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Argentina

Beyond the rejection of the law for the legalization of abortion in Argentina: a fourth feminist wave?

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV525 - October 2018 -
Publication date: Saturday 13 October 2018

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Two correspondents for the French journal *Contretemps*, Fanny Gallot and Bettina Ghio, were in Buenos Aires a few days before the Senate vote. They conducted two interviews, to retrace the building and the challenges of the present feminist movement: one with Dolores Fenoy and the other with Dora Barrancos. Then, shortly after the rejection by the Senate, they asked some questions to middle and high school girls who are involved in the movement.

Introduction

On 8 August 2018, the Senate finally rejected the proposed law for the legalization of abortion in Argentina proposed by the [Campaign for the Right to Free and Safe Legal Abortion](#). To believe that the hundreds of thousands of women who mobilized have lost would be reductive. As feminist activist Dolores Fenoy said just before the vote, "The movement will continue no matter what. We will surely be sad, we will have less energy, but never, never, will we be demoralized or even less demobilized. And since the vote, many texts circulate on social networks stating that "we won". [1]

In fact, it is a feminist tidal wave that is submerging the country; moreover, several Argentinian editorialists have spoken of a "girls' revolution" - since girls from 13 to 20 years old are a driving force in this movement: "girls who occupy, for the most part, the streets, colleges, subways, buses, squares, family meals, social networks, are under 25 years old". [2] On 13 June there were a million of them keeping watch in front of the Congress when MPs had to vote on the bill. On 1 August they organized for example Operation Spider in the subway in Buenos Aires and every line evoked an essential aspect of the mobilization: " Line A was centred on the demand for the law from a perspective of human rights, demanding the right to decide for our own bodies "; "Line D demanded comprehensive sex education. [3] in order to discover both the contraceptive pill to take advantage of it, and legal abortion to decide freely and to make a world habitable for everyone."

This massive mobilization comes after the one launched by "Ni una menos" ("Not one less") - a collective of journalists and intellectuals - that had mobilized about 300,000 Argentines in the streets on June 3, 2015 to denounce machist violence, after a wave of femicides in early 2015. It is also the continuation of a process over several decades, marked by the National Meetings of Women who meet each year in a different city of the country and each time bring together more participants: they were 100,000 in Rosario in 2016, for example.

Finally, this Argentinian feminist wave is not isolated, because it has lit a flame across the continent, and beyond: Chile has also been the scene of very big demonstrations, with regular exchanges of activists between the two countries; groups of women activists are also forming in Mexico [4] ; the women's strike on 8 March 2018 in the Spanish state was historic.

Dolores Fenoy has been a feminist activist for over 30 years. A psychologist by profession, for almost nineteen years, she is the general coordinator of 0800, a telephone number set up by the Ministry of Health. She has been involved since the beginning in the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Free and Safe Abortion.

Contretemps: What exactly is 0800?

DF: 0800 is the only welcoming telephone system of the country's Health Ministry. It is a free, centralized telephone line that responds confidentially to the requests of the people of every province in the country. And, for seven years, there has been a specific line for Sexual and Reproductive Health. From this line, we take care of all requests for information, advice, assistance and support and we give, of course, information on everything related to sexual and reproductive health. This line depends on the National Programme for Sexual Health and Responsible Reproduction, which has existed in Argentina since 2002. [5] We give information on different contraceptive methods, which are subsequently offered to women free of charge.

This service is especially intended for people who depend exclusively on the public health system. It should be noted that in Argentina there are three health subsystems: the public, the private sector (known as "prepagas", with very high care costs) and the "Obras Sociales" (Mutual Aid Societies) which applied only to those in work. This telephone line then welcomes people who do not benefit from the "Obra Social", and even less from the private sector. We then give all the information that people need and we deal, of course, with many situations of unwanted pregnancies. Up to now, this concerned only cases of danger to the life or health of the mother or in case of rape. [6] But since the debate was launched last March, when the 2018 bill was introduced thanks to the Campaign, the number of calls for an abortion has increased dramatically.

All these requests are processed and, on the same day, the information is transmitted to the National Sexual Health Department, which then directs the person concerned to a health service close to her home, where she is received and assisted properly, with the respect that she deserves. At this point, we can see whether the request may or may not fit into the cases envisaged by the existing law. Despite this logistics being in place, there are many obstacles, so it would be easier if we had a law that legalized abortion. Indeed, there are health professionals who refuse to receive these women; others play for time by asking for useless examinations or appointments with just as useless psychologists. With any request for abortion, it is necessary to take into account not only the danger to the physical health of the woman but also the psychological effects. Moreover, in most cases of unwanted pregnancies of underage women, these pregnancies are the result of sexual violence, very often within the same family, and this case is taken into account by the existing law, because it is a question of rape.

Contretemps: How did the Campaign start?

DF: The Campaign has been active for thirteen years and emerged from the National Women's Meetings, which have existed in our country for thirty-three years. In the early 1990s, at one of these meetings, the lawyer and comrade Dora Coledesky, returning from exile in France, brought up the issue of the fight for the right to abortion. It was a time when there were no public measures taken concerning either health or sex education, and contraceptive methods were not even distributed. At first, it seemed impossible to obtain a law for the right to abortion: we did not even have access to contraception! It seemed more logical to demand that first and then fight for the right to abortion. Dora remains the pioneer, she sowed the seeds of this fight in Argentina. Later on we established within these meetings, workshops to discuss the right to abortion and in particular to examine possible strategies for obtaining it. At the end of the 1990s, we created a Commission for the Right to Abortion, but there was always space within the National Meetings to discuss this issue. So in 2005 launched what is known as the "National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Free and Safe Abortion", and since then it has not ceased to grow.

Contretemps: And the impact of the movement Ni una menos?

DF: This movement came a lot later. The National Meetings provided the bulk of the critical mass; they are the pillar, the foundation that made possible the basis for everything else. Ni una menos would not even exist if there had not been previously all the discussions and work within the meetings. This movement appeared in 2015 as a reaction to

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a new case of femicide that seemed to be the pinnacle of all the other murders of women and girls. There was an impressive demonstration at the time, but the women's and feminist movement has always been strong in Argentina, and we have a long history of struggles. For example, in 1982, still under military dictatorship, with a group of women, we demanded the right to feminine sexual pleasure before the Congress of the nation. With the return of democracy, in 1983 we worked on violence against women. We also fought for the restoration of shared parental authority in 1985 and subsequently for the right to divorce in 1987.

Contretemps: How did we get to the point of proposing this bill for the right to abortion today, is it thanks to the Campaign?

DF: The Bill was drafted within the Campaign, but it was not the first, because it is the seventh time that we presented a bill to the Chamber of Deputies. We have presented one every two years. It is a question of parliamentary time, because in Argentina we renew half of the seats every two years.

Contretemps: But why was the debate so important this time?

DF: Because there has been an enormous transversal work. Chairs have been opened at the university, and we have attempted to expand and install the debate in a solid way in all walks of life. We have also intervened in secondary schools. The Campaign has about 500 women's organizations in every province in the country. At first, we were demoralized with the change of government, we thought we were not going to get anything. But to our surprise, on March 1st, which is the day of the opening of parliamentary activity, President Mauricio Macri authorized a debate on the bill that we presented. There are different interpretations of this gesture. No doubt the president opened up the debate - despite the fact that he does not agree with abortion - because he thought it was a kind of curtain to hide all the political and economic problems affecting Argentina. We never thought it was because of the personal or political conviction of the president. In any case, this was possible thanks to feminism, to the social movement of women, because sooner or later the issue of abortion had to be debated.

It was one of the most collectively worked out projects, which in addition has the broadest consensus in the women's movement. It was written along with a group of lawyers, doctors, psychoanalysts and psychologists from all over the country, along with comrades who had experience on the issue; it was then discussed in plenary meetings of the Campaign. These plenaries, bringing together comrades from all the provinces, took place once a month or were summoned urgently. One of our comrades who was indispensable for the drafting of the project is the jurist Neli Minyersky, who is 89 years old and is one of the co-editors of the reform of the country's Civil Code. She is present, moreover, in all the demonstrations and rallies.

Once the project was presented, we had to get a certain number of signatures from MPs, and for that we had to work with the political opposition, which did not necessarily represent an obstacle for us, because our struggle is transversal. Thus, some 25 comrades from different sectors met to discuss the political strategy we needed in order subsequently to work with the MPs. With great perseverance, some comrades devoted themselves to the Campaign and in particular to looking for signatures of MPs. On previous occasions, many MPs rejected us, but that was not the case this year. Thus, the bill came before parliament with the approval of 72 MPs of very different profiles, belonging to different political currents. It was this bill that was debated in the Congress on June 13th and subsequently in the Senate on August 8th this year.

Contretemps: If the project is not validated by the Senate, what do you think will be the consequences for the women's movement?

DF: The movement will continue no matter what happens. We will surely be sad, we will have less energy, but never,

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never, will we be demoralized and even less demobilized. As in many other countries, we women in Argentina have a long tradition of mobilization, struggles, achievements, but we never got anything the first time, we always had to fight and we never received anything as a present. We have forged ourselves through this history of struggle and we feel very strong, and even if the Senate rejects the bill, all is not lost.

Contretemps: In this situation, are there debates on strategy within the Campaign?

DF: One of the main debates is on whether or not we will negotiate with the law. There are also other discussions that are more related to the mobilization itself, such as where to assemble, whether to be in front of the Senate or the presidential palace, how to be more numerous next time, etc. There is a very important group of very young girls who are in concrete action, they are busy singing, painting their faces, finding green scarves, and so on. There are different teams, but generally we reach decisions by consensus. The Campaign is characterized by its transversality, there are no leaders, nor prominent personalities.

Contretemps: Where are these meetings held? In workplaces, in schools?

DF: We intervene through open discussions in secondary schools when we are invited by the "Centros de Estudiantes" [7], and also in some unions and universities. But it is thanks to social networks that the articulation between comrades is possible. They allow us to access information quickly, statistics on maternal mortality data, etc. and of course to organize rallies, like the "mareas verdes" for example. [8]

Contretemps: Is there a sex education law in Argentina?

DF: Yes, the Integral Sex Education Act has been in place since 2013, but it does not apply everywhere as it should and in the same way. [9] However, this law does not require a large budget - the Ministry of Education sends out printed material. But it is not always distributed in schools because of obstruction by provincial governments and churches. For example, there are some very conservative provinces that have never applied it, such as the province of Tucuman, which they now want to declare as a "pro-life province". There are cultural and religious barriers in the country that are deeply rooted in society. And at the same time, it is very hypocritical, because it is in these northern provinces of Argentina, which are the most conservative and rigid, and where the Catholic Church - but not only it, there are also evangelical churches - has a lot of influence, that the pregnancy rates of girls under 15 are the highest. There are even sometimes 11-year-old girls who are pregnant. It is also in these provinces that the number of femicides and rapes is the highest. [10] In the province of Salta, for example, instead of providing comprehensive sexual education from the Ministry of Education of the Nation, they follow a school programme dictated by the Catholic Church, where it is advised, among other things, not to have sexual intercourse before marriage.

Contretemps: And how can you explain the openness of Argentina on certain themes that touch on sexuality, such as the existence of the right to egalitarian marriage since some years ago, and this closed attitude with regard to abortion?

DF: That's a big question. Even though some of us, the feminists, had experienced it as a bit of an injustice, we supported, of course, the right to marriage for all and the gender identity law in 2012. I think that there are structural and cultural issues in our society that are very strong and one of them - but it's not just the case in Argentina, it's a global issue - is that women are producers of children who ensure and strengthen the workforce in the capitalist system. The social control of women's bodies dates back to the history of humanity and our capacity for gestation is the last bastion of patriarchy over our bodies, our autonomy, our decisions to be able to choose whether or not we want to be mothers. There is also a romantic picture of motherhood, the mother is sacralised. Yet, at the same time, we see abandoned mothers, who have many dependent children, who have no work and who go out to work on the

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street in the middle of winter with their children: there is no protection for these women or for their children. There is thus a double discourse and this law is puncturing the very foundations of patriarchy and the lack of respect for women's autonomy.

With marriage for all, it was a question of recognizing the rights of a group of citizens considered to be second-class, because they did not have the possibility to legalize their romantic relationships. There were very unfair situations: if one of the partners was ill, the other did not have the right to be present because he or she was not considered a family member.

Contretemps: And why the green scarf?

DF: It appeared by pure chance. At one of the National Women's Meetings, which ended with a big rally, the Campaign needed a symbol and that's when the green scarf appeared. There is a link with the white scarf of the Mothers of the Plaza de Maya [\[11\]](#) - even though it is worn around the neck and not on the head like the Mothers -, a symbol already installed in Argentine society. We did not want purple, or any other colour that is already used by political parties or unions. Green appears as a mark of struggle for the right to abortion and it is the colour of hope.

*Dora Barrancos is a sociologist, historian and feminist. She has written several books on the history of women in Argentina: [Las mujeres y sus luchas en historia Argentina](#) ; [Mujeres, entre la casa y la plaza](#). She agreed to answer a few questions from *Contretemps*.*

From time to time, Paula Lenguita, who is a sociologist, also participates in the conversation.

Contretemps: Is the mobilization for the law witnessing the emergence of a new feminist generation?

DB: The mobilization of teenage girls exists mainly in the large urban centres. There is a difference between the mobilization in the capital and that in the suburbs, which is less important, if only because the demonstrations take place here and it is more difficult and more expensive to move: there is support, but less mobilization. It is true that what is surprising is the mobilization of girls under 17, from 13 to 17 years old: this is really the most mobilized sector.

Contretemps: Are they girls from the popular classes?

DB: They are mostly middle-class. Teenage girls from the working class are more active in their schools; the middle schools in popular neighbourhoods are very active for example. It is more difficult in the popular sectors because pregnancies can have another resonance. We need to make a real analysis. Teenage pregnancies do not have the same impact in the working class, as Laura Pinero shows in her book *Felices por un rato: el embarazo adolescente desde la mirada de sus protagonistas*. There is the idea of a kind of comfort, a palliative, even if it is paradoxical.

Contretemps: What is the relationship between the movement Ni una menos and this one?

DB: Ni una menos is an organization and this is a plural movement. It is true that the call of Ni una menos produced enormous demonstrations from the beginning and also made possible the international strike of March 8th 2017. There are very many organizations or proto-organizations and there are also many unorganized women.

Contretemps: You were talking about the March 8th women's strikes? What can you say?

DB: There were moments of total stoppages but it did not happen all day. Work stopped. But the challenge was also for domestic work to stop. If no woman works at home, we go even further than the strike. But in fact, that did not happen very much. What we were able to measure was formal work. For example, at CONICET, we stopped, not all day, but we stopped for one or two hours, it was extraordinary. There were things in the public sector. I do not know too much about the industrial and commercial sectors, I think it was symbolic.

PL: But there was a lot of resistance from men, including activists, and it is not easy in this context for women to assume this commitment, to make this whole chain of domestic work visible. There was a whole debate about the place of men in the protests: from the first demonstration, the feminists did not want them to be there, or to be present in a secondary role.

DB: There has been a lot of resistance but today, we see changes in trade-union and political discourse: "we cannot conduct politics without them", that is quite remarkable.

Contretemps: How does the present movement fit into the history of Argentinean feminism?

DB: The girls here are talking about a fourth wave. The third wave corresponding to the questioning of normative heterosexism and the emergence of post-colonial feminisms (years 2000/2010) - the first wave going until about the 1950s and the second until the 1990s - the temporalities are a little different compared to Europe or the United States because of the dictatorship [12]. And yes, maybe we are facing a fourth wave because this is the first time that feminism has attained a mass scale, that it is conducting real mass politics: this massive mobilization is completely new. Moreover, the girls paint their faces, it is a festive mobilization: there is a resistance beyond the law. "My body is mine". There is a great deal of deconstruction of normative sexuality, going as far as the negation of anatomy. The girls do a lot of varied experiments, moreover without the need for clandestinity, and that's a part of the great revolution of the moment. Their references are not as categorical as may have been the case in the past of feminism: there were specific rules, and these new emerging groups seem to me to be much more porous.

Contretemps: And what about the Celeste, the anti-abortionists who wear a sky-blue scarf?

DB: Some of the celeste are completely under the yoke of the Catholic or Evangelical Church. And behind this struggle for the right to abortion, there is also the issue of the separation between the Church and the State, which is already finding expression with the orange scarf. [13]

Martina, 14, a pupil at Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires - a prestigious institution of public secondary education in the Argentine capital -, Guadalupe and Malena, 15, students at the Juan Pedro Esnaola School of Music in Buenos Aires.

Contretemps: how did you get involved in the movement for the right to abortion?

Martina: I started getting involved in feminist issues and mainly in the movement for the right to abortion a few months ago, when I was going into high school. My school in particular is very active around these issues and we are all very aware of all the rights that have been taken away from us, those for which we must fight and why.

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Guadalupe: I was present on August 8th and during all the demonstrations that took place for the legalization of abortion. On June 13th and August 8th, we left our college with our classmates and we went to spend the night in front of the Congress. On June 13th, when the Members of Parliament voted in favour of the bill, it was an immense joy, an emotion difficult to explain, to see all the comrades fighting for something and to see how we were making history, that impressed me a lot. And the very fact of writing that still gives me goose bumps.

Malena: My school participated in both the June 13th and August 8th votes. On both occasions, we organized a vigil in front of the Congress as well as other actions, such as demonstrations and roadblocks.

Contretemps: How were the debates and the movement organized in your school? Were they mostly followed by girls or did boys also participate? How did you perceive these discussions?

Martina: In my school in particular the debates on feminism are organized by a collective called "Mujeres empoderadas" ("Women empowered"). Everyone can intervene in these debates, but we give speaking priority to "childbearing bodies".

Guadalupe: Feminism is changing my life. I speak in the present tense and not in the past because the struggle is continuing, even though much remains to be done to deconstruct what this system imposes on us, especially in terms of what it makes seem to be natural. I consider feminism as a beautiful movement, the most beautiful of all: empowerment, discussions, embraces, laughter and tears. Every day we are a little stronger and nothing will stop us.

Malena: The debate over abortion is an important discussion, not only so that thousands of women (and childbearing bodies) do not die or have significant after-effects because of illegal abortions, but also so that women can decide about their own bodies, so this is an essential struggle for the feminist movement. And personally, I think you cannot be a feminist if you are not in favour of abortion because being a feminist means fighting for gender equality. The feminist movement is destroying patriarchy. We are an enormous mass of women who have had enough of being oppressed and it is very exciting to participate in this historic event. We will not be silent anymore.

Contretemps: How did you experience the Senate discussions and the deciding vote that ultimately rejected this bill for the right to abortion?

Martina: It seems to me that we all experienced in the same way the week that this project was voted on by the Senate: in the street to fight for this law. Some senators will remain in history because they defended the bill as if it were a struggle waged by themselves, ignoring the movement of women and of all those who were in the streets and who fought for this bill. But we saw above all how many senators will remain in history as being responsible for the deaths of thousands of women as a result of illegal abortions.

Guadalupe: it seems to me that the senators voted by looking at their reality, their problems and based themselves on their principles, completely forgetting the "childbearing bodies", completely forgetting the lives of the "childbearing bodies": once again, men want and believe that they have power over our own bodies. I really think they have stayed in prehistory, in the Stone Age, the age of the dinosaurs. But unfortunately for them, I must tell them that we will not be silent anymore. Patriarchy will collapse and feminism will win.

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[1] Mariana Carbajal, "Ganamos" 9 August 2018, *Pagina 12*.

[2] Luciana Peker, "La revolucion de las hijas" 16 June 2018, *Pagina 12*

[3] Despite the law that was adopted in 2006, it is not applied everywhere or in the same way.

[4] Charles Delouche, "Le système patriarcal pèse sur les structures politiques", *Libération*, 7 August 2018.

[5] See [here](#).

[6] In March 2012, the Supreme Court ruled that abortion in cases of rape or risk to the woman's life is legal and that a sworn affidavit is sufficient to authorize a legal abortion. It also ordained that provincial governments should write protocols for the application and management of legal abortions in cases of rape or life-threatening risk.

[7] These are student organizations present in all secondary schools and universities. Their goal is to represent the students within each institution vis-À-vis the authorities, ensuring their rights as well as fighting for a better educational quality. They can sometimes be associated with unions or political organizations.

[8] "Green waves" - a kind of mass party in the streets where the demonstrators wear the green scarf as well as flags of the same colour.

[9] The law was adopted in 2006 but did not come into force immediately.

[10] During the debate in the Senate, a senator from Salta made completely unacceptable comments about what should or should not be considered rape, thus ruling out situations of abuse within the family. In Spanish see [here](#).

[11] Since the dictatorship, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have been meeting weekly to obtain justice for their "disappeared" children, murdered during the dictatorship.

[12] The reference is to the last military dictatorship in Argentina, from 1976 to 1983.

[13] After the Senate vote, Dolores Fenoy also affirmed that "among the consequences of the rejection of this Bill for the right to abortion, the demand for the separation of Church and State has taken on a major force. Without delay, the same August 8th, signatures were gathered to demand the apostasy of the Catholic Church. It is a movement that is gaining momentum and impetus from the Argentina Coalition for a Secular State - CAEL."