

From unity in diversity

Luna Creciente^{1*}

¹Participaron mujeres diversas que pertenecen al Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres de Sectores Populares “Luna Creciente”, de las provincias Cotopaxi, Loja, Pichincha, Pueblo Shuar Arutam y Esmeraldas, Ecuador.

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We arrived early at the headquarters of Luna Creciente. Many of the women who would take part in the group narrative were already there. They had come from Cotopaxi, Loja, Morona, and Pichincha. Some had traveled all night by bus, arriving from lands warmer than Quito, now wrapped in sweaters and in the warmth that fills the house. Some came with their children, both young and small. There was laughter in the air, and Manuela and Clarita welcomed us. They knew Erika, and their affection and trust were clear. The place was cozy, and it was obvious that everyone felt at home. They knew one another and had gathered many times before. We waited for the compañeras from Esmeraldas, delayed by problems on the road. Sadly, the women from Sucumbíos could not make it. It is not easy to get to Quito, and the compañeras make a great effort to leave home and work behind, take buses, endure a difficult night and early morning, just to be together. The effort is worth it.

Because there were so many of us, we split into two groups to begin the narratives. I sat with the compañeras from Cotopaxi, Loja, and Cayambe, in Pichincha. I asked about their organization and how they began, and suddenly the floodgates opened into a river of stories, relationships, and emotions. Personal stories were told, the moments when they first met were remembered, they complemented one another and also respected each other's timing. There was laughter. There were tears. Personal stories were woven together with those of each organization, and the stories of each organization were braided into Luna Creciente.

We talked and talked, or rather, they talked and talked. About their lives intertwined with the life of the organization, about the new and older generations, about the criticism that had made them “bathe in oil” so that it would slide off them, though it still hurt, about struggles, courage, and rage, but also about overcoming shame, breaking barriers and fears, sharing, feeling, supporting, learning, and growing. Time flew. In the room next door we could hear the other group laughing and speaking loudly. It was time to finish and gather together to close the moment. We went into the living room and Clarita brought out bottles of wine and glasses. We laughed and celebrated the encounter and the privilege they had given us by sharing their stories. They spoke of how, for a long time, it had not been possible to gather because of a lack of funding. It is hard to sustain organizational work in these times, but Luna is still there in the sky, sometimes larger, sometimes only outlined: a Waxing Moon whose goal is, as Manuela says, nothing less than changing the world. We raised our glasses and toasted to that: to the women who come from every corner to gather, share stories and struggles, laugh together, and, nothing less than, change the world.

LUNA CRECIENTE: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Our memory begins long before we called ourselves a “movement.” It was born from the strength of many processes, from the struggles of women's organizations from popular sectors that searched for one another until they finally met and recognized each other. In 2001, we decided to take another step: to come together in our diversity with Black, Indigenous, mestiza, peasant, and

working women, as well as with sexual, gender, and age diversities, LGBTIQ+ communities, and women of diverse sexual identities, all wanting to build something together. To create a movement of women's organizations from popular sectors.

“At the beginning, we had nothing. The little we had, we shared. Some brought potatoes, others cheese, others whatever they could, and that is how we organized our

gatherings. One of us spent the last breath of her car traveling across the country to call the others together. She remembers how, in Sucumbíos, the army rescued her after she got trapped crossing a river. That is how we began: with solidarity, courage, and a hunger for justice. In 2004, we formally established Luna Creciente, convinced that our voice would be collective and that together we would fight for all sovereignties.”

The organization in Cotopaxi: Dreaming of change for women

In Cotopaxi, our journey began in April 1984. We came from a hacienda system where the word of the landowner, the overseer, or the priest carried more weight than any woman’s life. Women worked harder than men in the fields, yet they had no place in assemblies or decision-making. We were invisible: without a voice, without a vote, without the right to decide about the children we had or about our own bodies.

Faced with so much violence and mistreatment, we decided to organize ourselves. At first, we did so to stop domestic violence, because that was the closest and most urgent pain. We first gathered to recognize one another as companions, to share what we were living through, and to dare to speak about what had never before been allowed. From that seed, our organization was born: from a collective cry against imposed silence.

The process in Loja: From a group of friends to becoming part of Luna Creciente

In Loja, our story began as that of a group of mestiza activist friends who, without belonging to any formal organization, came together because we sensed the need to organize ourselves. We began in 2000, and little by little we grew. In 2010, we heard about Luna Creciente, although we were not yet part of it. We knew that women from the Saraguro community belonged to Luna Creciente, and in 2018, thanks to a compañera from that region, we attended one of their national workshops.

That encounter changed us. We realized we were no longer alone, that there were women in other territories sharing similar dreams and struggles. Since then, we have remained part of Luna Creciente. Through the movement, we learned the strength of collective action, the importance of naming what we live through, and of speaking openly about issues for which we had never before had space: comprehensive health, sexual and reproductive health, and solidarity among women and across territories.

Shuar Arutam people and Esmeraldas: Building alliances

The Shuar Arutam people in the Amazon, although never conquered by the Spanish, later suffered the violence of mining, which devastated entire communities. The Shuar compañeras found an alliance with us, and together we built a shared path, even though they did not have formal legal recognition as an organization. The same happened in Esmeraldas: Black women from San

Lorenzo and the border cantons came closer to us, recognized themselves in our struggles, and became part of the collective leadership.

In this way, Luna Creciente expanded not through programmes or funding, but through trust and the need to sustain one another in the face of injustice. Every new territory that joined brought its own strength, stories, and wisdom, and we learned from and contributed to that diversity that makes us a movement.

Joining Luna Creciente: Building connections through trust

Joining the movement was never a bureaucratic act, but rather a path built on trust. Many of us arrived through invitations from compañeras who were already part of the movement, like the time we received the proposal from Cotopaxi to join. It was not enough for one person alone to decide; we had to discuss it in the Assembly, because for us, decisions are collective rather than individual.

“I remember that the first thing we asked for was to participate in an 8 March mobilization in Guamote. For many of our compañeras, it was the first time they had ever left Cotopaxi. We travelled in three packed buses, carrying food that we shared among all of us. It was like opening a door to another world, recognizing that we were part of something bigger.”

“The national gatherings became a vital space: 80, 100 women sharing their realities, talking about the good and the bad, learning from one another. With or without funding, we contributed whatever we could in order to continue. And that is how the movement grew stronger, because we discovered that what united us was more powerful than any scarcity.”

“When we gathered together or held workshops, we came to understand the realities of different territories, and all of us became empowered. Solidarity is something we deeply value. We have been able to see how important organizational spaces truly are. Through Luna Creciente, we came to understand in depth issues of great importance such as comprehensive health, sexual and reproductive health, and political realities.”

Collective struggles are more important and more effective

“We are the sum of organizations, not just individuals. In Quito, for example, many compañeras have tried to build popular organizations, but in large cities it is extremely difficult because of hierarchies and Western ways of thinking. Several women leaders wanted to join as individuals, but our commitment was never individual: our goals are collective.”

“The movement taught us a major lesson: collective struggles are the ones that truly matter. We come together to fight for our bodies, our lands, and our territories. That connection between body, land, and territory is not easy to explain, but for us it is obvious: everything is connected, everything is political. That is why we

speak of autonomy and sovereignty in our decisions; that is the core of our praxis.”

“We have learned to overcome difficulties, and although we have not yet transformed society completely, we can see real progress. Our organization, at the provincial level, managed to become part of broader spaces such as the first Plurinational Parliament, created through Luna Creciente in Loja. There we met doctors who defended the full decriminalization of abortion. It was no longer only us; other sectors were beginning to support the struggle as well.”

“We also learned that the only way to achieve something at the national level is through networks and unity. If we are not together, we can go through life without achieving anything. But if we are united, the compañeras in the communities know that Luna Creciente means hope: together we can achieve so much.”

“On a personal level, many of us began our feminist and territorial activism independently, each one in her own corner. But the movement showed us that unity, both locally and nationally, is the true path toward achieving deep change.”

Only when we truly know can we defend

We are convinced that only by deeply knowing the territory can we defend it. The more we understand what is happening, the more visible inequalities become. That is why we promote training schools: so that compañeras become empowered with awareness, knowledge, and tools. Only then can we truly fight.

These training spaces and exchanges, both national and international, have been essential. To go, see, debate, listen, propose, and learn: that transforms people. It is not the same as receiving instructions from above. For us, shared and lived knowledge is what makes political work real.

The decriminalization of abortion is one of our fronts, but not the only one. Knowing, learning, and replicating experiences has helped us in many struggles. That is why we insist: only when we truly know can we defend what is ours.

We are a movement: Some of us are here, others have left, others will come

In Luna Creciente we say: “With those who came before us, with those who continue after us, we will grow and create a crescent moon that illuminates all of us with tenderness and passion.” Other times we say: “with dignity and justice.” That is how we name ourselves, how we recognize one another.

In Cotopaxi, for example, we began in April 1984 with fifteen women. Today only three of us are still alive; the others have passed away, but we feel that from wherever they are, they continue to give us strength and wisdom. We managed to reduce violence in our parish by 80 or 90 percent, an enormous transformation built through years of organizing.

When some of us speak about 1984, others were only children. Many of us are daughters of the process our

mothers began. That is the beauty of diversity within Luna Creciente: some of us are here, others leave, and others will come. Because this is a movement, and there are no strict rules: we are not the same, nor do we want to be.

We know that in other countries the decriminalization of abortion has already been achieved. We will achieve it too. Perhaps not in our generation, but after us, or alongside us, more compañeras are coming who will continue walking this path. The strength does not disappear; it multiplies.

We believe in difference: Strength lies in diversity

Within the movement, we have always called for unity through diversity. That unity does not mean uniformity: each of us comes with her own journey and her own goals. And although many times people have tried to attack us because of those differences, we believe that this is precisely where our strength lies.

In every political training school, every meeting, every workshop, we share, analyze, and debate. We believe in difference: we are not all the same, but we want the same rights for everyone.

For a long time, we worked on sexual and reproductive health as part of family planning, and little by little we opened paths toward safe abortion. Sometimes we spoke quietly, in secret, in places where we could not say it openly; other times we shouted it without fear. That too is part of how we exist in diversity: respecting that not all of us can say or do the same things at every moment, yet continuing to walk together anyway.

We do not destroy organizations because of disagreements. On the contrary, we believe that this is where the value lies. Strength comes from converging through our differences, not from erasing them.

The trust we have built among women of so many ages, cultures, and territories is one of our greatest achievements. In Luna Creciente there are compañeras from thirteen or fourteen years old to those of us who are already elderly. We have shared ancestral knowledge, life experiences, pain, and joy. We have resisted together in difficult times, and we have also celebrated together in good times: through theatre, music, photo-novels, videos, marches, parties, football tournaments, and cultural evenings.

Our gatherings brought together more than one hundred women for two days of work and celebration. That exchange of knowledge, generations, and cultures gives us the strength to continue while we are alive. There are so many diversities here, damn it!

Along this path we also met the compañeras who were sex workers in Machala. They were there from the beginning, and together we held workshops and shared learning experiences. They trained us, and at the same time we learned from their experiences.

In one exchange with Saraguro compañeras, for example, they spoke about their work, about the body, love, and income. Between jokes and truths, they came

to the conclusion that they could finance a major movement gathering, around 3,000 dollars, by selling all the festive clothing of one Saraguro compañera, more than what the others earned combined. Conversations like these taught us to look at ourselves honestly and without shame.

Over time, the sex workers' organization moved away from the movement, but several of us remain in contact because the trust that was woven together cannot simply disappear.

Today we continue planting seeds. My twelve-year-old granddaughter, for example, listens to us, watches us, and is growing up within her community, absorbing what we say and do. That is the most beautiful thing about this movement: respecting each person's identity and building spaces of learning among girls, young women, and elders alike.

We have learned that life is not measured by the steps we take, but by the traces we leave behind. And we are certain that those traces will remain long after we are gone.

OUR JOURNEY IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Abortion and sexual and reproductive rights were difficult topics within the organization

It was very difficult in the communities when we began talking about comprehensive health, because everything was there: abortion, contraception, the right to decide over one's own body. For many compañeras, speaking about these issues meant facing rejection. We were accused of being with the devil, of pursuing what was forbidden. We heard men say: "We men are the ones who decide how many children to have or not; you women only have to give birth." At times, the conflict between men and women became deeply painful.

In Loja, as in other territories, the weight of religion closed many doors for us: even family planning was considered a sin, a moral failing. From the pulpit, priests accused us of killing children and insulted us. But we were convinced that we were right, and we continued. In San Patricio, for example, we had a very difficult gathering: bringing sexual and reproductive health into debate among organizations created strong tensions, especially with compañeras linked to the church.

At first, we could not even say the word "abortion," so we spoke instead about "those remedies to bring back menstruation." Thanks to the feminists who accompanied us, we began incorporating ancestral medicine: plants, cleansing rituals, guinea pig healing practices. And we came to understand that, for our bodies, bringing back menstruation meant not having the wawa (baby). That was when we began asking ourselves forcefully: do we or do we not have the right to this? And so we connected together universal income for women, safe abortion, and femicide as linked struggles.

The struggle for the decriminalization of abortion

The decriminalization of abortion was always a complex issue, a taboo that generated tension. But we confronted it through education and awareness-raising. Little by little, patiently, through spaces of trust. Until the churches openly came against us: not only the Catholic Church, but also evangelical churches, united together. They joined with schools, parents' associations, and religious educational institutions to organize marches and actions against us. They wanted to silence us. But we continued, convinced that we had to speak about this even if it made many uncomfortable.

Training and health promotion: Health in women's hands

We learned that training was not simply about receiving a certificate. Being a health promoter meant commitment: learning in order to support and accompany others. We created pamphlets about contraceptive methods and shared them in assemblies. Sometimes compañeras rejected or hid condoms, saying: "That's for doctors, not for us." But others, like Doña Dolores Lara, a midwife, would tell us clearly: "This is used, and this is how it's used. There is nothing to fear." And we walked alongside her because she knew how to speak from trust.

Many times we were questioned: "You are not a doctor, so how can you speak about these things?" So we went to health centres carrying a statement from the movement and demanded Pap smears for compañeras first. We asserted the right to health through arguments and concrete actions. Beginning in 2010, we organized Pap smear campaigns for women in the communities, encouraging many to undergo examinations for the first time and to learn things about their own bodies that they had never known before.

The path was filled with painful stories. One compañera induced an abortion and was left with a severe infection; we rushed to help her. At the border regions, women who had been raped sought the morning-after pill, and many times carrying contraceptives meant doing so with fear and anxiety, as if we were carrying something forbidden.

We also made cervical cancer visible, spoke about prevention, and insisted on awareness campaigns. Always with the conviction that health should be in women's hands, and that every woman should know and defend her rights.

Sexuality from our own perspective

For many of us, it has been difficult to recognize that sexuality is not only a matter of motherhood or public health, but also part of our lives, our pleasure, and our dignity. In the communities, midwives would quietly tell us that when a drunk husband arrived home, he touched his wife however he wanted, and then another pregnancy would come. In our intimate conversations, a painful truth emerged: many of us had never felt well,

never experienced sexuality with tenderness or love, only aggression.

At first, speaking about pleasure seemed impossible. Several older compañeras would say: "I met my husband the day he came to ask for my hand, and from there it went straight to having wawas (children), with no courtship, no getting to know each other."

In that context, rape had become normalized, even by doctors who advised a midwife to put her daughter with a man so that her menstruation would come down.

Our strategy was to speak among ourselves. With trust and care. We listened to desperate compañeras: one who had considered suicide, another who had taken rat poison and survived. We realized that before making any decision, women always carried the burden of what the family, the community, or the husband would say. We learned never to leave anyone alone: we always sought another compañera for support, like when we called Manuelita for guidance in difficult cases.

In 2012, we won the Law on Free Maternity and Childhood Care, the result of the struggle of women's diversities across Ecuador, although later it was taken away from us. That law allowed us to address other issues and open doors to speak about what had long been silenced: sexuality, autonomy, and the right to decide.

Working in communities: We could not suddenly arrive talking about abortion

In the communities, we had to accept that we often could not begin by directly talking about abortion. We needed tact, moving step by step. We trained health promoters who gradually introduced the subject through family planning, explaining that deciding how many children to have was not promiscuity but dignity. Younger compañeras were more open; with older women it was harder.

Where abortion could not be named, we spoke about "bringing back menstruation." It was a way of protecting ourselves. Because in certain places, saying the word abortion could cost us our lives. Through this strategy, we managed to speak openly and accompany women without having doors closed on us.

Even today we see communities where women have 13 or 14 children. We know that the poorer women are, the less access they have to organizing themselves, and the more difficult it becomes to decide over their own bodies. That is why we continue insisting: together we can achieve much, even if the road is long.

Turning to ancestral knowledge: These knowledges are neither new nor foreign

In Luna Creciente, we have learned to sustain ourselves through ancestral wisdom. In local and national gatherings, we collected practices from every province: plants like rue, community gardens, seed exchanges, and the knowledge of midwives and healers. When there were no resources, those little herbs and ancestral knowledges that our grandmothers and great-grandmothers always used were there for us.

These knowledges are not trends or inventions. People have always spoken about "bringing back menstruation," even if only in whispers. Abortion is not something new: it is a practice that has existed throughout history, even if people try to silence us or accuse us of being "sold out to foreigners." We know it lives in our collective memory.

In Shuar communities, for example, compañeras remembered that girls were given ginger to care for their bodies from a young age. Every territory has its own plants, remedies, and ways of accompanying women. Alongside that are stories of women who decided not to marry in order to avoid being controlled, or flower plantation workers who suffered violence and sought support.

We call this the recovery of memory, because these issues are neither foreign nor new. Today it may be easier to speak directly about abortion again, but we must remember that this is not the first wave of decriminalization in Ecuador. We know this because we have lived it.

When we were little girls attending organizing meetings, compañeras would say: "Raise your hand if you have never experienced violence. Raise your hand if you do not know a woman who has had an abortion." Almost no one raised her hand. Abortion is not something from five, ten, or fifteen years ago. It has always existed, even if only spoken about quietly in our communities, even if it has always been silenced.

As a strategy, we realized we needed to speak from our own realities and ancestral knowledges. We began remembering: "my mother used this when she was about to give birth," "my grandmother used this or that to bring back menstruation." These knowledges have always existed in our communities, passed quietly from mother to daughter, grandmother to granddaughter.

We had to approach them gradually, because if we spoke too directly we were accused of being murderers or of being manipulated by foreign women bringing fashionable ideas from Europe or the United States.

What matters is that we learned to speak from trust. One compañera arrived with fever, a strong smell, and a severe infection after a poorly performed abortion. Another story involved a young woman who had been assaulted in a flower company where most workers were women, especially young women. In these cases, compañeras sought support from us because they knew they would find listening, guidance, and accompaniment.

Providing sexual education woman to woman

For several years now, we have taught practically how to use condoms. In Cotopaxi, for example, men would say they were too poor to buy them. So we made calculations with them: how much does a beer or a Coca-Cola cost compared to a condom? After those reflections, awareness grew, and we ourselves brought condoms to distribute. The same happened with contraceptive pills.

"For many of us, it was the first time openly talk-

ing about our bodies. I, for example, did not know what a condom was until I already had three daughters; I learned through the movement, practicing among *compañeras*, embarrassed at first but also with trust. That is how we learned to share with our daughters and sons without repeating the fears and silences we grew up with. In our communities, talking about sexuality was taboo and abortion was considered a sin, but little by little the possibility of contraception through pills, IUDs, or injections became more accepted. Today young women know more, although silence and inequality still remain.”

“Today education is expensive, there is no work, and life is no longer like before, when families could survive from the land. That is why many young women seek protection through remedies or methods. I grew up with fear: my father and the nuns told us that ‘those things’ were bad, and because of that I feared men. I never used modern contraceptives; I only knew about plants that grandmothers shared secretly and discreetly.”

We question all forms of colonialism

Regarding external funding, we sometimes feel there is no real interest in reaching our organizations or popular territories. Instead, agendas are imposed: “We only support abortion, and if you want to work on extractivism, look for other funding.” Coloniality has mutilated our peoples, and that is why we are critical. We do not identify either as NGOs or with academia.

Patriarchy is colonial, but not only Western: ancestral patriarchy also exists, even among peoples such as the Shuar Arutam, who were never colonized. We have the example of an older *compañera* who, in deeply patriarchal communities, broke with the idea of marriage, did not have children, and despite all customs became a leader in mixed organizations.

Together with the struggle for the right to decide over our bodies and territories, we have fought against capitalism and racism from the lived experiences and positions of women. In our schools, we analyze systems of oppression, from slavery and feudalism to capitalism and imperialism, alongside the transformations of feminisms.

Regarding abortion, we have discussed extensively who truly has guaranteed sexual and reproductive health and who does not. We connected with an international network that provided information about misoprostol and its risks, but in practice it sometimes became a business: men charging up to 280 dollars for a few pills.

Because we refused to stay silent, many times we did not receive funding. I remember a visit from a global NGO where a woman pointed at *compañeras* asking, “What is a vagina?” while offering a pacifier as a prize. They only counted numbers: how many pills distributed, how many users of misoprostol. We tried to explain that in communities you cannot simply hand out contraceptives, because if a husband found them,

the woman risked being beaten. But the response was: “Then women just have to be told to use them.” That imposed logic made us even more critical of colonialism and of the way women’s bodies are instrumentalized.

From feeling and from the body

In Luna Creciente we work not only from thinking and analysis, but also from feeling. We believe in wholeness. We experienced this when we shared with *compañeras* who were sex workers, who jokingly asked Indigenous women: “And how do you deal with desire wearing so many skirts?” Or when Indigenous *compañeras*, for the first time, reached the beach and entered the sea wearing their *anacos* (traditional skirts). That intimacy, that living together for several days, is also part of how we relate to our bodies.

In our workshops, we have insisted that wisdom does not come only from academia. If a woman cannot read or write, that does not make her experience any less valuable. We have spoken about the political economy of bodies and about how domination is imposed through Western knowledge systems. We do not recognize only academic knowledge, because even medicine itself has marginalized the ancestral wisdom of Indigenous peoples and nationalities. We have learned to validate other ways of thinking and feeling from our own bodies and territories, because we know resistance also lives there.

The importance of involving men

How we have fought for the right to abortion, for so many years! We come from large families; our mothers had more than twelve children. But we also followed another path: organizing ourselves in the commune, in community life, and in the defense of rights. Very quickly we understood that, beyond empowering women, it was also necessary to involve men.

That is why from the beginning we included them in our work. We organized workshops, theatre performances, photo-novels, radio spots, and community libraries to create spaces for dialogue. We asked them: “How are your family and your community doing?” Only then did they begin to realize what it means to bring children into the world without being able to provide education, food, or a secure future, especially when the state guarantees almost nothing. We began raising awareness among men, and that has brought some results.

Sometimes men approached us with accusations: “You are responsible for the deaths of girls.” We answered with direct questions: “How many children do you have? What did you contribute when your wife was pregnant? How did you treat her? Who decides how many children to have?” Little by little, they began recognizing their own responsibility, and over time some even became defenders of our organization. The current president of CONAIE, the son of one of our founders, is an example of that transformation.

Of course, it has not been easy. At first there was resistance: “Neither machismo nor feminism,” they would

say. But it was a process. We clarified concepts, shared struggles, and managed to move forward. In our communities, we have always defended the idea that the struggle for life and against violence must be collective. Positively empowering men is also necessary if we are to move toward the total decriminalization of abortion and toward lives free from violence.

Some feminist organizations look at us with suspicion because of this. They call us soft because we do not hate men or because we walk alongside them; others say we are too confrontational because we fight not only for parity but also for the body, the territory, and against extractivism. We are not in the middle: we have political clarity and a community feminism.

Along this path there were men who initially approached from machismo, but later even wanted to call themselves part of the Luna Creciente movement. And although we could not grant them that because we are a women's movement, their desire showed the strength of what we were building.

Working with peoples such as the Shuar Arutam showed us another dimension. There, we had to ask permission from the community president, and often we faced resistance from men who did not want women gathering together. They would say: "Do only women live here? We want to participate too." We showed them real life: women who wake first and sleep last, who carry the burden of children, who are forced into repeated pregnancies because otherwise they are considered unfit as wives. There too there were disputes, jealousy, and fear, but also brave women saying: "We want to control our own bodies."

In Luna Creciente we have learned that community feminism is not imposed; it is built step by step from the concrete realities of each people. We do not arrive to teach. We arrive to listen, to walk together. And that is our way of transforming life.

POLITICAL ADVOCACY

Political and territorial advocacy around abortion

In Luna Creciente, we have promoted many processes that have influenced policies and programmes at different levels: local, national, regional, and even global. Our steps have opened paths in sexual and reproductive rights, especially around abortion. But we have learned that a law, by itself, does not guarantee real changes in our bodies or our lives.

We could have insisted on the rhetoric of "we are progressive," won budgets, and appeared in headlines and on social media, but that was never our interest. For us, what matters most is built in the everyday life of communities, in the practice of autonomy and sovereignty. That is why we prefer to speak of safe abortion rather than decriminalization.

We have also seen how coloniality runs through health. We experienced this, for example, with the medical brigades that arrived in the Shuar Arutam territory: they came from the city with pills and contraceptives, but

without any process or continuity. That solved nothing and often left worse problems behind. In response, we chose community work, raising awareness from within and supporting women with closeness and respect.

Before the 2008 Constituent Assembly, we had already made progress in accessing misoprostol, although it was difficult for health promoters to use it in the territories. In Montecristi, many of us took a plane for the first time to be there, alongside other women's networks and organizations. We fought hard for two proposals: universal basic income for women and the full decriminalization of abortion. It was not easy.

That same year, during the debate on the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code, we proposed that femicide should be recognized as a responsibility of the state, by action or omission, and not only as an individual crime. The response was harsh: "That will happen in a century," they told us. The state washed its hands of both femicide and crimes against humanity and chose only to increase penalties. Even so, through internal congresses and dialogues with other movements, we kept insisting.

Our advocacy has been powerful, especially at the local level. Even before the Correa government, we were already taking proposals to the Decentralized Autonomous Governments. Although national political advocacy sometimes requires great effort from us, we know it has to be done. Because everything we do, from the smallest action to the broadest struggle, is political, and it is feminist politics.

Luna Creciente advocates for the right to free, safe, and accessible abortion

We are committed to free, safe, and accessible abortion, especially without barriers in our territories. What has been achieved so far was not easy: there were analyses, debates, and alliances with the few assembly members willing to listen, and above all with other expressions of women's and feminist movements. For example, the decriminalization of abortion in cases of rape and the actions for its implementation before the Constitutional Court. And even so, in the territories, especially outside Quito and other large cities, it remains a problem in our communities.

Our goal is clear: full decriminalization, as has already happened in Argentina and Colombia, examples that inspire and sustain us. We know that the law is not enough. Consciousness must be transformed, especially inside health facilities, where prejudice and resistance persist. We have made great progress in communities, but churches, institutions, and the state itself continue to criminalize us. We understand this as a structural issue: our bodies have always been judged and punished.

Gender-based violence and abortion

The violence women experience is an important part of the right to abortion. Femicide, for example, was denied for years: they said it only happened in cities, making invisible what was happening in our communities. In meetings with leaders, we have pushed discussions

about community rulings on violence against women and the right to make decisions over our own bodies.

In 2012, we carried out deeper research on sexual and reproductive health in several areas and discovered a painful truth: many women had been raped by their own partners, and from those forced pregnancies came postpartum crises, pregnancies not carried to term, and, in one area, a devastating practice: leaving newborns in a ravine because the mothers could not raise them and could not access safe abortion. "I already have eight children, I have no work, my partner is never around, I am only surviving," one compañera told us. In those contexts, with those and other testimonies, we confirmed that safe abortion is a vital necessity. We also accompanied cases of criminalization, such as that of a woman in Chimborazo prosecuted for ending her pregnancy.

In one Indigenous territory, we recovered this testimony: "Every culture has had its own ways. In the past, if a girl was born, she was already assigned to a man; from the age of six or seven, they would take her hunting as if she were part of a contract. That too was violence, marriages without love or consent. Today realities have changed: we live more mixed with mestizo populations, we know our rights, and we recognize that control over our bodies is something we are still learning to build."

FACING CRITICISM, PERSECUTION, AND CHALLENGES

Attempts to infiltrate the organization and break it apart

When we began speaking about the decriminalization of abortion, attempts to divide us also began. Some compañeras arrived through recommendations; they seemed close, like friends, and they supported marches and actions. But soon we saw their behavior change: what they wanted was to destroy the organization from within. It was painful to have to separate from them, but we knew we could not allow what we had built together to be broken apart.

The power of the church: Sexuality as sin for women

At first, speaking about abortion within our cultures was very difficult. Among healers and wise women, there was fear. Many compañeras were connected to churches, both Catholic and evangelical, that taught that sexuality was a sin. The first challenge was daring to speak among ourselves, to look at one another and place full abortion rights on our agenda, along with basic income. But taking that word into the communities was not easy: there was resistance from women and, above all, from male leaders.

Several of us have carried this struggle since we were young. One of us, at just sixteen years old, was reported as an "agitator" by the town priest. Another remembers when we were replicating a workshop in one of the organizations: a newly arrived priest became furious when he saw us talking about abortion and threatened to denounce us in the parish. We offered him a glass of water to calm him down. One compañera, who was pregnant,

raised her hand and said to him: "I did not want to have this child. Are you, Father, going to help us raise it?" That silenced him. We have always said: when a priest arrives, we make it clear from the beginning who we are and what we fight for. Because the Church, the media, and the oligarchy are powers that have never wanted women to decide.

In Loja, we lived through another experience. While defending water against extractivism, we were also defending abortion as part of the decision over our bodies and territories. A Catholic NGO entered the communities, but while they spoke about caring for nature, they also warned against us: they said we were murderers, that with our green scarves we promoted abortion. In response, they promoted their light-blue scarves to mark us as enemies.

Growing up with imposed fear

"Some of us come from religious boarding schools. One Indigenous compañera, orphaned as a child, remembers that the nuns taught that having a male friend was a sin, and becoming pregnant was even worse. They said that women who wore strap tops were 'whores' and that abortion led straight to hell. We were never able to talk about contraception or how to live sexuality freely. Among compañeras, we secretly asked one another how not to become pregnant; some said their grandmothers gave them plants such as malicua or seda to protect themselves. That was the education we received: fear, silence, and punishment. We grew up doubting everything the nuns called sin."

Resistance within Amazonian communities

Each culture and nationality has experienced abortion differently. "In our territory, almost no one spoke about it, and that is why it was so hard to begin organizing. In 2017, at the Pan-Amazonian Social Forum, we met with medical brigades and academic feminists, and there the first feminist tribunal was born. That space marked us, because from our vision of territory we affirmed that abortion is part of sovereignty over our bodies. We also shared struggles, such as the struggle of Nankints against extractivism, and from then on our network of friendships and resistance began to grow."

"Reaching the Shuar Arutam people was a difficult path: there are six associations and 48 centers, where many women were immersed only in life as part of a couple. The community judged us: if we met, it was because we had been 'abandoned' by our husbands. Some accused us of being involved in party politics, when all we wanted was to share experiences and unite forces among women.

We knew very well that jealousy and machismo carried weight in our culture: many men always wanted us with wawas in our arms, pregnant and busy, with no time for ourselves. Few accepted that a woman could make informed decisions about her body and sexuality. That is why it was so significant that, after years of struggle, one of our compañeras became the first woman

president of her people: a wise woman, without children, who broke through that ancient historical barrier.”

FEMINISM AND ACTIVISM

Feminists abort and leave their husbands

We begin by recognizing prejudice and advancing through rights. Just as we have the right to food, we also have the right to decide about our sexual and reproductive lives. A vital part of this has been talking about sexuality, the right to pleasure, contraception, and abortion, which has been and still is difficult because we were labeled libertines, “to say the least.” People questioned us: “And where do you learn these things? Why do you get a Pap smear if you are not married?”

In gatherings, even within our own organizations, doubts arose: are we feminists or not? Some of us defended a community feminism rooted in our peoples. But saying it out loud was difficult because, for many, feminism was tied to prejudice: that we only wanted abortions, to leave our husbands, that we did not want wawas (children). In debates, we remembered how even our own compañeras would tell us: “You complain with five wawas; we managed with twelve.”

Added to that was the demand to learn everything: politics, agroecology, organization. It was another workload, but also a path to defend what was ours from within. Even in religious spaces, some compañeras managed to position the issue by opening discussions in other ways, such as arguing that “malnutrition was not caused by the number of children, but by the living conditions in which we were raised.”

Persecution

Talking about abortion exposed us to risks. As women leaders, we faced not only prejudice but also direct persecution. One of our compañeras from the highlands suffered intense harassment because of her activism and for distributing pills for safe abortion. She spoke through megaphones in public squares, challenging censorship, and because of that she became a target.

Others of us were also singled out. Rumors spread that we performed abortions for money, and this was used to persecute us from within the communities themselves. They said we endangered women, that we wanted to profit from contraceptives. Even wise midwives warned us: “Help if you can, but only as much as possible, without exposing yourselves too much.”

We knew the danger was real. Many times we chose silence or turned to methods that elder women shared only with trusted people. Even so, we continued speaking, continued supporting one another. We repeated: “We advise living well and staying out of trouble,” while always remembering that the right to decide was part of both our personal and collective path.

Economic and material challenges to women’s participation

This issue was, and still is, a vital part of our organizational process as a movement. Financial resources

were and remain minimal; each compañera contributes whatever she can. In every region we brought potatoes, legumes, whatever was available, and we would say: “With potatoes and salt, we survive!” We also laughed while searching for ways to sustain activities, even asking compañeras who were sex workers how they managed to earn money so we could explore different ways of sustaining our organizations.

One of our greatest difficulties, across different peoples and communities, was and continues to be geographical distance and economic hardship. Our territories are spread across many cantons, and although many women wanted to participate, financial limitations and family responsibilities made it almost impossible. That is why we are also grateful to the compañeros, sons, and daughters who supported us. Many young people would come and say: “If my mother doesn’t go, who are we going to learn from?” That solidarity strengthened Luna Creciente and allowed us to continue.

“Few women in our culture could participate freely. Many had strict husbands who would not allow them to leave or become involved in community life. Luna Creciente has given us spaces to learn, to train ourselves, and to raise our voices so that we are heard and our right to decide is respected.”

“The economic situation remains an obstacle: some of us work with palm, the land, mangroves, the jungle, in laundries or food stalls, and sometimes we cannot attend meetings. The pandemic exposed these weaknesses even more, when many single women and women heads of household were left at home without income. That is why preparing young people is so important, so that in the future they can defend their rights and participate in feminist politics. We must be present so that others do not speak for us, but with us.”

Now we’ve been bathed in oil and criticism slides off us

The persecution we face does not come only from outside, but also from within organizations themselves. We are attacked for speaking about abortion, sexual health, and reproductive rights, in attempts to weaken our leadership. They call us “feminazis,” stigmatize us, and portray us as radicals, even within our own families and social circles.

At first, it hurt because people did not understand our work. Thanks to the support of our families and the organization, we kept going. We learned to explain the process to friends and compañeras, to show why we defend our rights. Although these comments were limiting, they did not stop us. Now we can say we have been bathed in oil: criticism slides off us, and we continue firmly on our path, with reason and conviction on our side.

ALLIANCES

At the national level, we have alliances with the Women’s Coalition of Ecuador, which we hope will continue, and with the Plurinational and Popular Parliament

of Women and Feminist Organizations, although that space sometimes wavers. We are also part of regional and global networks such as AFM, FLP, Mujeres FOSPA, and ILC, and in some of these spaces we are still seen as something unusual: a feminist movement of women from popular sectors.

Our alliances are diverse because our compañeras are also diverse: Indigenous, mestiza, and Black women of different ages. That is why we walk alongside the Indigenous movement, with CONAIE, and with the Afro-Ecuadorian movement, the Amazon Defense Front, the National Anti-Mining Front, the Alliance Against Prisons, and human rights organizations.

Around abortion, we have had spaces within the Coalition itself and have coordinated with foundations and collectives. We participated in “Abortion for Rape” until it was recognized in law, although we also engaged in dialogue with the “Free and Total Abortion” space. At the regional level, we are part of the International Land and Territory Coalition of Latin America and the Caribbean, where we participate as women defenders of nature. In 2018, we promoted the Feminist Platform for Lands and Territories from the Global South, which began with eight organizations and now includes ten, with the goal of more actively integrating feminist organizations from Africa and Asia.

Another important space was the National Platform for Women’s Rights, where we sought to come together to make abortion in cases of rape visible and to propose an agenda around economic rights, food sovereignty, and the full decriminalization of abortion. It was a moment when we achieved broad alignment with other organizations.

We think carefully about who we walk with

We believe in unity, but we discuss carefully who we walk with and who we do not. It is not about joining every platform simply to appear in photos next to those in power. “Not just any woman represents us.” We prefer to converge around concrete issues, such as the decriminalization of abortion, protection for women leaders, or the defense of organizational processes. We know we cannot risk years of work because of misunderstandings or outside impositions.

Convergence is necessary, but it must be with organizations that have a clear political vision. A coalition built by two or three people without organizational roots is useless. We value alliances with those who know and accompany our struggles, and we also work with long-standing feminists whenever there is trust and coherence.

Experience has taught us to distinguish: some alliances last only to a certain point, while others endure as long as coherence exists. We distrust opportunistic politicians who say anything during election periods, sign documents, and later forget their word. For us, one’s word is sacred, just as it was for our grandmothers, and political participation is not limited to voting.

Difficulties in building alliances based on equality and mutual respect

We have many alliances, but they are not always easy. It is difficult to articulate with organizations that have more resources, greater access to media, and stronger social media presence, because they end up having louder voices than thousands of impoverished compañeras.

Even so, we maintain important convergences. “Coalition for Abortion” is a space where compañeras who have sustained the struggle for years participate, and we respect them because they also respect us. The same is true for the Plurinational Parliament of Women, born from the Parliament of the Peoples, which despite tensions remains important.

Each organization contributes from its own diversity: the Indigenous movement, Black women’s movements, rural communities. But we also face distrust toward electoral participation because many times those spaces do not offer real guarantees. Although we continue to be invited, we notice that some organizations want us present but silent, or prefer to invite others who are more compliant so they can appear in the photo.

That is why we say alliances are not simple. We walk together because we believe it is the only way forward, but we also know we must protect ourselves. We do not close ourselves off, but neither do we hand over our voice or our struggle to anyone who does not respect our political project.

Other struggles and the 2019 national strike

During the 2019 national strike, we clearly saw the differences between organizations. There were compañeras who had previously agreed with us on abortion decriminalization, but when the strike came, they stepped aside: “We support this issue, but not the others.” We, on the other hand, were where we always are: on the front lines, in the road blockades, cooking and finding food to sustain the mobilization.

They had strong control over social media and constantly posted what was happening, while the bodies in the streets were ours, those of compañeras from the territories. There we clearly saw that not all organizations embrace integral struggles; some limit themselves to a single issue. We believe in something different: in a broad struggle interwoven with every aspect of life.

The greatest struggles in Ecuador in recent years have been led by the Indigenous movement, especially by compañeras from Cotopaxi, who have been on the front lines since ancient times. Some compañeras even gave birth in the middle of demonstrations; that shows the depth of our commitment. “Sexual and reproductive health is not just discourse, it is risking one’s life.”

“I remember one march where safe abortion was one of the central issues, though not the only one. In Luna Creciente, we decided by consensus who could travel to Quito because there was never enough money for all of us to go. But another organization went directly to one of our territories and offered to pay for compañeras to

attend the march, publicly announcing that Luna Creciente already had its participation ready. That caused conflicts with mixed-gender leaderships, internal ruptures, and persecution. These are wounds that remind us there is mistrust and that alliances must be handled carefully.”

“We value and recognize that these organizations have strength on social media and can amplify messages that we ourselves cannot always spread. We appreciate that and believe it is necessary. But we do not accept that they speak in the name of all women, especially when they do not experience the same vulnerabilities in their own flesh. That requires care, respect, and responsibility.”

Frustration and distrust toward politicians

We have also learned to distrust electoral politics. There was an Indigenous assembly member who voted against the decriminalization of abortion in cases of rape. The outrage was enormous because, although he was not from our parish, he was Indigenous, and we expected a different position from him.

Nor is it a guarantee when a woman reaches a position of power. A former female minister was the one who ordered repression and killings against our brothers and sisters. Today there is much talk about 50/50 representation, but it is not enough for half the assembly members to be women if there is no conviction, political education, and loyalty to the struggles. Parity without consciousness and organizational processes becomes an empty number.

In our provinces, we have had female assembly members from different political parties who, when it came time to vote, positioned themselves against the women’s movement, despite speeches that seemed to say otherwise. That has shown us that female representation alone changes nothing.

What does make a difference is when compañeras shaped through organizational processes reach those positions. With them, we can speak openly, receive alerts about budgets, and defend resources together. There, trust exists. But not with just anyone who dresses as a feminist or claims to represent women.

“Elections are like floods: they sweep away years of collective construction, of crops planted patiently.” That is why we continue insisting on the need for feminist political education schools and deep processes that strengthen consciousness and rights. “It is not enough for a woman to hold office; what matters is the process she comes from and the struggles to which she remains loyal.”

AN INTEGRAL STRUGGLE: BODY, LAND, TERRITORY

We cannot divide our struggles. Abortion is an integral part of all struggles

We do not see our struggles as separate. Just as we fight for land to grow food and for clean food for our families, we also fight for the right to decide over our

bodies. In Luna Creciente, we do not speak only about motherhood; we speak about the whole of life: the girl, the young woman, the adult woman, the elder.

Abortion is one struggle, yes, but it goes hand in hand with the defense of the highlands, the rivers, the jungle, and the organizing against mining and pollution. For us, all of this is the same thing: protecting life. We cannot say, “First this and then the other,” because what happens to the body also happens to the land and the territories. “This is what our grandmothers taught us: we are part of individual life, collective life, and nature.”

“What has sustained us as a movement is that coherence. Because we feel in our own flesh what is missing: there is no land to plant on, there are droughts, we are poisoned with chemicals, crops are lost. And even though it hurts, we remain standing because we know you cannot defend only one piece of life.”

Clarity in the struggle: The right to safe abortion is part of our feminist political project

We are clear about our path. No struggle is easy; all of them demand something from us, but all are worthwhile. And among them, safe abortion is one of the hardest and most necessary. We know that perhaps it will not be for us, but for our daughters and granddaughters, and even so we continue, because we will not allow women to keep dying for not being able to decide.

Abortion, like the defense of water, land, and health, are struggles that walk together. We cannot let go of one and keep only the other. We always say: words and actions must be the same thing. And if we say we fight for life, then we must also fight so that no woman dies from an unsafe abortion.

Our horizon is to change this world, to make it more just and dignified. And even if we have no money, even if we are persecuted, we continue. Because this is not a job; it is our life, our history, our future. This is what we have been taught: struggle cannot be broken into pieces. The struggle is one and the same, like the land, like the body, like the community.

The traces we leave for daughters and granddaughters

We say that this path did not begin today. “One compañera got involved in these things from a very young age, when talking about sex or the body seemed vulgar, hidden, forbidden. Many of our mothers and grandmothers repeated that a woman should be a wife, a mother, remain in the house. I myself used to say: women spent their lives bent over, caring for children, tending the cooking pot, and nothing more. There was no space to go out, to talk, much less to gather with other women. That was unthinkable.”

“Today there is a little more openness, and it is thanks to those who walked before us. Now I can speak more freely with my sixteen-year-old daughter, even with my sons. Before, it was not like that. Our mothers did not talk about these things; we were raised in silence and shame. If something happened to us, we kept it in our hearts. You could not even tell your partner.”

“We feel it is our responsibility to continue the path they opened. We are here because others raised their voices first. Even with difficulties, the challenge is to remain united, not to let the movement fall apart. Because if one woman leaves, it feels as though everything weakens. We have to push together, open the way for those who come after us. As we say, Clarita will not be here forever, so others will have to take up the torch, continue with her name and with the names of all those who already gave their strength.”

“I never imagined myself attending these women’s

gatherings. I was shy, quiet in my community, and now I represent my people, my association. That gives us strength: training ourselves as women leaders to defend rights, not only our own but also those of our sons and daughters, and of the land where we were born. Because without territory there is no life, and transnational companies want to leave us with nothing. Being together is a form of defense; it is also a way of saying we are not alone.”

Compañeras, the future is ours and the present is resistance!