize we were putting ourselves at risk. Thanks to self-care workshops, little by little we have learned to look after ourselves, to protect one another, to support each other. Because our struggle is for life and for rights, but also for survival in the midst of so much hostility.

FEMINISTS: ALLIANCES AND FRACTURES **Internal frictions between “older” and “younger” feminist organizations**

We have to be honest: we cannot idealize the feminist movement. We have seen ourselves divided, fractured. Perhaps because of the positioning of older feminists. From my point of view, some carry a sense of superiority: “Who are you, just showing up now and trying to make a name for yourself?” And that creates very tense situations.

But when we are called to support a cause, all of that is set aside. We leave the frictions behind and focus on what matters. For example, in 2023, around the issue of parity, organizations that were usually separated came together. We put our differences aside to focus on what belonged to all of us.

Obviously, the feminist movement has many divisions: there are cis feminists, trans feminists, anarchist feminists... We do not always agree ideologically, but we share a common goal. That diversity is part of the movement’s success. Yes, sometimes young women taking leadership positions makes older women feel displaced, but that is part of growth. Now it is no longer only privileged university girls: all of us can join, all of us can fight together.

Surprisingly, abortion itself does not create as much friction as other issues. The strongest disputes have been over sex and gender issues or movements focused exclusively on lesbians. But regarding abortion, there is more genuine support, even if it is not always outspoken.

One point of tension has been the permitted timeframe for abortion: 12, 16, or 20 weeks. These discussions happen within the National Assembly and in internal working groups, but publicly we must show unity. We do not interfere with the others, as long as they do not interfere with us. The important thing is support. What matters here is solidarity.

The fight for abortion rights: Abortion is elitist, but the struggle is for poor women

All of us who are part of the feminist movement are focused on making abortion free, legal, and accessible for everyone. Because in practice, abortion becomes an elitist issue. Whoever can afford an abortion does not need the law. The person who most needs the law is the raped girl, the raped woman, the poor woman who cannot pay 500 dollars at a clinic.

In many communities, sex education is scarce. Nobody talks about the possibility of abortion. Historically, it has been the upper classes who have addressed the issue. That is why, in community feminism, abortion is often not openly discussed: protest is more closely tied to rebellion itself.

This struggle is not only for upper-class girls. It is for poor women. So that a mother of five can go to a health center and, if she decides to have an abortion, she is not criminalized. So that no one has to risk their life or be judged.

If a wawa (young girl) from La Colmena wears a green bandana, many people see her as a delinquent, a troublemaker, someone without values. But if a wawa from González Suárez wears the same bandana, she is seen as progressive, as “the future.” I see the girls from La Colmena marching together with those from González Suárez. All of them shout, protest, and confront the police. Some fight because of hunger, others fight out of rebellion, but all of them fight for rights: the right not to marry, the right to abortion...

The fight for abortion rights is a struggle led by young people

Within the movement for free, legal, and accessible abortion, there is a generational divide. The struggle is led mainly by young women. They are the ones who fight, march, and take risks. Their efforts also benefit those of us who were criminalized. Those of us who may have the law now, but still do not have justice.

How many friends must have gone through the same thing? Sometimes they had to register the children of rapists as if they were siblings. All of those situations, all of those injustices, have begun to change thanks to the work of these new generations. But always at the cost of the tears and sacrifices of those of us left behind, of those who spent years fighting for the rights of all women.

The role of academia

I believe academia has a fundamental role to play: creating awareness, spreading knowledge, conducting

research, and providing tools to those being trained in universities. So that they can become carriers of this knowledge, this hope, this belief.

For me, academia should be a space that helps us dream of a free life. We only want to live freely: to educate, inform, spread awareness, and support one another on the path toward that freedom.

The struggle for my daughters and granddaughters

I want my daughters and granddaughters to be able to decide over their own bodies. I want them to know what they want and to be able to act freely. That is my challenge. I want them to live without stigma, without labels, to enjoy their sexuality without being called “promiscuous” or “prostitutes.” I want them simply to be treated as people.

Like every struggle, some of us are left behind, others continue, and others will take up the cause after us. One day they will achieve what we are fighting for today. Just

as there was a time when getting a divorce, reporting an abusive husband, or demanding child support seemed almost impossible... today those things are a little easier.

One day, other daughters and granddaughters will sit here and say: “We did it!” And of course, we will not go to hell for it.

It is important to understand that those of us who have been part of this change have sacrificed a great deal: our lives, our time, our effort. All so that our daughters, our granddaughters, even the woman next door, can have rights that neither my grandmother, nor my mother, nor I ever had.

That commitment led us to the streets, to shouting, to fighting.

The greatest reward in my life has been hearing my children say to me, “Mother, I am proud of you,” or hearing my daughter say, “Mother, one day I want to be like you.” That is my reward. I got divorced in order to have a better life, and in the end, I think I achieved it.