

THE CASE OF ARGENTINA

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In Argentina, the debate on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion reached its highest point in 2018 and spearheaded the reorganization of conservative religious and secular forces. These groups have been very active and achieved their goals: the law reform project was rejected by a very small number of votes. After this legislative rejection, a crusade against “gender ideology” erupted in the country. In the previous twelve years, the Kirchner administrations had taken important steps towards the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights and the implementation of public policies to guarantee them: the Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation laws, which established the free distribution of contraceptives (2002) and regulated assisted reproduction, the Comprehensive Sexual Education Law (2006), the Equal Marriage legislation (2010) and the Gender Identity Law (2012).

During the parliamentary debate on abortion, several “educational” and “scientific” organizations opposing abortion rights played a major role in the propelling of ideas against the reform, which aimed at permitting the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (in Spanish “IVE”) until the fourteenth weeks of gestation. Amongst these voices, the most vocal were the Universidad Católica de Argentina (Catholic University of Argentina, especially the Institute for Marriage and Family), the Universidad Austral (Austral University, specifically the Institute of Sciences for the Family), the Catholic University of Salta (Catholic University of Salta), the Academia La Plata (La Plata Academy), and the Centro de Bioética para la Persona y la Familia (Center on Bioethics, Person and the Family). In addition, authors such as Jorge Scala, Agustin Laje and Nicolás Marquez -- internationally known, especially across Latin America, for their anti-gender and anti-abortion positions -- have strongly engaged in efforts to propel reactionary views, anti-gender and anti-rights discourses.

In 2011, Jorge Scala's published the book *Ideología de Género o Género como instrumento de poder (Gender Ideology or Gender as a Power Tool)* that had a major impact in Latin America, amongst both Catholic and Evangelical sectors. During the 2018 legislative debate on abortion reform, many parliamentarians opposing it based their arguments on a paper published by Scala in 2006 entitled *Abortion: Demystifying the Numbers*, which contested empirical data informing that legalization reduces the number of abortions, to instead affirm that it makes these figures to go up.

In 2018, when the abortion reform debate took place, Agustín Laje was the Director of an ultraconservative institution called Centro de los Estudios Libres de Córdoba (Center of Free Studies of Cordoba) whose production articulates anti-gender and anti-abortion discourses with ultra-neoliberal tenets, such as the primacy of private property and individual liberty over and above social and collective values.¹ Since the early 2010s, Laje had viciously criticized human rights, exalting the role of the military during the dictatorship regimes that ruled the country between the 1960s and 1980s. He also systematically attacked the Kirchner administrations and these crusades gave him much public visibility. During the 2018 debate on the abortion reform, he released a number of YouTube videos criticizing feminism, the sexual diversity movement, “gender ideology” and the legalization of abortion. One of these videos, *15 Lies About Abortion* had over a million viewers².

Nicolas Marquez is a lawyer and writer from Buenos Aires. He also represents the views of Argentina's ultra-right and military wings and other religious and secular conservative groups. He was also quite active in using social networks during the discussion on abortion³. In 2016, Laje and Márquez published *El Libro Negro de la Nueva*

1 He now lives in Spain where he has strong connections with the right-wing party Vox and the ultra-Catholic NGO Hazte Oír and its international digital branch CITIZEGO.

2 For more information, see Arrigoni (2018).

3 It is noteworthy the fact that Márquez was denounced by his ex-wife for physical and sexual violence against her and her 4-year-old daughter.

Izquierda- Ideología de Género o Subversión Cultural (*The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion*) that would become a sort of bible of anti-gender, anti-abortion and anti-leftist ideas across Latin America. The book central thesis is that after the fall of the Berlin walls in 1989, as it became increasingly difficult for the left to mobilize labor, Marxists shifted their mode of operation towards a Gramscian strategy of cultural revolution, in which feminism and gender have a central role. While the book recovers and repeats arguments used by many other authors, such as Scala, its singularity is that, in line with positions previously developed by Laje it articulates these views with flagrant neoliberal stance and policy proposals.

This brief recapturing shows that, almost for two decades, these sexular and religious conservative forces had been generating a political platform against abortion rights, “gender ideology”, the feminist movement, sexual diversity, secularism and, more recently, equality-oriented state policies described by them as “Marxism”. All these elements have somehow jumped out of the box during the 2018 abortion legal reform debates.

In addition to the conservative legal and policy arguments against abortion raised at the Congress and public debates, “pro-life” organizations -- such as the Corporación de los Abogados Católicos (Corporation of Catholic Lawyers), the Comisión Federal de Abogados Provida (Federal Commission of Pro-life Lawyers) and the NGOs Vida y Esperanza (Life and Hope) and Amor en Acción (Love in Action) -- mobilized public demonstrations and massive digital campaigns to oppose this legislative change. These forces also counted with the open support from the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party).

In these mobilizations, a whole set of new formations became visible: the Unidad Pro-Vida (Pro-life Unity), Escuelas por la Vida (Schools for Life, connected with Federation of Religious Educational Associations of Argentina), Doctores por la Vida (Doctors for Life -Argentina), Tutores por la Vida (Tutors for Life, set by journalist and communicators). The business sector also raised its voice against abortion rights through the Asociación

Cristiana de Líderes de Negócio (Christian Association of Business Leaders). And, significantly enough, anti-abortion women's organizations have also emerged, while also self-entitling as feminist, like Feministas Por una Nueva Era: Pro Mujer, Provida y Resistencia no Violenta (Feminists for a New Age: Pro-Woman, Pro-Life and Non-Violent Resistance).

Another new actor became visible in this period, more specifically when the Minister of Health authorized the national production of Misoprostol. Evangelical NGO Más Vida (More Life) that encourages people to denounce drugstores and pharmacies that sell “abortion pills” and health professionals or health centers that perform abortions even authorized by the existing law (Centenera, 2018).⁴ Another new group that is worth mentioning is La Red Federal de Ciudadanos y Organizaciones que Cuidan de la Vida en Todos los Tiempos y Lugares (Federal Network of Citizens and Organizations that Care for Life at All Times and in All Places) created by media professionals devoted to cover the abortion debate in Argentina from a “pro-life” perspective.⁵

As the abortion legal reform evolved at Congress level, this plethora of “pro-life” groups engaged with it as speakers in the various Commissions discussing the matter. They made their voices heard in radio and television shows and organized demonstrations in various cities across the country. To emulate and make a contrast with the feminist green scarf - which became internationally known as the symbol of the National Campaign for Legal, Safe and Free Abortion -- anti-abortion rights forces adopted as their main icon a light blue scarf, mimicking the color of the Argentinean national flag. They have also crafted the political lemma “Save the Two Lives”, which would be rapidly transported to other countries.

4 To learn more about NGO Más Vida, visit its official website at <http://masvidaoficial.org/>.

5 To learn more about La Red Federal de Ciudadanos y Organizaciones que cuidan de la Vida en todos los tiempos y lugares, visit its official website at <https://cuidarlavida.org/>.

On June 14 and on August 8, 2018, when the reform was respectively voted in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, thousands of anti-abortion demonstrators, convened by Catholic and Evangelical churches, congregated around the National Congress. Although it is difficult to measure the influence these actions had on the decision made by legislators, the impact of the “pro-life” campaign was read by various observers as a success. While in the House of Representatives the abortion reform was partially sanctioned, the Senate, historically a much more conservative body, rejected it for a minimal number of four votes.

The defeat of the reform was important on various grounds. Firstly, Evangelical churches that were up until then quite marginal in these debates became valid interlocutors of state institutions, specially the Congress. During the parliamentary discussion, these churches organized around the Alianza Cristina de Iglesias Evangélicas de la República de Argentina - ACIERA (Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches of the Republic of Argentina) were very active convening large “pro-life” marches (ACIERA, 2016). Subsequently, “pro-life” political parties have taken form, in particular the Partido Celeste (Celestial Party), mostly comprised by Evangelicals.

Anti-abortion initiatives were also activated at local levels where they did not exist before. Several municipalities approved ordinances to self-proclaim themselves as “pro-life” cities, such as Concordia y Herrera in Entre Rios district, Eldorado in Misiones district and 25 de Mayo in La Pampa district. The Municipal Council of Rafaela (in the Province of Santa Fé), approved a proposition presented by the group Rafaelinos por La Vida (Saint Raphael Order for Life) created an office to ensure that pregnancies, which under the existing law could be terminated, were carried to term (Buchara, 2018).

THE ERUPTION OF THE BATTLE AGAINST “GENDER IDEOLOGY”

During the abortion law reform debate many Parliamentarians spoke against feminism, LGBTTI rights, sexual education, contraceptive methods and anti-discriminatory public policies. However, no direct and clear connection was made between these positions and “gender ideology”. But, as soon the Senate rejected the abortion reform project in the early morning hours of August 9, the crusade against “gender ideology” began.

On October 26, the Argentinian Episcopal Conference published a document titled *Let’s Distinguish: Sex, Gender and Ideology* warning about the risks implied in “gender ideology” (Comisión Episcopal de Laicos y Familia et al, 2018). Its content coincided with the views expressed by Jorge Bergoglio, Pope Francis I, in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), which states that “gender ideology” would lead to a society where there are no sex differences and that this development must be contained by an anthropology of the family. On the basis of these arguments, the document issued by the Argentinean bishops called for the rejection of “gender ideology” as a vision in open contradiction with the cosmovision of Christianity.

A month earlier, the Federación Nacional de la Familia (Federal Network for Families), a Catholic anti-abortion network launched a national campaign against “gender ideology in schools” exhorting parents to expressly prohibit their children to attend comprehensive sexual education classes in public schools (sexual education is mandatory by national Law 26150). The campaign named *Yo no autorizo* (I Don’t Authorize) invited parents to present a “model letter” to directors of schools to manifest their disagreement with the Comprehensive Sexual Education curriculum.

Concurrently, another and more glaring campaign was launched by the Argentinean chapter of extreme-right movement Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas (Don’t Mess With My Children) and sponsored by a Pentecostal Evangelical church based in the city of Córdoba named Encuentro con la Vida (Encounter with Life).⁶ The campaign spokespersons declared they

6 For information on Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas, see this series chapter on the OAS case on page 164.

would “wallpaper”⁷ the whole city with billboards against “gender ideology” and sexual education in schools. Pamphlets were distributed that indoctrinated people against the perils of “gender ideology”.

The campaign, however, generated critical responses and resistance. Citizens complained against the organizers because they had breached a municipal ordinance which established that “no advertisement can be made that is contrary to the law, negatively affects morality and customs, or is discriminatory”. As a result, the billboards and posters placed on walls and public transportation were taken down (La Voz, 2018). On the other hand, the campaign had support in other cities where demonstrations were also organized using the slogan Don’t Mess With My Children. The Con Mis Hijos No te Metas campaign was originally Evangelical but quite rapidly got support from key Catholic actors.

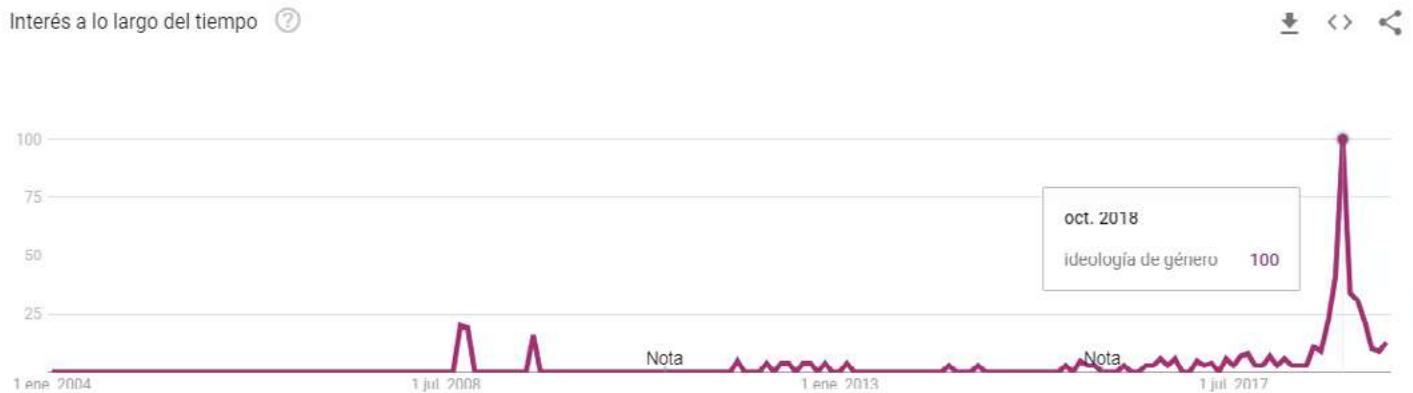
Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas uses entirely new strategies of communication and mobilization, such as WhatsApp groups for mothers of school-age children that spread fake news with regard to the contents of the Comprehensive Sexual Education Law, generating confusion and fear. According to one report, an audio message circulating in these WhatsApp groups featured a pastor falsely claiming that “in sexual education classes, the teachers force students to get undressed and touch each others private parts, they also tell boys to practice sexual positions with other boys and girls with other girls, they stimulate boys to get dressed as girls and girls as boys, and show videos that depict pornographic sexual acts amongst adult persons and even teach kids in kindergarten level that there are girls who have penises and boys who have vaginas” (Carbajal, 2018). The same strategy was replicated in other social networks media, especially Facebook.

It suffices to check the graphics provided by *Google Trends* for Argentina to verify that the key words “gender ideology” were almost entirely absent before the 2018 Congress debate on abortion rights. In contrast, a peak was reached in October that year coinciding with the beginning of these digital campaigns and the marches “for the right to life and against gender ideology”. As it can be seen below, one of these Google search peaks was in October 28, 2018, exactly when the first national Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas march took place in Córdoba.

7 Listen to the audio at <https://m.soundcloud.com/user-474067345/whatsapp-audio-2018-09-05-at-55020-pm>

Figure 1

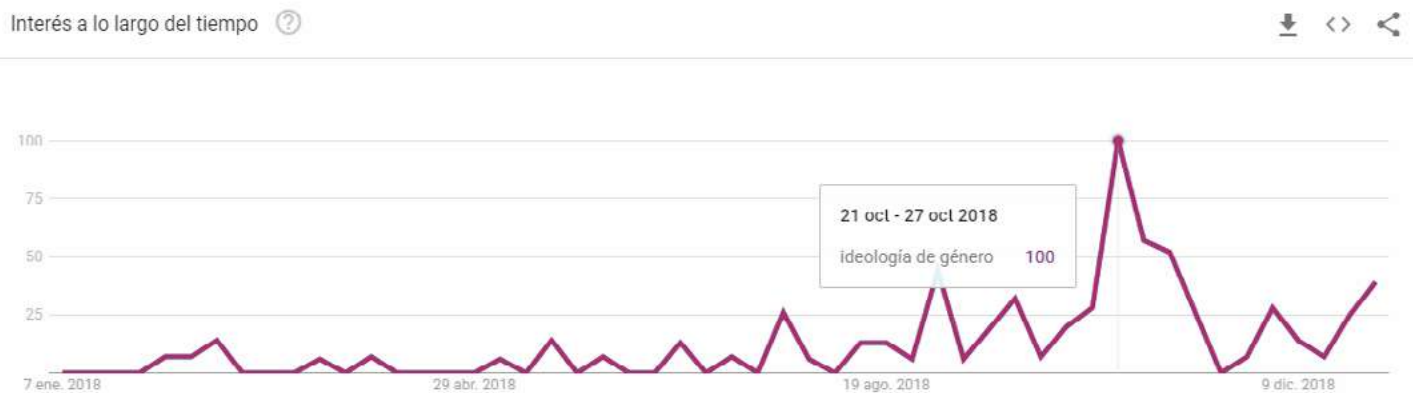
Google Argentina Search for “Gender Ideology” From 2004 to 2019



Note Google Trends consultation

Figure 2

Google Argentina Search for “Gender Ideology” During 2018



Note Google Trends consultation

Not less importantly, Argentinean crusades against “gender ideology” are connected with similar regional and transnational initiatives. The most glaring example is provided by Frente Joven (Youth Front) that also has chapters in Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru. Their Argentinians leaders Leandro Flocco and Sebastian Schuff, who are key transnational figures, were present in public demonstrations and social network media debates in the course of the abortion law reform process. They are also extremely active at annual Assemblies of the Organization of American States (OAS). The virtual platform Citizen Go, connected with the Spanish NGO Hazte Oír, is also present now in Argentina and promotes periodical campaigns against abortion rights, “gender ideology” and feminism.⁸

WHAT ABOUT RESISTANCE?

Religious and secular conservative and reactionary forces opposing the recognition of rights related to gender, sexuality and abortion have, therefore, a substantial track record in Argentina. The “pro-life” NGOs began to be established at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990 they enlarged the scope of their anti-abortion frame to also encompass sexual and reproductive rights. Their political demands to the state were quite varied, ranging from the protection of the family to sexual matters. Even so, the opposition to abortion rights has, to a large extent, become the terrain in which their discourses and actions were unified. The 2018 abortion legal reform has provided these forces with an opportunity of mobilization and cross-sector coordination. From the strong mobilizations propelled against the abortion law reform they jumped towards the crusade against “gender ideology” to attack the Comprehensive Sexual Education Law and related policies. This opened the space for the Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas campaign to gain roots in Argentina.

8 For more detailed information on Frente Joven and Citizen Go, see this series chapter on the OAS case on page 164.

Albeit their gains and expansion, since 2018, they have face resistance, especially from the feminist and LGBTTI movements, but also voices from the left and the human rights defenders camp. It is also crucial to observe that their arguments have not captured large support in society. In 2018, for example, in a series of opinion polls performed to assess the perception on the abortion law reform, the majority of persons interviewed declared their support to the law provision under debate (Paladini, 2018).⁹ A more recent survey also shows that 82 percent of people consulted across the country are in favor of comprehensive sexual education (La Voz, 2018). Likewise, mainstream mass media vehicles have been slowly adopting a gender perspective and supported the #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess) movement against sexist violence and femicides.

In the political realm, the narrow margin of votes defeating the abortion law reform also shows that parties and politicians are predominantly committed to principles of reproductive autonomy. Nothing suggests that the attacks on “gender ideology” and sexual education will easily prosper amongst parliamentarians and other politicians. In 2019, the wide victory of Alberto Fernández, who is linked to the progressive wing of the Justicialista Party, suggests that society is leaning towards an entirely different direction. One main commitment of the new administration is to re-table the abortion law reform provision.

Although these resistances and institutional responses must be valued, it is also crucial to recognize that in Argentina the battle for abortion rights has not reached its end and the crusade against “gender ideology” has just begun. Even though they are far from hegemonic, anti-abortion and anti-gender formations and actors exist, are extremely active, well-funded and transnationally connected. Suffices to recall that a number of representative and senators have voted against the abortion law reform in 2018. Amongst them, two prominent voices are Salta’s congresspersons, Alfredo Olmedo

9 Although other media outlets published surveys showing higher rates of rejection such as the La Nación Daily Newspaper assessment, “according to one survey, 49 percent of the population rejects legal abortion and 40 percent accepts it” (Stang, 2018).

and ex-Representative Cynthia Hotton who systematically express their views against abortion and “gender ideology”. Most importantly, the new party formation, the Partido Celeste, has been created and has also defined abortion rights and “gender ideology” as its targets. More recently, a new national party named Una Nueva Oportunidad - UNO (A New Opportunity) was also created by a provincial Evangelical grouping whose program goes in the same direction.

As the other country case studies included in this publication show, these forces do not give up and will continue to pressure for their regressive agendas, even when they may lose many battles before reaching their objectives. One symptom that this is what may also lie ahead in the Argentinean landscape was grasped by Mariana Carbajal, in a Página 12 article reporting on how the ex-president Mauricio Macri, defeated in 2019, is reaching out towards an alliance with UNO in view of the forecoming provincial elections (Pertot, 2020).

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