

Abortion, sorority and body autonomy: a conversation with Mónica Macha, representative in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies

Aborto, sororidad y autonomía de los cuerpos: diálogo con la diputada nacional Mónica Macha

Dora Barrancos¹, Patricia Rosemberg²

ABSTRACT Just days after the Argentine Chamber of Deputies approved the bill on the Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy, Salud Colectiva asked Dora Barrancos and Patricia Rosemberg to converse with representative Mónica Macha regarding the events leading up to the Chamber's approval of the bill. In the conversation other themes emerged in connection to the energy that flooded the streets all over the country throughout the year. The three women highlighted the activism and sorority present inside and outside of the chamber, the central role of youth, "the revolution of the daughters," the discussion of body autonomy, the role of doctors and how the struggle became a cultural change from which there is no return. This conversation narrates a historical moment in the words of some of its actors.

KEY WORDS Derechos de la Mujer; Feminismo; Aborto Legal; Legislación; Argentina.

RESUMEN Días después de la aprobación en la cámara de diputados del proyecto de ley de Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo, Salud Colectiva convocó a Dora Barrancos y Patricia Rosemberg para dialogar con la diputada nacional Mónica Macha sobre los sucesos previos a la media sanción del proyecto. En la charla surgieron otras temáticas, que inundaron las calles de todo el país durante todo el año. Las tres recuperan la militancia y la sororidad dentro y fuera del recinto, el protagonismo de la juventud, "la revolución de las hijas", la discusión sobre la autonomía de los cuerpos, el rol de los médicos y cómo todo esto devino en un cambio cultural del que ya no hay vuelta atrás. Esta charla relata un momento histórico, en palabras de algunas de sus protagonistas.

PALABRAS CLAVES Women's Rights; Feminism; Legal Abortion; Legislation; Argentina.

¹Sociologist, PhD in History. Former Headmistress, Gender Studies Interdisciplinary Institute [Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género], Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina. ✉

²MD. Former director of the Maternidad de Moreno Estela de Carlotto; Director of Maternity and Childhood at the Emilio Zerbón Hospital. PhD in Collective Health, Collective Health Institute, Universidad Nacional de Lanús, Argentina. ✉ 

INTRODUCTION

This interview took place a few days after a tide of green scarves swarmed around the National Congress. That “green wave,” in clear analogy to the “waves” of feminism, would have a specific goal in this case: the legalization of abortion in Argentina. On Wednesday, June 13 2018, the Bill on the Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy finally reached the House of Representatives, after two months of public hearings in commissions. It was a historic day across the country, in which millions of women and individuals of childbearing potential took over the streets and held an all-night vigil waiting for the voting results in the House of Representatives. The morning of June 14, after a 22-hour session, the news that the bill had been passed by a 129-125 vote with one abstention caused an outburst of hugs, tears and emotions that spread across all borders and reached the Latin American feminist movements.

Since 2007, the bill has been presented six times by The National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion, which is currently composed of a wide spectrum of political organizations, groups and personalities linked to the women’s movement, health care workers, unions, human rights organizations, people from the academic and scientific sphere, and several social and cultural movements. This Campaign was created in 2005, after the XIX National Summit of Women, a reunion that is held yearly in different Argentine provinces for three days, where thousands of women from all over the country gather to debate, in non-hierarchical workshops, different topics that affect this collective, among which topics, the fight for the decision whether or not to bear a child is central.

Since its creation, the support for the bill on the Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy caught everyone’s attention because of its transversality, overcoming party divisions in order to be set in as a public health care and social justice concern, and a pending issue since the reestablishment of democracy. On June 14 for the first time in history, the House

of Representatives gave preliminary approval to a bill on body autonomy, but it still had to be approved by the Senate. This interview was conducted during this period of time, between victory and what would follow.

DIALOGUE

Dora Barrancos: How should we start this chat? You could tell us about the backstory, the strategies used to bring up this topic and what happened from the moment it became a matter of public debate.

Patricia Rosemberg: Yes, we could start by mentioning the work that The National Campaign (for Legal, Safe and Free Abortion) had been carrying out; so that it does not appear as if the discussion was brought up and approved by Macri (laughter).

Mónica Macha: Actually, the first initiative was taken by The Campaign. After December 10, the date where the newly elected female representatives took office, The Campaign launched a call as usual, inviting all the newly elected representatives and, generally, only the counselors attended. When the seats were renewed, several women that took office as legislators in December went straight to the summoning, and that meant that something had changed.

PR: Did several representatives from different political parties attend?

MM: Yes, and we started to work on the idea of presenting this bill again, bearing in mind that The Campaign’s approach is absolutely pluralist, isn’t it? We held that first meeting and we agreed to meet again. We met again in February with more congresswomen as well as several female counselors, and also the CELS [*Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales* - Center for Legal and Social Studies], and several other organizations attended the meeting. Dora, you too came to some lobbying meetings as well, didn’t you?



Mónica Macha, national congresswoman, 2018.
Photographs by Sofia Spinelli.

project and to promote it and, thus, each of the political blocs is represented. There we begin to build up this idea of...

PR: The presentations of previous years, had they always had only one author?

MM: No, what The Campaign did in each presentation was to switch blocs, so as to maintain the idea of a pluralist discussion among all the parties involved, but always bearing only one signature, from a single author, and so we began; that was the beginning of the deliberation of the bill that maintained the same characteristics as that presented in 2016, because it was agreed by all the organizations that make up The Campaign that, at least initially, we would move forward in that way, which was the correct.

DB: Tell us how you came up with this good strategy of respecting the signatures, beyond the formal matters, so that it could be seen clearly from the outside, and how you felt when the green light was given – if I recall correctly, that was mid-February, I think – for Lipovetzky to set up a definite internal strategy (this is a reference to national congressman Daniel Lipovetzky from the officialist party *Propuesta Republicana Cambiemos*, current chairman of the General Legislation Committee).

DB: I went to the first meeting, the one held in February...

MM: Exactly, and that day we started to work on the bill, so it could be introduced in Congress on March 6, we decided on the date with our minds set on...

PR: That was after the bill presentation I think...

PR: International Women's Day...

MM: Right, that was in March, when the legislature was settled, and then a decision was made. This is what happened: we agreed to present the bill on March 6 and call for a special session on March 8...

MM: Right... The presentation had to be made once the ordinary sessions began, after March 1 and before March 8 to have the bill presented in time for the international strike. The first thing we did was present the bill. In addition to legislative regulations, which establish that the bill must be signed by only one person – namely, Vicky Donda –, The Campaign proposed that four co-authors be present in order to give visibility to the

DB: Exactly, that was it.

MM: But it was likely that that special session could not be carried out. We decided to launch the call all the same and started to cause a stir, to take the premises, to hold the session, taking into account that the "*Ni Una Menos*" [Not One Woman Less] march was beginning, that the international women's

strike was beginning. In that context, the governing party proposed an agreement: not to make the special session and in return – and this was the turning point – to work on the subject in a plenary of commissions, not in each commission at a time and then going from one to another constantly, but to work in a plenary of all four commissions through which the bill had to be passed and subject to deliberation before the soccer world cup, from that day onwards until June 13, which was the deadline for the official deliberation in the premises. We assumed that, because of the soccer world cup, all other debates were going to be abandoned, so we reached those two agreements: a plenary of commissions and June 13 as the date to deliberate in the premises. In that period, from the day we started to work on the plenary until June 13, we agreed that the informational meetings would take place, and that those meetings would be regulated, that is to say, that in the first plenary session of committees a set of regulations for the operation of the briefings was to be established. That was by the end of March, I think, and then after that we began with the informational meetings in April and May.

PR: And how was all this (legislative) framework structured in the Congress? What really caught my attention was the transversality of the project, which included representatives from different political parties, and the situation that was not only focused on the voting, but also on the speeches. Some speeches in the lower house had not been anticipated by the parties, right?

DB: The feeling is that it took *Cambiamos* by surprise...

PR: Yes, right.

DB: And I think that surprise is a harsh reminder of a situation that still persists and, in that sense, what was the reaction of those who were in favor and against within *Cambiamos*?

MM: There is an initial rift in the *Cambiamos* interbloc on the part of the congresswomen

that come from the radical party, the historical radicals who fight for legal abortion, led by María Luisa Storani. Although María Luisa is not a congresswoman, she was in charge of gathering radical women, above all. There were two simultaneous tasks then: on the one hand, to build transversality among us all and, on the other hand, to explicitly define the need to set aside all other discussions, not to use political chicanery to deceive each other, that is to say, if we didn't put on hold our differences in other issues, we wouldn't be able to make any progress on dealing with the matter of abortion legalization. We were all convinced that we wanted that and, in fact, we tried to address it every time we talked, especially, when we talked about abortion. Obviously, then all the political discussions



Patricia Rosemberg, former director, Maternidad de Moreno Estela de Carlotto [Maternity Center Estela de Carlotto, Moreno, 2018.]
Photographs by Sofia Spinelli.

occurred, with everything that is going on, but when we talked about abortion and when we were working on the legalization of abortion, we had to limit ourselves to that topic, and we all agreed to work that way and knew that we had to have a strategy among us and it should be outward-oriented, and also, for each woman and man, also inward-oriented within their party blocs. That was when we started to build inside *Frente para la Victoria* (FPV) the idea of being able to start to consolidate the votes in favor. There was a first issue then that was also raised by Agustín Rossi, as president of the FPV bloc he said: "I will vote in favor, I do agree, but I am not going to make any statement, nor sign any bills, or talk about this matter with the media, or nothing of the sort," in order to show respect for the bloc situation that had 54 votes in favor of legalizing abortion; at that time, we had eight votes against and two that were in doubt but finally voted against. Mayra (Mendoza) and I were in charge of all the work inside the bloc, and we were able to gather those votes in favor. Each congressman and congresswoman had the possibility to invite four people to the briefings, but some would tell you "I'm only telling you that I will vote in favor, but I don't want anyone to find out, or anything, I'll leave you the four seats, I don't want to know about this, I don't want to get too involved, but I will vote in favor," and then there were those who committed themselves, that were present and wanted to be joined by someone from this or that province, right? There was an important level of diversity. It implied, on the one hand, a matter of care toward those within the bloc so as to prevent that tension from breaking up the bloc, because there was also that concern.

DB: That bloc has a large number of males.

MM: Yes, exactly.

DB: But there is a noteworthy fact, 50% of women voted against the bill.

MM: Yes, exactly.

PR: Out of the total number of congresswomen from all the parties, 50% voted against.

DB: What do you think about this? Because that is a worrying sign, isn't it? Neither the *Ley de Identidad de Género* [Gender Identity Law], nor the *Ley de Matrimonio Igualitario* [Same Sex Marriage Law] had such a large percentage of women voting against.

MM: I think that they don't have a feminist perspective, or a perspective about the right of women to make decisions about their own bodies. I mean, they are women, but they have a patriarchal mindset when it comes to this topic and there is also a certain kind of prejudice regarding what is happening in the provinces...

DB: Were you surprised to see that some of the women in the bloc voted against?

MM: Not at all.

DB: No surprises?

MM: No, there were no surprises, but that is because we are closely linked and there is a lot of room for conversation, so those who voted against, and now I'm thinking about those in our bloc, had already been raising their arguments...

PR: I imagine that the change also involved a lot of conversation, right? Because, beyond the women and men who had their opinions about abortion, what mental construction takes place in people as they change their minds? Not in the case of those who make a final decision against it, but the ones who maybe at first are a "no" that over time becomes a "yes." How much of this were you able to work out as an individual decision and how much as a representational decision of the bloc of representatives? From the outside, this really caught my attention; on the one hand, that somebody may speak from a personal standpoint, without ever being able

to step out of what he or she represents, of who voted them, and, on the other hand, there is also what Dora says, when someone votes against, is it a vote arising from the conviction that abortion should not be legalized, or is it derived from the fantasy that people in the provinces believe one thing or the other, when we don't actually know what people in the provinces believe in.

MM: Yes, one of the congresswomen told me that it was her conviction, and it was not as in other cases where they could say that in the provinces they told them such and such a thing, that was not her case. In fact, we had another congresswoman who, at first, said that she would vote against, then, in favor, because her daughter told her: "I'm never letting you into our house again, if you vote against, you are no longer my mother"; protesters mobbed outside her house and she ended up voting against. That is to say, she changed her mind three times, she wasn't convinced.

PR: That is why I am impressed by the role of the congressman, of the political leader. Yesterday, one of the senators said that the reason behind his strong conviction was his 17-year-old daughter. I find that impressive, a 17-year-old girl breathing down his neck.

MM: A congressman who was about to vote against said: "I don't want to have any differences with the Pope"; he said it off the record, but he actually said it. (laughter)

DB: Explicitly, he said that he didn't want to...

MM: But afterwards, his daughter insisted so, so, so much, that he also ended up voting in favor, because he preferred to have differences with the Pope (laughter) to having differences with his daughter.

PR: Of course, it is clear that he doesn't see the Pope every day. And in the other cases, what was this process like? In order to modify the opinions of other bloc members, how important was the personal relationship in

changing their minds and how important was the institutional representation of having the historic opportunity to vote this law? Because there were many who voted against at first but then voted in favor, and that had to do, I think, less with the dissertations and much more with the work done.

DB: With the green tide.

MM: I think this topic has a particular impact on the youth, on the younger males. What we have been living, at least since 2015 until now, with the *Ni Una Menos* marches and the like, has had its impact. In fact, I was sworn-in at the beginning of December of last year, and feminism was the badge that identified me... And it started to happen, as in many other places, that when I went to the meetings, they would say "careful, we can't make those jokes in here." Something started happening among my male colleagues, they started to feel uncomfortable with the things that were already deeply ingrained in them, the jokes, the comments, the insults, all those things started to fall apart and I think that, in that same line of thought, they ended up reconsidering their position concerning abortion. This was because there are a lot of young males, who come from other provinces, but were primarily formed in the principles of the Catholic Church; they graduated from the UCA [*Universidad Católica Argentina*] or the *Universidad del Salvador*. However, they also began to give this issue some careful thought.

DB: Going back to the topic of transversality, what happened on June 13?

MM: We talked all day among us and with the congressmen and congresswomen who hadn't defined their votes yet. In the end, we asked for a meeting with Monzó, in his capacity as chairman of the House of Representatives. All of the women... we had a meeting with him at seven in the morning on June 14. By that time, we were losing, so we and a group of congresswomen requested a meeting with Monzó. At night the

crowd had thinned out a bit, and we started to ask everyone to come back: “come back, we need people,” “we need to lobby because we are losing.” We also worked on a strategy with the press, with some key actors who started tweeting, it was a collective work that we conducted: “let’s tweet this,” “okay, yes, let’s go this way,” the actresses, including Dolores Fonzi who stayed there tweeting all the time... The social networks aspect was also very important, and in that meeting we had with Monzó we told him: “more women are coming, they are on their way, we are losing and we have no control over our female companions that are coming.”

DB: Sorry, but, what was the evidence that we were losing?

MM: We were counting votes. We had been up all night sitting next to each other, trying to convince people and checking up and, now and then, we kept a record, we checked what our general situation was.

PR: At that time, we had the representatives of the province of La Pampa against us.

MM: Exactly, some of them had said they were going to vote in favor and at the last minute they changed their minds, so we knew that we could lose by two or three votes. So, we requested the meeting with Monzó and told him: “all the women who were tonight in the square will come back, plus all the girls that will miss school to come here with the green handkerchiefs.”

DB: Is that what you told Monzó?

MM: Yes, that’s what we all told him.

PR: That was sisterhood, not the inter-bloc.

MM: And we told them that we couldn’t control them, because we could respond to small groups of about one or two hundred companions that are the ones who support



Dora Barrancos, former director, Gender Studies Interdisciplinary Institute, Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2018.
Photographs by Sofia Spinelli.

our political organizations. But this was not the work of political organizations, they were self-organized girls that were coming but didn’t belong to any organization...

PR: Organized groups and not organized groups of women, right? Because the streets were flooded by a big green tide.

DB: It was a human anthill!

MM: We told him: “Macri has to intervene,” “the president must define this.” Our aim was to reach a tie. And as we were moving forward in that line, we went to the session

meeting room and we saw Governor Carlos Verna's tweet saying that all his bloc men were voting in favor. It was done!

PR: We are all going to take our holidays in La Pampa forever, we don't mind. From this point onwards to the end of our days we're going to La Pampa (laughter).

DB: I am from the province of La Pampa... and the previous day, a girl had called me; she was a presenter of quite an important TV channel, but she called me when I was a director and I didn't know that I was on a live TV program, broadcasted as a voiceover, and she told me: "Dora, we are here with the problem of the people of La Pampa," and then I said to myself "oh dear, I'm making a statement": "La Pampa!, the first province that passed a Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health!, La Pampa!, I don't know what else." At night, I laughed so much because Felicita told me: "we did it." No, obviously, Verna did it. The important thing in my opinion is that Politics with capital "P" had come into play, because Verna was very angry with the president...

PR: It was because Macri, as president, had the institutional responsibility of preventing what was going to happen. Because, additionally, the bill then passed to the Senate afterwards, and this gave them extra time to keep lobbying against the passing of the law. Although that seems to be the logic behind *Cambiamos'* policies, doesn't it? I don't know if this was the result of a miscalculation or also how this could be used to discredit feminism, or women, or the FPV, right? I think that it was also a scenario that they took advantage of.

MM: Exactly.

DB: Now, there were indeed pathetic speeches, weren't there? In addition to the girl using the dog metaphor, or the representative from Tucumán... who is quite a special character; he said terrible things.

PR: The one who talked about the dictatorship and threatened Cabandié.

DB: There was so much excess, right? The representational categorization was low; we could see major flaws in congressional representation.

MM: Yes, totally. I think that one thing that the house showed was that it was not faithfully representing what was actually going on socially speaking. In our society, there is a majority that is in favor of legalization, and that majority was really hard to build in the House of Representatives, and it is going to be even harder in the Senate too, because there is – as you say – a left-over of what is being left behind, with, also, a lot of very similar speeches. Such as that of one of the congressmen who said, in relation to those who were wearing green handkerchiefs and talked about the *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA) [Institute of Mechanics of the Navy] "if the women who gave birth there had had an abortion, a lot of congressmen present wouldn't be here."

PR: It was very threatening...

MM: Exactly, that was way over the line, or when Massot said "not even ourselves had dared to go that far."

PR: I think that, on the one hand, there is a great majority of the population who is in favor of legalizing abortion which is not reflected in the legislative houses; but also, in the Senate there were speeches such as the one from this woman who asked "what happens when a little bitch gets pregnant?," where she presented women in their condition as reproductive females, which is worse than the most anti-rights speeches ever heard in the House of Representatives, which are founded mostly on religious grounds. Now, how much of what was happening outside permeated into the legislative houses? I still believe that it was beneficial on all fronts, because the actual benefit of it all was to make it a public matter; what happened with all



Dora Barrancos and Patricia Roseberg, 2018.
Photographs by Sofia Spinelli.

those women and many men too in that all-night vigil, was the merit of the speeches and not the broadcasting. I think there was also a phenomenon that has something to do with the generational change in the composition of the House of Representatives, which is the use of networks and media and how we all learned to have a speech that could permeate somewhere, including those of us who spoke along with fewer leading figures.

MM: We defined strategies, faced the issue from the perspective of public health, of social justice...

PR: And I also think that it is a very interesting construction, because when you said “we are going for public health and social justice,” we all aligned ourselves quickly, we are schematic, “this is a public health issue, let’s count how many women die and how many...” although deep inside the matter lies the background of what we think in relation to this, but that alignment of speeches also seems to me to be a political construction from The Campaign, which is quite interesting, and

exists because there is a change, because there are other chances to dispute, because we could also widen the perspective to focus on the most necessary aspects.

MM: I also think that The (National) Campaign has a vast trajectory gained in all these years of political construction, constantly raising the issue, and I think the *Ni Una Menos* movement has contributed to this, while both movements are like two worlds with their own share of tensions too. I think that the *Ni Una Menos* movement contributes with a very strong communication stance. In fact, many of the women involved in the movement are social communicators that got into the media. The other day we were joking around, saying that we should always say “thank you, Facundo [Arana]” when doing our work, because of his remark to Isabel Macedo: that now that she was pregnant, she had fulfilled her role as a woman. That was when it all began, from that point onwards the issue was brought up and the serious discussion about abortion became more visible in the afternoon TV shows.

PR: Absolutely, it was Señorita Bimbo on Rial's show.

DB: And after the extraordinary day, those within the bloc who had not voted in favor didn't have such a bad time. I imagine that you all have forged strategic alliances, just in case the project is returned, let's say because that is the question.

MM: I think that, if the project was returned to the House of Representatives, we would still keep the majority of the votes, but there are circumstances that arose in that moment that we would be unlikely able to replicate. We were militant activists, nobody could leave, everyone had to be there. If necessary, we will do it again.

PR: That is because voting against is implicit. The idea is that the law is not passed; it wasn't their votes that worried them but that the law would be passed. What else could be more profound there?

DB: In the *Frente Renovador* there were still some very interesting cases, but Ms. Graciela Camaño is the oxymoron that always amazes me, for so many reasons.

PR: I was indeed shocked by Camaño.

DB: Now, what was she thinking? Because I imagine, with deliberate intent in my words, that she is one of those persons who have been directly or indirectly concerned with abortion, I'm sure about this. Then, what is the reason for...

MM: Passionately voting against...

DB: ... voting against. One thing is to abstain from voting, another is to retract, but another is to make a heated speech.

PR: And she also did that as the bloc chief, this should be said...

DB: As bloc chief.

PR: They shocked me too, the bloc chiefs. And going back to the previous question, what is at stake in each representation? Remember the bloc chief who is the voice of the bloc whose voters are divided; because for the leftist bloc chief it was clearer, it was easier, as everyone in his bloc votes in favor. Now Camaño, with a divided bloc...

MM: Camaño spoke in representation of the part of the bloc that voted against anyway. They were also divided when they voted.

PR: But as a bloc chief, does she speak for herself or on behalf of part of the bloc?

MM: The truth is that I don't know Camaño all that well. I only know what is publicly known about her. What I do know is that she was a permanent campaigner against legalization.

DB: Don't you have the impression that such kind of differences, or divergences are much harder and hostile than the vulture funds? In the case of the vulture funds you can be against, but these issues, these managements are really so strong that both rivalry or friendship are indeed deepened. I will never forget the breaking up of the FrePaSo [*Frente País Solidario*]; it is true that they had very bad things. I was a congresswoman in the city, and there was a discussion about the issue of prostitution in section 71 of the Code of Coexistence, and they managed to obtain approval for police intervention and detentions, and that was very tough. Later on, the relationship with many people was reestablished, but it had been a deep wound.

PR: In the case of the session for the legalization of abortion, what happened afterwards?

MM: I think we didn't reach a level of animosity with anyone. What for many is a source of fear, does not inspire fear in me given that I am inside, so I don't feel it in that way. But if it is the other way around, how do you manage to gather very different people through a more humane bond?

PR: The image of you going out with Mayra (Mendoza), with Silvia Lospennato, with Vicky (Victoria Donda), was quite shocking because it speaks of the networking, of the close inter-connection. It is very shocking for people with common sense.

MM: Also, we went out, as if we were saying “let’s go out to the streets,” “we are here.” There was a moment when we realized that we could leave, because there was that too, because if they called you to vote and you weren’t present, and all those matters, and we chose that moment to go out, to greet the people, to ask them to stay and then go back to the session room, and that also accomplished something. I know that I have political differences with Brenda Austin, with Silvia Lospennato, that these differences will last and that we will always continue to argue. The political view that we have on the issues will never change, but sometimes there are discussions in the sessions that are violence inducing, and there is also one thing that seems to me to be typical of the construction and logic of the political disputes of men.

PR: Yes, typical of men. I think it is more a matter of chicanery, chicanery, and more chicanery. It is more of a male centric issue, right? Another thing is that such transversality speaks of another possibility of political participation for citizenship. The fact that a cause may gather people despite their deeply ingrained political differences, also demonstrates a possibility of construction, such as gender issues, women, and above all, teenagers, who in that night of watch were our under-17-football team. I heard in those days the change of slogan from “all of them must go” to “let all the women come.”

MM: Totally. Something that was on my mind related to how to handle the discussion on the legalization of abortion as well as all the other issues, which are indeed very complex. In that sense what did happen to me was that in one of the green Tuesdays Miss Bolivia was scheduled to come. Daniel Grinbank was a great, impressive player: he mounted the stage,

everything, and, also, he had called different legislators. One day there was a show here, after June 13, and the idea was that Griselda Siciliani and other Argentine actresses and singers would come to sing to show people that we were enthusiastic activists fighting for a right. But it was the same day that several workers were made redundant in Télam (the national news agency), the day of the 350 layoffs, so I was there for a while and then I left because that was a limit; we cannot be singing on a stage, not even for the best cause, the same day that 350 people were fired from Télam...

DB: You can’t be celebrating in that situation...

PR: Of course not. Well that is really good too, it is very important.

DB: Exactly, the cause wouldn’t be lost if you were not there.

MM: No, sure not, it wouldn’t.

PR: Precisely, it wasn’t about the voting, it was the stage, and I think that has a “voice” too... Another issue is the later reaction from the anti-rights groups...

DB: It is a reaction that I still feel is typical of the Church’s power. I arrived in Paraná one day and I saw a large number of people, and I asked “what is this about?” and it was an anti-rights demonstration, with a lot of people, from several places, but what I saw didn’t reflect the same capacity for protest mobilization as that of demonstrations against same-sex marriage, joined by the churches, the neo-Christians, the newest churches...

PR: Yes, the Evangelicals...

DB: The Evangelicals, you might remember that they did an enormous thing, that they brought everybody. I conjecture that this gigantic mobilization of the Evangelical churches against same-sex marriage was not seen now. I mean, there is no stridency in the opposition, there are terrible voices that

express themselves against, but they are never over, 200 people?

MM: At best.

DB: That was nothing like the mobilization we saw, for instance, in relation to same-sex marriage. I'm referring to those groups. There is something strange and we should go deeper into the matter...



Dora Barrancos and Patricia Rosemberg, 2018.
Photographs by Sofia Spinelli.

PR: What I find shocking is the level of violence in the health care area against legalization. It is clear that we need to find out amid all this fuss how many of them there are, but the health care system has quite a lot of violence, and a lot of naturalized violence. For instance, the violence made explicit by the doctors of La Rioja who say: "in my shift the abortions will be performed without anesthesia." Yesterday I had to discuss with a doctor, a urologist, the chief of CEMIC [*Centro de Educación Médica e Investigaciones Clínicas "Norberto Quirno"* - Center for Medical Education and Medical Research] who expressed a Nazi-fascist ideology, who constantly lied and used phrases such as "you have breast cancer, ma'am, but I want to tell you that we cannot assist you now because we will be assisting women who didn't use protection and come here to have an abortion." That was outrageous. Anyway, he was even questioned by the Senators themselves. Miguel Ángel Pichetto asked him "how many doctors are there in Argentina? Please, tell me which entity gathers all of them, because I would like to have a meeting with that entity that gathers the 800,000 Argentine doctors and that's it." The same with the phrase "don't count on me." The symbolism behind those phrases worries me.

DB: I have an assumption that still needs some further work, and it has a lot to do with the health care level: why are doctors involved in this matter? It is obviously

because of the central issue of public health care. But I think that there is a questioning that creates those standards in line with and in epidemic levels of objection, which has nothing to do with religion, because, is that group of professionals more religious than, for example, the lawyers? I think we are looking at another type of problem. How can you decide to have an abortion? Your body actually belongs to the medical level. And there is a highly patriarchal structure there that goes back to nineteenth-century standards, with a matter of moral undertones: "this woman is bugging me about having an abortion," or "Hey! Close your legs," those are trivial comments, but they actually manifest a tug-of-war: if we make decisions on our own bodies, there will be fewer bodies for them.

PR: Totally.

MM: Absolutely.

DB: There are fewer bodies for them, and, in my view, this is a matter that has to be delved into, because it has nothing to do with the religious or philosophical mindset.

MM: It is a matter of power.

PR: Of power over the body.



Mónica Macha, national congresswoman, 2018.
Photographs by Sofia Spinelli.

DB: Of power over the body and this implies an injury, an injury to their authority...

PR: When we work with conscientious objection, we address it from humility, from conflict. I say “look, if you are a conscientious objector you have to object humbly.” We cannot go out on a hunt for objectors, or make a list of objectors; who could come up with the idea of making a list of conscientious objectors? But, furthermore, I think that if the conscientious objection is given a value, that is to say, if being a conscientious objector had a negative value, then it would be over, if that

omnipotence is wounded... Maybe because I’m always dealing with this all the time and every day, I worry about violence...

DB: And what about objection?

PR: No, they can do whatever they want with objection... What worries me is the practice. Why did they include penalization for women who have an abortion from the 15th week onwards? This possibility of penalization, doesn’t it exclude the possibility of causes which could subsequently be an obstacle for the health care teams?

MM: Penalization is imposed because, according to lawyers (both men and women), not imposing a penalty implies the risk of declaring the law unconstitutional.

DB: Yesterday, I was listening to Claudia Piñero, who said that after her speech, she was fiercely attacked on social media. It is true I don’t have Facebook or Twitter and that gives me a great sense of freedom... I isolate myself from insults. Regardless, emails can still reach you. In this season, I only received an email from a man who identified himself: he did not insult me, but he said that he was terribly sorry that someone like me – I don’t know what he meant by that – could not understand the principle of life, but that was the most insulting thing that I received. I think that, in these days, until August 8 there is going to be a more tense atmosphere. In earlier times it was easier, the bishops knew more about the sins of these men, but this is no longer the case. Of course, in many Argentine provinces this religious burden is heavier, but I think that they don’t have the power of the streets, they don’t dare to organize a mobilization, they don’t have the power to do it, they cannot fill *Plaza del Congreso* [Congress Square].

MM: No, they can’t.

PR: See what happened with the anti-rights call in Ferro Stadium, also because being anti-something is always a hard reason to mobilize.

MM: But I think that there is something about the mobilization that has also been trimmed down, if there aren't videos and things saying that there will be buses, that there will be this and that...

PR: There is no popular mobilization... I also refer again to adolescence and youth; this factor of "the revolution of the daughters" has a very heavy and very impressive weight.

DB: I have a question and a hypothesis: how did this happen? How did this happen under our noses? In my opinion it has a lot to do, of course, with the context. With the levels of signification of the context, with sexual freedom, the people are not turning back... Those teenage girls who have their experiences on all sides do not want to retreat, they are unwilling to retreat; "that won't happen to me" say the girls, "you won't have me confined in the closet for that." I think that the other reason is all there...

PR: The enjoyment of pleasure...

DB: Without the sexual revolution, this wouldn't have happened.

MM: And I notice much of that effect in the Law on Same-Sex Marriage and on Gender Identity.

PR: Of being able to speak about pleasure, of being able to speak about sexuality.

DB: I find that extraordinary, not retreating refers to that. In my time, there were principal and secondary matters, and now we have been able to assign a value to these issues, having the same value as politics and I think that the young girls have learned this quickly.

MM: Totally.

PR: Yes, of course, and because also, there is no turning back from that. From sexuality and pleasure there is no turning back.

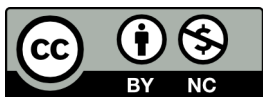
DB: There is no turning back.

MM: And, besides, regardless of what happens on August 8, if the law is not passed on August 8, it will be passed some other time in the future...

DB: As I say: we've already won! We've already won!

CITATION

Barrancos D, Rosemberg P. Abortion, sorority and body autonomy: a conversation with Mónica Macha, representative in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies. *Salud Colectiva*. 2018;14(3):447-460. doi: 10.18294/sc.2018.2006.



Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International. Attribution — you must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). NonCommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

<https://doi.org/10.18294/sc.2018.2006>

The translation of this article is part of an inter-departmental and inter-institutional collaboration including the Undergraduate Program in Sworn Translation Studies (English < > Spanish) and the Institute of Collective Health at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús and the Health Disparities Research Laboratory at the University of Denver. This article was translated by Sofía Bazante and Gonzalo López Outeda under the guidance of María Victoria Illas, reviewed by Orphea Wright under the guidance of Julia Roncoroni, and prepared for publication by Vanesa Martínez under the guidance of Vanessa Di Cecco. The final version was approved by the article author(s).