THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA: THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY IN FOUR ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS FIGHTING TO MAKE ABORTION LEGAL

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In Buenos Aires abortion is an issue which sparks controversy and forces people to choose sides. Abortion is almost entirely illegal in Argentina\(^1\); however, there are “pro-life” activists who wish to make the laws governing abortion even harsher.

On the other side of the argument stand participants in the pro-choice movement, made up of a loose coalition of social movement organizations which have been active since the late 1980’s. The activists who formed these groups, mostly women, believe that the laws in Argentina should be reformed to protect all reproductive rights. They have created organizations to educate the public in Buenos Aires about illegal abortion, to make their arguments for legalization heard in the media, and to pressure the Argentine government and the Catholic Church in various ways.

In this paper, I will discuss the emergence, strategies and beliefs of four reproductive rights organizations in Buenos Aires using data collected through a series of personal interviews conducted in 1995 and 1998, and activist publications. I will examine each group: La Comisión por el Derecho al Aborto; ELEGIR - Mujeres por el Derecho a la Anti-concepción y al Aborto Legal; Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir; and Foro por los Derechos Reproductivos to see how they fit into the movement for reproductive rights in Argentina. This paper will address the following: How does the ideology of each group affect its growth, organizational structure, leadership, strategy and activism? How does ideology serve as a uniting and dividing force in the pro-choice movement in Buenos Aires?

I explain how sociologists define ideology and describe the four central collective action frames from the movement in Buenos Aires. I describe three fundamentally different ideological lenses through which the right to abortion can be seen: as a social issue, as a health issue, and as a women’s rights issue. The three ways of seeing abortion are illustrated in the next section, where I present the four organizational case studies. In a separate section for each pro-choice organization, I discuss the group’s background (including history, emergence and ideological formation), structure (including leadership and financial issues), and activism (the type of action in which they are engaged, goals, and strategies). I focus on how the four organizations in the pro-choice movement interact in both supportive and conflicting ways. In conclusion, I make some predictions about the future of the pro-choice movement and include some recommendations for future activism.

**IDEOLOGY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMES**

Ideology and related concepts have been studied by sociologists as they seek to explain why people with common interests organize for collective action. In order to understand how ideology affects the pro-choice movement in Buenos Aires, it is useful to note how ideology is defined by sociologists. Skocpol (1985) defines ideologies as “idea systems deployed as self-conscious political arguments by identifiable political actors” (91). Zald (1996) sees ideology as “the set of beliefs that are

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\(^1\) Abortion is considered a “crime against life and person” by the Código Penal. Today, abortion may only be performed by a licensed physician with a woman’s consent in two situations: 1) in the case of grave risk to the mother’s life or health when danger cannot be averted by any other measure, or 2) in the case of the rape of a retarded or mentally ill woman, when legal proceedings have been initiated.

Even though abortion is illegal, it is a common practice Argentina. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates 365,000 abortions per year, and other agencies have estimated up to 400,000 (Llovera 1992) This figure implies an estimated abortion ratio of as high as 500 abortions per 1000 live births. Women who can afford safe and sanitary abortions performed by trained doctors are able to access this service in clinics similar to those in the United States or Europe. But poorer women are not so lucky. For this reason, the majority of women who are killed or hurt by abortion are from the lower classes. The consequences of these clandestine abortions are an estimated 300 to 400 deaths each year. This figure places Argentina on the World Health Organization’s list of nations with high maternal mortality rates. In fact, abortion is the leading cause of maternal mortality with about 30% of maternal deaths resulting from illegal abortions and death rates are higher in the more isolated provinces of Argentina. It is easy for elites—even women in power—to ignore abortion’s consequences since they can afford to access contraceptives and, if necessary, easily gain entry to clinics where abortions are performed safely, albeit clandestinely.
used to justify or challenge a given social-political order and are used to interpret the political world” (262). To Tarrow, ideology is closely tied with symbolism, and has the following functions: 1) To allow movement leaders to communicate their goals to opponents; 2) To help ordinary people understand their lives and societies; 3) To “communicate messages among leaders, supporters, and outsiders”; and 4) To “provide movements with the solidarity that enables them to maintain themselves and expand their influences in the face of repression, co-optation, or indifference.” (Tarrow 1992: 187).

Instead of using the term “ideology” to explain specific actions, many sociologists use the concept of “collective action frames” to understand how beliefs are related to action. More specifically, collective action frames are “purposively constructed guides to action” (Tarrow 1992: 177). According to Zald (1996), collective action frames are generally less complex than ideologies, and “may be embedded in ideologies” (262). Therefore, organizations can share the same general ideology, and approach the same situation with different collective action frames. There are other practical differences between ideologies and collective action frames. According to Tarrow (1992), frames are more flexible than formal ideologies, and can be adjusted according to opportunities available to the movement at any given time. The creation of collective action frames is crucial to a group because these frames serve to convince others to support the cause(s) or arguments of the organization. Frames are created with “specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action” (Zald 1996: 262).

By examining the symbols deployed by leaders and members of the pro-choice movement, we can see how these ideas are communicated to the public.

Leaders are “carriers and transmitters” of the messages of any movement (Snow and Benford 1992: 198). Tarrow explains, “rather than entire segments of a society reacting automatically to their social situations or choosing one culture over another, enterprising individuals and groups draw upon existing mentalities and cultures to create action-oriented frames of meaning” (Tarrow 1992: 186). Leaders strategically plan what arguments they need to make, along with the group, and how the actions they choose are appropriate to the goals and ideologies of the movement. Furthermore, the choices leaders make about ideology and collective action frames can have momentous repercussions on the solidarity of an organization. Conflicts between the decisions made by leaders and the desires of other leaders or members within the group can weaken the organization.

**Three Collective Action Frames Which Are Central to the Movement in Buenos Aires**

The leaders and members of pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires are aware that abortion means different things to different people, and each group uses a combination of ideological positions to advance the goals of the group. In the pro-choice movement in Buenos Aires, as in the international struggle for reproductive rights, abortion is presented to the public in many ways. Hadley (1996) outlines the ways that activists state their cases for abortion using health advocacy, feminism, and humanitarian or social concerns. Each group in Buenos Aires uses a combination of the following viewpoints, and there is no black and white argument. Yet, if asked, leaders and members will emphasize one or two issues over others.

*Abortion as a social issue*

When approached as a social or humanitarian issue, abortion-- and all aspects of motherhood-- are intimately connected to society, human rights, economics, and state policies. According to Argentine psychologist Gisela Rubarth (1995), the way that a mother feels about her children depends on not only her individual situation, but societal values regarding maternity, her class or community identity, the demographic politics of her nation, and her religious values (9). Checa and Rosenberg (1996) agree, saying that a woman’s autonomous decision about her body should not be made alone,
but as part of her relationships with others (19). Furthermore, Checa and Rosenberg argue that women facing abortion face a conflict between their desire to have children and their realization that they cannot fulfill the ideal maternal roles that society and the mass media dictate; roles which glorify women as the perfect providers, care-givers and homemakers (19).

People who see abortion as a fundamentally social issue emphasize the fact that reproductive rights laws affect all Argentine women, but abortion is a concern which divides society along economic lines. In fact, activists will argue that it is a social problem which serves as an illustration of the economic division which exists in Argentina, noting that virtually all of the women who die from botched abortions each year are from the popular sector. When they frame abortion as a social issue, groups will emphasize the contrasting picture between poor and wealthy women. They will argue that women of the upper and middle classes have better access to contraceptives and sex education to prevent unplanned pregnancy and that if they have abortions, they have superior access to safe health services. Therefore, activist-leaders within the pro-choice movement who see abortion as a social problem make frequent reference to the fact that it is poor women who are dying in Argentina.

Looking at abortion from a social standpoint enables activists to portray the close relationship between high abortion and maternal mortality rates, and Argentina’s status as a developing nation. By comparing Argentina and other developing countries to more developed nations, the contrast is clear.

Furthermore, Argentine critics note that while reproductive rights and contraceptive provision are problematic in the developing world, especially amongst the popular classes, assisted fertility is developing in richer countries—especially in upper class families.

Also within this ideological argument falls the liberal-utilitarian view that abortion enables mothers to be responsible parents, enabling them to choose “quality over quantity of children” (Ramos and Viladrich 1992: 11). Therefore, family planning improves quality of life, giving parents the ability to decide when to have children, and to space them so that they are born when resources are available and when they are truly wanted.

**Abortion as a health issue**

As previously discussed, clandestine abortion has serious health consequences for women in Argentina. The statistics and data involved with clandestine abortion, especially those related to maternal mortality, are the central backing for the ideological position that views abortion chiefly as a problem of health and provision of women’s health care. When viewed primarily as a health issue, abortion raises the following two questions: “1) Is it possible to decrease the practice of abortion?, 2) Is it possible to decrease maternal mortality and injury caused by clandestine abortion?” (Soberón 141-144). In pro-choice movement publications and media appearances, the answers to these questions often lead directly to a discussion of the importance of contraceptives and sex education. The stress in this case is on family planning to prevent the need for abortion, as well as sex education.

With the remarkably high rates of maternal mortality caused by abortion in Argentina, as well as international pressure, it is no wonder this argument has been successful in mobilizing support for contraceptive access. Furthermore, the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases strengthens social perception of the need for access to contraceptives and sex education. These arguments are less controversial than those proposed by activists who consider abortion to be a woman’s issue. Furthermore, they may be supported by diverse academic and social education programs, such as sex education in popular *barrios* (neighborhoods) and funds for academic research on abortion or contraceptive practices.

Those who see abortion as a health issue will also note the damage clandestine abortion has on a woman’s mental health, though this is more controversial. According to Marcos, “A just theory about abortion should admit that threats to a woman’s emotional and physical health are also a violation of her
bodily integrity. . . her sense of self-esteem and plans are values which must be protected” (5). Besides fearing censure by the authorities, the psychological effects of clandestine illegal abortion include fear of death or injury caused by unsafe abortion, guilt about the inability to meet social and family expectations placed on women as mothers, lovers, etc., and fear of abandonment by partners (Checa and Rosenberg 1996).

Women in the pro-choice movement who see abortion as a health issue in Argentina are more inclined to argue for legalization of abortion and legislation which provides for contraceptives and other services that will aid reproductive health, and not solely for the decriminalization of abortion. They see legalization as a means of eliminating needless deaths, which do not occur nearly as much in nations where abortion is legal and carefully regulated to provide safe service to women. Legal contraceptives, especially if they can be distributed freely by public hospitals, are often the first incremental step to reform for groups whose leaders are of this ideological framework.

According to Hadley (1996), basing “the case for abortion. . . values of individual and public health” enables activists to avoid being ensnared in moral arguments. It may also achieve the powerful support of the medical community. However, Hadley also points out the downside of using health as the central framework for abortion: it passes control into the hands of doctors. She explains: “Because doctors control access to abortion, women’s role is only to present reasons which are good enough to earn the doctor’s approval” (187).

**Abortion as a women’s rights issue**

Feminist leaders who see illegal abortion as a women’s rights issue argue that laws related to reproductive rights do not merely pertain to whether a woman can legally decide to discontinue an undesired pregnancy. They reflect how women and motherhood are considered by society. According to Luker (1983), pro-choice women who believe abortion is fundamentally a women’s rights issue see their claim to abortion as “the right to be treated as individuals rather than potential mothers” (92).

Furthermore, because safe abortion cuts the bonds of a woman’s dependence and responsibility to care for a child (Gilligan 1975), it is an issue related to women’s liberation. Echoing the pro-choice movement in the United States, feminists who see abortion as a women’s rights issue in Argentina make frequent references to a woman’s right to control her body. The statement, “If you can’t control your own body you can’t control your future...” (Anonymous quote in Luker 97), characterizes this argument. To activists who strictly prescribe this kind of ideology, there is no middle ground, for any restrictions on abortion are unfair to women and jeopardize women’s lives and women’s rights.

In this feminist view, women see the persistence of illegal abortion as a means of maintaining patriarchal power. The tenacious hold of the Catholic Church and social conservatism in Argentina are considered to be forces which deny women’s equal status in society. For example, Marta Lamas (1990) uses a women’s rights argument when she writes that those against abortion see women as “child-bearers par excellence. . . as if it was really not costing anything to carry the pregnancy to term and to give up the child to adoption” (58). Furthermore, anti-choice groups view the care and supervision of children as a woman’s natural duties (Checa and Rosenberg 1996).

Motherhood is of utmost concern because pro-choice feminists see involuntary motherhood as a sentence to a perennial “low status” for women. To them, “control over reproduction is essential for women to be able to live up to their full human potential” (Luker 1983). They deploy the powerful image that anti-choice laws regard women as “containers” for babies, nothing more (Rubarth 1995).

The concept of a sexist double standard is another aspect of this view towards abortion. For example, Claro notes that “a large percentage of men do not assume their biological responsibility in pregnancy. Men are not blamed like women for induced abortion even though they often support the
decision to abort... the law has a clear double standard by exempting men from responsibility and penalizing women who abort” (Claro 1990: 166).

A discussion of sex is also central to this argument, for a lack of reproductive rights prevents women from fully realizing their sexual freedom: “Sex without procreation is regarded as something for prostitutes” (Finkelstein 43). Although the climate in Argentina is increasingly open to the discussion of sex, there remains in some conservative and religious circles an idea that sex is taboo. To fight these views, pro-choice movements which see abortion as a women’s rights issue emphasize abortion and birth control as services that enable women to self-regulate their sexuality. Luker sees pro-choice people as valuing “‘amative’ sex... sex whose primary purpose is not reproduction” (176). Those who share this frame often plan on having small families, and view sexual taboos as damaging their goals for intimacy and freedom of choice (Luker 1983).

In practice, these strong ideological positions make activists who stress abortion as a women’s rights issue less interested in making political concessions and building coalitions. The following chapter will explain how they are not eager to negotiate for birth control or sex education if it means compromising their strong feminist framework, and will give many examples of how pro-choice groups in Buenos Aires are influenced by-- and express-- ideology.

THE FOUR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

La Comisión por el Derecho al Aborto

Using the motto, “Contraceptives to prevent abortion, legal abortion to prevent death”, the group was founded on March 8, 1988 by professional women who had returned to Argentina from exile after El Proceso. They saw the lack of reproductive rights in Argentina as a violation of the newly established protection of human rights that was central to the democratic government. Members of La Comisión were also concerned because of the high numbers of women dying from clandestine abortion in Argentina, especially as compared with the data for the North American and European nations where many of them had temporarily lived in exile during the Dirty War.

During the days when they united at ATEM’s headquarters to discuss and think about the issue, abortion was “very hidden... and taboo” (Campos, personal interview) except in the women’s movement. Since 1982, ATEM had an annual conference with workshops where women’s issues were discussed, including abortion. In fact, many of the women who started La Comisión were part of feminist organizations in Buenos Aires (such as ATEM), and were accustomed to confrontational tactics as well as an “anti-hierarchical structure” (Flori 1988).

Thus, La Comisión does not have any kind of hierarchical leadership, and prefers to democratically make decisions by voting. It is a small organization, averaging about seven members per meeting, so this type of government is possible and practical. Members of La Comisión have professional backgrounds which put them in contact with medical, legal and emotional problems related to abortion. Among those in the founding group were a nurse, a lawyer, a psychologist, a doctor, and an ex-nun. Some members were also active socialists. Their personal experiences with women who faced unwanted pregnancy in Argentina gave the members and leaders of the group a basis for their collective action. Their professional experience as lawyers, nurses, doctors, etc. would later make their arguments more persuasive and enable them to write and protest from both personal and professional experience.

La Comisión’s methods of protest, strategy and tactics make it an unusual group in the pro-choice movement and also reflect the ideology of the group. Members spread their pro-choice message in the street, placing a table covered with various publications to sell or disperse on a corner adjacent to the National Congress building on calles (streets) Rivadavia and Callao. They table in this manner
every second and fourth Monday between 6:00 and 7:30 p.m. At this hour, the streets are filled with commuters from the many political and business offices nearby, and this busy corner swarms with people from all walks of life.

The organization’s tradition of tabling is a strategic action that began early in its formation, for La Comisión used a common porteña political tactic of the eighties. During this newly democratic period, many groups had street campaigns for their causes. Some marched with signs and others, such as La Comisión, had tabling sites where they gave out information, solicited signatures for petitions and spoke out. Many of these campaigns ended because they were successful, such as one led by ATEM that occurred in the late 1980’s for the legalization of divorce. La Comisión has continued to table and protest and has become a Monday evening fixture on the corner of Callao and Rivadavia.

The activists of La Comisión wear neon orange construction aprons emblazoned with their motto as they solicit signatures for a petition against the current laws on abortion and give out printed information and publications. They take turns speaking on megaphones about their cause, in the same manner employed by the leaders of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo use. According to Pastora Campos and Elite Costa, two long-term members of La Comisión, they see themselves as “workers” for their cause, self-consciously using socialist terms. For what they call a “suerte folklorico”, the aprons and megaphones serve as self-constructed symbols for La Comisión (Campos and Costa, personal interview). These aprons have strong symbolic meaning because they are usually worn by male construction workers doing repair works on Argentina’s highways and streets. The women of La Comisión manipulate this mental association to attract public attention and to show that they also work in the street for their feminist cause: ‘repairing’ Argentina’s current laws.

La Comisión also uses a different kind of street activism once a year, in celebration of the 28th of September-- the day the fifth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro (Meeting) held in San Bernardo, Argentina in 1990 chartered as el Día de Lucha por la Legalización de Aborto en América Latina. On this day, La Comisión attempts to make a strong point with pro-choice symbols that will gain public attention to their cause. A powerful example of this street action occurred on the first Día de Lucha por la Legalización de Aborto en América Latina when they staged “a collective drama with the objective of showing social hypocrisy with an ‘Oral and Public Trial of Clandestine Abortion’” (Campos 1990: 26). La Comisión members acted the parts of a judge, a lawyer and a group of witnesses for the prosecution. The witnesses spoke about medical cases of abortion that they had seen, explained the theological basis for a pro-choice stance on abortion, and gave personal testimony about their own clandestine abortions. Before an audience of passerby, members of La Comisión accused “Argentine laws” of causing genocide from clandestine abortion, of violating the articles of the Argentine Constitution which provide freedom of religion and equality under the law, of discrimination against women, and of violating the ban on the death penalty that was included in the Pact of San José de Costa Rica. In the end of this drama, the judge condemned clandestine abortion and recommended the decriminalization and legalization of abortion (Campos 1990: 27).

According to Campos and Costa, La Comisión’s work in the street is “what matters the most, because there you can find people from all social levels” (Campos and Costa, personal interview). This statement demonstrates a major part of La Comisión’s ideology. Members regard the grassroots methods used by the La Comisión as appropriate because they believe that it is necessary for organizations to meet and discuss their political ideals directly with people. La Comisión publishes information in a newsletter called Nuevos aportes sobre aborto (New Contributions About Abortion) and makes it available to everyone who stops at their table, whether or not they are able to make the requested one dollar (US) donation.

The printing of articles and periodicals is done as cheaply as possible in order to keep costs down and to maximize the number of publications available to the public. Because of these constraints,
the publication of *Nuevos aportes* occurs on an irregular basis and is done when the organization can amass the funds and time to compile articles and make photocopies. However, this may detract from the attention that *La Comisión* receives in the media or from the government.

Furthermore, the fact that members rely on their own funds and those they can collect from street donations to publish *Nuevos Aportes* is ideologically consistent for an organization which seeks to be popular and work in the streets. The group’s ability to exist is not entirely predicated on the fact that most (if not all) of the members are middle class professionals and can afford to contribute. In fact, *La Comisión* strives-- and manages-- to cover almost their costs by requesting donations from the people who receive their publications.

The members write theoretical and analytical articles, and also include excerpts from international sources. The members report news about abortion laws and practices around the world, publish letters to Argentine legislators, write other opinion pieces, and record the words of people who make personal statements in support of abortion rights at *La Comisión*’s table on the street.

Besides street activism and the publication of *Nuevos aportes*, another main activity of the group is the organization of debates, interviews and talks about abortion in universities, law schools, labor unions, schools and other community forums (Campos, personal correspondence). *La Comisión* also prides itself on ties with students, and Costa and Campos related that for the past five years, they were part of an annual conference at the Medical School of the University of Buenos Aires. The members were dismayed that a change in administration-- from an independent head of the university, to a Catholic Menemist president and member of *Opus Dei*-- prevented them from attending in 1995 and will probably preclude the group’s attendance in the future (Campos and Costa, personal interview).

In order to avoid co-optation, *La Comisión* will not accept money from outside foundations or agencies. However, this may prevent the organization from growing and more fully spreading information and its messages. The members of *La Comisión* are also the primary contributors to publications, performing research and more informal analyses of the problem surrounding abortion in Argentina. Campos and Costa said that *La Comisión*’s grassroots approach keeps them from becoming bureaucratic and losing contact with reality. They fear that these problems befall other organizations, which accept outside funding and work mainly in academic spheres on “technical projects-- the results do not reach the people” (Campos and Costa, personal interview). This may be a criticism of *Foro por los Derechos Reproductivos* (Forum for Reproductive Rights), a Buenos Aires group which accepts grants and focuses on theory and research (see the last section in this chapter for more information).

*La Comisión* has also been wary about allying itself with other organizations in the pro-choice movement, partly because of the militant nature of the group, partly because of the strict ideological views members have regarding abortion, and partly due to their beliefs about fundraising. When *La Comisión* has cooperated with other groups at all, these groups have usually been members of the broader feminist movement in Argentina. This occurred in 1990, when the organization organized a conference inviting CEM, Lugar de Mujer, ATEM and individual feminists to discuss contraceptives and abortion.

The formal mission statements of *La Comisión* can be interpreted from the goals in their proposed “Anteproyecto de ley” which includes eight articles about contraceptives to “assure that all the population has access to information about contraceptive methods” (*La Comisión*, “Anteproyecto de ley de anticoncepción y aborto”: 16) and “to guarantee free contraceptives to all the social sectors” (Article 3). It also includes three articles about abortion:

Art. 1: The right of every woman, [is recognized] . . . to interrupt her pregnancy during the first twelve weeks of gestation.
Art. 2: The national, provincial or municipal public hospitals, health clinics dependent on federal funding and private clinics must have personnel and equipment necessary to guarantee said interruption, preserving the psycho-physical health and the dignity of the patient.

Art. 3: [The above providers must also] . . . provide sexual information and contraceptives to women who have interrupted their pregnancies. (*La Comisión por el Derecho al Aborto, “Anteproyecto de ley de anticoncepción y aborto”: 16)

It is surprising that *La Comisión* is the only group in Buenos Aires which advocates a specific time during a woman’s pregnancy when abortion would no longer be legal (in this case, twelve weeks of gestation). The reason for this is probably that the Anteproyecto is intended to be a proposal for a law, and the group believes this would be the most feasible way to get the measure through the legislative process in Argentina. Moreover, the group has expressed concern about providing a legal structure (through legalization and not just decriminalization) that could regulate abortions under the safest conditions possible by providers in the public hospitals† (*La Comisión*, “Editorial” 3). Thus, the group may fear that universal abortion beyond twelve weeks of gestation would be dangerous in public hospitals today.

This Anteproyecto is widely distributed by the members of *La Comisión*, including at the tabling location. Members solicit signatures of support from the public and support from other organizations, such as ATEM. The proposed law is also published in paid advertisements (paid for by member contributions) in local newspapers, something which occurred frequently when the issue was debated during the Constitutional Convention of 1994.

Because *La Comisión* is a small group, there has generally been a simple consensus among members about the tactics and ideology of the group. However, tensions have erupted at times, especially in the early years of the organization when part of the membership base split off and formed a new pro-choice organization. This split, which occurred in 1989, led to the formation of ELEGIR-Mujeres por el Derecho a la Anti-concepción y al Aborto Legal (Choice-Women for the Right to Contraceptives and Legal Abortion). According to Campos, “the methods used are not a cause of rivalry between the groups, but ideological conceptions surrounding the issue are” (Campos, personal correspondence).

*La Comisión* emphasizes the importance of two themes, contraceptives and abortion, debating with other organizations, such as ELEGIR, that-- for reasons of political expediency-- abandoned *La Comisión’s* ideology that these two themes are necessarily intertwined. For example, *La Comisión* was proudly the first to use and promote the motto, “Contraceptives to prevent abortion, legal abortion to prevent death.” According to Campos and Costa, reproductive rights cannot be separated from abortion, because abortion is the key to a woman’s right to control her own body” (Campos and Costa, personal interview). The group does not discuss the reality of contraceptive failure, although it is in favor of full access to contraceptives and abortion.

The language used by Campos and Costa reflects the central ideology of *La Comisión*. Abortion is seen primarily as a woman’s rights issue, and therefore legalization is of utmost importance. Decriminalization must be accompanied by legalization in order to make the State responsible and to prevent discrimination against poor women and those who live in rural areas. The members use health

1 None of the other pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires have proposed trimester limits, or any other specific time limits, on legal abortion.

2 *La Comisión* considers decriminalization to mean the suppression of the articles of the Penal Code which call abortion a crime, and believe that this is not sufficient because it would not resolve the problem of poor women who suffer from botched abortions. Instead, the organization fears that decriminalization would merely legalize the practice of the doctors who currently provide clandestine clinical abortions to women who can afford them, and would not help poor women who seek abortion. The group thinks that decriminalization would not create a system to provide safe abortion services in the public hospitals (*La Comisión*, “Editorial”: 3).
and social issue arguments to emphasize their positions, and to inform their audience about the situation in Argentina. Yet, their refusal to negotiate about providing contraceptives and sex-educa
tion if abortion is not also legalized makes their ideology more inflexible.

The organization, therefore, criticizes other groups which at first accepted La Comisión’s motto, but later abandoned it or split it in half in favor of tactics which allowed negotiation with political forces that were willing to accept the need for contraceptives, but not abortion. Thus, to La Comisión separating the motto is to backtrack in their fight for legalization (Campos and Costa, personal interview). As an organization with strong feminist collective action frame, La Comisión does not accept the idea that reform of the current law can come in increments. They refuse to stand behind laws which provide for contraception and not for abortion and criticize groups who do as selling out in order to “negotiate to obtain immediate little political ties” (Campos, personal correspondence).

The ideology of La Comisión has never been more apparent-- nor, as some might say, as rigid and impractical-- as during the Constitutional Convention of 1994. The group refused to negotiate (as some other groups did) to gain access to contraceptives by de-emphasizing abortion rights. La Comisión was active in fighting Menem’s proposition to further prevent and penalize abortion, because they feared that this would only cause more limits on the provision of contraceptives and preclude any hope of increased liberalization and legalization of abortion. The members also thought that a climate of fear would grow amongst patients and (safer, but clandestine) clinical abortion providers if the laws were made harsher. Member Dora Coledesky explained in a newspaper article, “This would no doubt mean that it would be more difficult and costly to get these services, services that are already inaccessible to large sectors of the population” (Colesdesky 1994).

La Comisión’s treatment of the Catholic Church serves as a good example of the kind of ideology they deploy in the media and on the streets. On television Coppola said that the Church and the anti-abortion Opus Dei organization treat women like children and “value the life of an embryo over that of a woman” (Campos, “Visto y considerado”). Another example of La Comisión’s strong criticism of the Church and the military is the fact that the group used puppets of well-known priests and military leaders in demonstrations for the Día de Lucha por la Legalización de Aborto en América Latina in 1992 and 1993. These grotesque puppets held signs which read: “Guardians of hypocritical morals” (La Comisión, private video, 1992). The language used in these cases places “hypocritical morals” in direct opposition to women’s lives and women’s rights.

Furthermore, the puppets serve to create a symbolic representation of well-known conservative leaders and to make a serious situation comical, helping to bring La Comisión’s point across. A similar effect is produced by the publication of pro-choice cartoons in La Comisión’s newsletters and documents. La Comisión is aware of the strong statements which can be made by images, and chooses to create them in order to provoke discussion and gain support for their cause.

La Comisión is the most radical of the pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires, mainly because of the group’s strong feminist ideas and its symbolic street protest strategies. It is valuable to contrast La Comisión’s tactics with those of ELEGIR, an organization which formed when members of La Comisión left to found their own pro-choice organization.

**ELEGIR-Mujeres por el Derecho a la Anti-concepción y al Aborto Legal**

ELEGIR -Mujeres por el Derecho a la Anti-concepción y al Aborto Legal was founded in 1989 by three members of La Comisión who left the group because they wished to emphasize the importance of free contraceptives in their fight for abortion and reproductive rights. According to Dr. Silvia Coppola, one of the founders, she and the other two founding members of ELEGIR left La Comisión because they were frustrated that La Comisión would not fight for liberalization of the laws in Argentina in order to promote the use of contraceptives, and instead wished to focus only on
legalization of abortion. They formed ELEGIR in response to the grave situation of high rates of botched abortions and dangerous teenage pregnancies that they felt could have and should have been prevented by better access to contraception (Coppola, personal interview). The leaders said that they had to accept compromise when it came to the reform of national laws, because Argentina was “worse off without contraceptives, and if they pushed for both abortion and contraceptives, they would never get anywhere” (Coppola and Pasquale, personal interview). ELEGIR believes that contraceptives and abortion go “hand in hand” and that with contraceptives, there would be fewer abortions (Coppola 1994).

ELEGIR is an organization consisting of four to five permanent members, all professional women with ties to medicine, law or the social sciences. For example, Coppola is an anesthesiologist who started to fight for abortion rights with La Comisión after treating women with botched abortions in hospitals where there were rules against giving patients information about contraception. During important campaigns, such as the one which arose at the time of the Constitutional Convention of 1994, ELEGIR absorbs other adherents and increases in size and power.

ELEGIR identifies itself as a group of people who “come together to defend women’s lives and the liberty of women, . . . to defend reproductive rights, contribute theoretical and practical answers to contraception and abortion. . . . [and] to fight so that women. . . can exercise their right TO DECIDE and TO CHOOSE” (ELEGIR 1992). It is interesting to note that ELEGIR, unlike La Comisión, refrains from using the “legalization of abortion” as their objective. Instead, ELEGIR adopts more neutral language suggesting the need for “reproductive rights” and “choice.”

The members see ELEGIR as a “militant” group, because the activists share a way of looking at abortion and pro-choice activism. Furthermore, they say they are “militant” because they are not earning a living from the organization as for example, members of a non-governmental organization might (Coppola and Pasquale, personal interview). Moreover, they see themselves as militant activists because they do not focus on research or theoretical study, but on activism. However, if La Comisión is seen as a militant group because of its confrontational tactics and street protest techniques, ELEGIR is much less radical in comparison.

ELEGIR’s current methods of protest, strategy, and tactics are clearly outlined in one of their pamphlets, where they state the following goals: “1) To organize talks, debates, workshops, study groups and exhibitions; 2) To publish press notices, bulletins, and works on research and polemics; 3) To participate in meetings, seminars and conferences about health problems and women’s reproductive rights, legislation and health policies” (ELEGIR 1992). By doing these things, ELEGIR seeks to defend reproductive rights via discussion about contraceptives and abortion as well as creating “real and effective spaces” for discourse in all classes (ELEGIR 1992). This tactic favors private discussions, thus placing ELEGIR in a different social realm of Argentine life than La Comisión. The fact that ELEGIR does not use street protest as an activist tactic also shows that the original founders who left La Comisión and had participated in this kind of pro-choice activism did not feel that it was effective or important enough to continue this strategy with ELEGIR.

Furthermore ELEGIR differs from La Comisión because it is more active in holding formal workshops and talks about abortion issues. During these meetings, which Coppola and her co-leader, Claudia Pasquale call “cursillos”(mini courses of study) (Coppola and Pasquale, personal interview), they discuss abortion with “women’s organizations, neighborhood groups, political parties, health centers and meetings of men and women”(ELEGIR 1992). So instead of taking to the streets, ELEGIR has chosen to occupy more formal settings when it communicates its message to the public.

The activists of ELEGIR work on various societal fronts. They publish editorials and research results which are aimed at the academic, educated reader. For example, ELEGIR published three

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1Emphasis as written.
abstracts from investigations about maternal mortality in 1990, underlining key facts and analysis which members wanted to emphasize for the reader. ELEGIR also publishes and disperses press notices to the media, such as their response to US film “The Silent Scream”, a film produced by anti-choice activists which falsely depicts a fetus ‘screaming’ during an abortion. The organization has also supported its members and other activists in the pro-choice movement by publishing their original work. This occurred in 1994, when ELEGIR published three articles in celebration of the International Day of Action for Women’s Health. The articles discuss the legalization of RU486, the relationship between contraceptives and abortion, and reproductive rights and social control.

The fact that ELEGIR publishes articles written by women from other organizations demonstrates cooperation between ELEGIR and women from these groups. But like La Comisión, ELEGIR considers its autonomy as hinging on monetary independence and it will not accept cooperation in the form of grants. ELEGIR relies even more than La Comisión on the contributions of activist members, as well as small donations from the sales of publications.

ELEGIR has been most successful at gaining public and media attention at key moments in the pro-choice movement in Argentina. For example, 1994 was an important year for ELEGIR for two reasons. First, there were more people interested in abortion issues because of the Constitutional Convention. In addition to increased membership, this public interest led to more media coverage for abortion issues, and therefore more public attention focused on ELEGIR and its message. ELEGIR’s members were very happy that they were able to defend abortion against its opponents. Coppola and her co-leader, Claudia Pasquale, applaud the fact that their movement succeeded in acquiring legal and free contraceptive services in Buenos Aires public hospitals.

Unlike La Comisión, ELEGIR is very eager to link with other groups to gain support and strength. The organization is part of the Red Mundial de Mujeres para los Derechos Reproductivos, an organization based in Amsterdam. ELEGIR has also participated actively in international events, such as the annual International Day of Action for Women’s Health and the Latin American and Caribbean women’s Encuentros since their fifth conference (in San Bernardo, Argentina) in 1990.

Just as the ideology of ELEGIR makes the organization open to cooperation with other groups in the pro-choice movement in Argentina and abroad, it also aims its message of inclusiveness when it works in Buenos Aires. ELEGIR is ideologically less rigid than La Comisión about seeking abortion as a fundamentally women’s rights issue, and therefore feels more eager to compromise and negotiate about the path used to achieve legalization. Liberalization of laws, or depenalization of abortion are thus seen as short term goals-- or stepping stones-- to the long term goal of legalization. Because abortion is also considered a health issue by members of ELEGIR, they are willing to compromise if they can gain contraceptive and/or sex education programs.

In its discussion of abortion as a woman’s right issue, ELEGIR notes that the current law impedes the liberty of choice and exercises profound control over women (Coppola and Pasquale, interview). ELEGIR’s feminist emphasis on respecting the body and reproductive rights of women is obvious in the organization’s publications, which include pamphlets and editorials. One, “Ni morir tranquila nos dejan” (They don’t even let us die peacefully), includes a scathing criticism of Argentine society which Coppola also repeated several times in her television appearances: “As women, we are treated as if we were a kind of container for the fetus, a type of disconnected procreation machine... the worst is that women... are always treated in the same manner... the reality which women’s rights encounter is a system which systematically denies us a place [as people with rights]” (Gonzalez, et al.).

ELEGIR, in concurrence with its name, is an organization which emphasizes the decision of women: “maternity is a choice, not a destiny” (Coppola on El Moderador).

On the other hand, the central argument of ELEGIR is that abortion is a health issue. When emphasizing health concerns as the basis of their argument, ELEGIR maintains that the majority of
unwanted pregnancies result from ignorance about contraceptives, and not because methods failed. The members advocate sex education and increased discussion about family planning methods in public hospitals, clinics, schools, other social institutions, and in the media (Coppola and Pasquale, personal interview). Of all the pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires, ELEGIR publishes and verbally uses the highest data for abortion rates, suggesting that 750,000 abortions are performed each year in Argentina (Coppola on “El Moderador”). Yet, this figure is a very high estimate, perhaps twice that of the World Health Organization and even Coppola has published substantially lower figures on various occasions (Viladrich and Coppola).

ELEGIR makes frequent reference to the fact that Argentina has “an extremely high figure [of abortions per year] in relation to the First World” (Coppola on “Sin Dudas”, television program). ELEGIR also compares the situation of Argentina to the case of Cuba in a public debate entitled, “Contraceptive and legal abortion in Cuba” (ELEGIR 1992). Coppola often compares the situation in her country to that of France, noting that contraceptives and abortion are available, and there are few complications and deaths related to abortion in France (Viladrich and Coppola).

Furthermore, Coppola self-consciously uses her status as a medical doctor. She uses her title consistently, as it is symbolic of her knowledge and qualifications. Her status as a medical doctor makes her arguments seem stronger, and she illustrates her arguments with stories from her work in emergency rooms, where she treated women suffering from abortion complications. She emphasizes the irony she felt treating these women in public hospitals where there was no family planning counseling and methods of contraception were not provided. Being a doctor may also gain Coppola support from within the medical community, and may be part of the reason that ELEGIR emphasizes contraceptives and medical care in their struggle for abortion, making abortion as a health issue the group’s primary argument.

In fact, Coppola’s leadership seems key to the group. Along with Pasquale, Coppola coordinates the group, a leadership position they say came from mutual consensus with their peers. Coppola is a charismatic and energetic doctor who appears frequently in the media, especially on TV and cable, discussing abortion and pinpointing the contradictions and hypocrisies of Argentine society. Alongside other pro-choice activists, she has been on several Argentine talk shows, debating with priests, politicians, lawyers and women from the pro-life movement. Although ELEGIR is a small organization, the leadership and activism of Coppola seems to inspire and sustain the group.

Furthermore, Coppola speaks freely-- in person and on television-- about her own experiences with abortion. She compares abortions she has had, one in her youth in Argentina and one in France as an adult. She suggests that she was lucky to have the means to acquire her first abortion, which was illegal and expensive and contrasts that experience with her second, legal and inexpensive abortion. Because there are not many women who are willing to publicly declare that they have had abortions in Argentina, her statements have shock value and bring the argument she makes to a very personal level. She says, “Someone has to speak out, to say, Yes, I had an abortion” (Coppola on “Aborto”, Sin vueltas, television program).

Coppola’s tactic-- and ELEGIR’s as well-- is like those used by La Comisión because it is meant to shock the audience and persuade people at a personal level. It is interesting to compare this strategy with that of Argentina’s branch of Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD), especially because CDD has religious viewpoints and an international perspective.

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD) is the Latin American branch of Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), which was founded by three New York members of the National Organization for Women in 1973. They wanted to apply the ideas of the women’s movement and the struggle for
women’s equality within the Catholic Church (Segers 1992). CFFC was established in support of abortion after U.S. bishops began a campaign to reverse the newly secured measures enacted in Roe vs. Wade. The founders of CFFC were motivated by the idea that the bishops did not represent the Catholic people on reproductive rights issues (Kissling 1995). Although the organization began with a small grassroots following, political scientist Mary Segers has documented that “it has attracted considerable popular support, foundation funding, and media attention throughout the 1980’s and early 1990’s. . . achieving legitimacy as a public interest organization articulating a thoughtful dissent from the official Catholic position on abortion” (169-70).

According to current CFFC President Frances Kissling, her organization did not begin working with Catholic Latin American women until 1986, when the group translated CFFC publications into Spanish. After the 1987 International Women and Health meeting, CFFC sponsored a post-conference meeting for Catholic women from Latin America (Kissling 1993: 55).

CDD’s members were Catholic feminists who came together because they wanted to create a wider discussion about abortion which included a pro-choice religious standpoint and because of their common interest in women’s health issues, and liberation theology (Trillini, personal interview). Liberation theology is a kind of Christian thinking that emphasizes individual consciousness-raising, “transforming action”-- especially regarding social and economic injustice-- and small communities called Christian base communities that often are composed of very poor Catholics (Hennelly 30). The active participation of women in liberation theology and the Christian base communities is important because they learned how to organize for contemplation and social change, thought critically about their situations and the leadership of the Catholic Church, and applied the Bible to their lives-- instead of accepting the Church’s teachings without questioning.

In Argentina, the group has two branches: Buenos Aires and Cordoba. Until 1996, the Argentine members do not have meetings, but they agree with the ideas of the group and they help distribute publications produced in Montevideo to Argentine legislators, lawyers, and theologians. Of the 200 Argentines who sympathize with CDD, some offer varied levels of support, ranging from passively receiving publications, to writing articles for CDD periodicals, to aiding in the translation of CFFC materials to Spanish (CDD 1991), to conducting sex education workshops. For example, two leaders of CDD in Cordoba were able to hold informational contraceptive workshops in Mendoza and Santa Fe with money they received from a grant in 1995 (Trillini, personal interview).

The publications produced by CDD vary from the popular to the academic. For instance, CDD makes pamphlets on contraceptive use, comic books, statements of feminist theology and books on the relationship between sexuality, Catholicism and abortion in Latin America. CDD also publishes the results of surveys regarding sexuality, support for reproductive rights and contraceptive use in Latin America. CDD produces Mujer e Iglesia: Sexualidad y Aborto en América Latina (Woman and Church: Sexuality and Abortion in Latin America), a book of articles written by six Latin American feminists about the religious, historical, political and cultural conditions that affect women’s reproductive health. Many of CDD’s other theoretical publications are translations of similar works produced in English by CFFC. The group distributes translations of guides for making ethical decisions about abortion and summaries of the history of abortion in the Catholic Church. In addition, CDD has two published periodicals, Aportes (Contributions) and Conciencia Latinoamericana (Latin American Conscience) which contain articles about legal, theological, medical and feminist issues related to abortion. Conciencia Latinoamericana is published three times a year and covers reproductive health issues all over Latin America. Both periodicals are distributed to CDD members throughout Latin America. The various publications are also mailed by CDD-Argentina to legislators and the clergy, as well as to anyone who expresses interest.
The central tenets of CDD are stated in a two-page flyer entitled “Ayuda memoria” (Memory aid) which emphasizes and summarizes the main points of the rest of CDD’s literature. It is distributed in Argentina to members, people working on abortion issues, feminists, human rights activists and the media. The document states:

**Certain beliefs are at the base of [our ideological] convictions:**
1. To formulate moral judgments about abortion, it is important to avoid rigid and negative attitudes towards sexuality.
2. The decision to have an abortion can be a justifiable moral decision in many circumstances; it is also possible that this decision is not justified.
3. Abortion must be legal so that women may start to make a moral decision in a climate of true liberty.
4. The decision about abortion contains intrinsic values. Amongst these are the value of the woman’s life and the plan that she has, and the value of the fetus.
5. We all have the obligation to create a society in which women do not have to choose between the value of her life or that of the fetus. (Frances Kissling, as quoted in CDD, “Ayuda Memoria”)  

CDD members promote the ideology of their organization as a “concrete alternative” (CDD “Y María fue consultada para ser madre de Dios”, back cover) to the vision that is espoused by religious groups which are against freedom of choice. Instead of condemning abortion, the women of CDD and CFFC have chosen to provide women making difficult personal choices with publications that advise a cognitive approach that empowers women to make positive decisions about abortion. They say women can do this by praying, thinking and making a decision to abort with good conscience and thus removing the guilt (CFFC, “You Are Not Alone”). This goal is consistent with the stated ideology of the group, because it suggests that there are morally acceptable justifications for the difficult decision to have an abortion.

In addition to having an ideological background that is religious in nature, CDD also emphasizes prayer, and spiritual and moral questions. As opposed to making a one-sided decision about the legitimacy of abortion in all circumstances, CDD insists that each woman must decide about terminating a pregnancy based on her own conscience. If she does not go against her conscience and still has an abortion, then she is not committing a sin and thus she cannot be excommunicated. While other pro-choice groups might disagree with this recommendation because it can be seen as an endorsement of patriarchal views regarding maternity, it is appropriate to CDD because it stresses the importance of the individual woman’s beliefs and choices.

Because the women of CDD organize themselves centrally around the fact that they are Catholic, their ideological standpoint is obviously distinct from other groups in Buenos Aires. According to Trillini, the women of CDD do not just come from a women’s health background, nor one of feminism. Instead, she says CDD is unique because “we are revising our faith and the Bible and from there, we make a re-reading . . . for a woman’s right to decide about her own pregnancy. . . and her right to abort in the best possible conditions” (Trillini, personal interview). This goal appears frequently in the publications of CDD, for example: “Our objectives relate to the immense gap which exists between women’s necessities and reproductive health decisions and the current teachings generated by the . . . Catholic Church” (Hurst 1992, back cover). Grela emphasizes that women’ personal participation in the daily workings of the Popular Church has led them to question the rules of the hierarchy regarding sexuality and birth control (Grela 1994).

Therefore, the role of prayer is important in the activism of CDD. CDD publications emphasize the need for women in crisis to pray about their choices, or “paths” (CFFC, “You Are Not Alone”). Materials suggests liturgies which women can perform in groups, and even the comic book produced by
CDD depicts a woman who is deciding to have an abortion praying earnestly (CDD, “Y María fue consultada para ser Madre de Dios”). This specific religious tactic is a good example of how CDD is strikingly different from other organizations in the pro-choice movement.

There are two main goals for CDD: the first is political and legal change so that the civil laws may make abortion legal. Within the periodicals of CDD, this first mission of the organization is made clear:

We support legislation for fundamental human rights in reproductive health for all people in the region.
We dedicate ourselves to making sex education, family planning, contraceptives and legal abortion accessible. We work to increase the responsibility and the right of women to chosen and desired maternity and, by these means, to reduce the incidence of abortion. (Aportes 2: 2)

These simply stated goals have been in place since the foundation of CDD.

The second mission is change within the Catholic Church. This goal is especially important to CDD, because members seek to inform the Church of their dissent and inspire change in the religious teachings of the hierarchy. Grela explains, “we are not for abortion, we are for the right of women to access birth control methods which are necessary for them to decide how many children they will have” (Grela 1994). This view is consistent with the ideology expressed by CFFC, which sees abortion as a negative thing, and “not something to be welcomed or celebrated or viewed as positive” (Segers). This idea is not discussed by women in the other pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires.

The group emphasizes the fact that the hierarchy of the Church is supposed to limit itself to issues related to faith and morals, and it is regarding these issues which the Pope is considered to be infallible. Grela attributes the policies of the Pope and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to the fact that they desire to “conserve the power of celibate men and to destroy sexuality for pleasure that is independent of procreation. . . . The Pope can’t speak about something he does not know: maternity” (Grela 1994). Yet, because the prohibition of abortion has never been made into a Dogma of Faith, and instead has only been supported by the ecclesiastical laws related to penitence and the ordained teachings of the Pope and many bishops, CDD sees abortion as a personal moral question (Hurst 1989).

CDD advances the idea that women who abort “can only be excommunicated if they commit the sin of abortion, and to commit this sin, the woman must think that the abortion is a sin... and act against her conscience by interrupting the pregnancy” (CDD, “Ayuda memoria”).

Furthermore, CDD also notes that abortion is accepted under certain conditions by some Catholic theologians, and that some priests and bishops recognize that a woman who has an abortion is not always committing a grave sin. According Segers, CFFC has combated the anti-Catholicism of the US pro-choice movement by showing that being Catholic and pro-choice is not a contradiction (172). This may also be true in Latin America and Argentina, in the case of CDD.

CDD is specific about how language shapes the abortion debate, and members believe that the words chosen and used by both pro-choice and anti-choice movements are important. For example, publications emphasize the emotional differences inspired by using the words “fertilized eggs or fetuses” and “babies or children.” Using the latter two words creates an implied denial of a woman’s right to choose because it suggests that women who abort are killing “babies or children.” On the other hand, saying “fertilized eggs or fetuses” implies a more detached, scientific, pro-choice view (CDD, “Ayuda Memoria”). In televised arguments or statements published in the printed media, CDD contributors are careful to state their opinions using pro-choice terminology, and are therefore making self-conscious arguments. This is more important for CDD than for other pro-choice groups in Argentina because of their identity as a group of Catholic women in debate with other Catholics.

One example of the arguments made by members occurred on a cable talk show in June 1994, when Safina Newberry, then-leader of CDD in Buenos Aires, spoke about her belief that abortion is not
CDD literature often addresses this issue in critical response to the anti-choice movement and Catholic Church hierarchy which suggests that abortion is equal to assassination. Philosophically, CDD considers when life begins as a subjective decision, because there is not “scientific, moral, religious, or judiciary consensus” (CDD, “Ayuda memoria”). Grela suggests that governments in Latin America use the rules of the Catholic Church to make laws which suit them (Gutiérrez 2). CDD’s Assistant Coordinator Graciela Pujol explains the Church’s rejection of pro-choice Catholics who dare to express their views: “According to the Vatican, CFFC and CDD are not legitimately Catholic, because they are in favor of the right to abortion, categorically rejected by the Catholic Church” (13). In fact, CFFC members and supporters (some of whom were nuns) who signed a letter published in 1984 as an advertisement in The New York Times were immediately threatened by the Vatican. The Church demanded “that they publicly retract their statements or face dismissal from their congregations” (Segers 174).

CDD has also made room for self re-examination and change. In a booklet published in 1994, CDD listed a series of goals made by each of the CDD branches in Latin America. CDD produced these goals after the World Conference on Population and Development at Cairo, when a group of thirty leaders united at Fortín de Santa Rosa, Uruguay to revise the goals of the organization. The members of CDD also sought to review their strategies in preparation for the Women’s Conference in Beijing, where CDD members traveled to represent their organization. Overall, CDD declared the universal need for the organization to create alliances with feminist and political groups, and to inspire public debates about reproductive rights (CDD, Dec 1994: 14). Individual CDD groups contributed more specific goals. For example, Peru pledged to start sex education programs, to stress quality of care for women’s reproductive health, and to begin a research investigation about how women make decisions about abortion. Colombia also pledged to begin an anthropological investigation, about “the myth of maternity” to further the creation of a national network of Catholic women, and to work with community women’s groups (CDD, Dec 1994: 7-8).

The Argentine leaders contributed the following priorities to this publication:

• Construct meeting and reflecting spaces to discover ourselves as “subjects” of civil, sexual and reproductive rights, being capable of participating in social change.

• To find allies for the defense of women in institutions or groups that work with health or education, as well as the government and the Church.

• To make the contents and materials of CDD adequate for use in the education of the popular sector. (CDD, Dec 1994: 8)

These goals reflect the desire of members in Argentina to “participate in social change” both at the higher and lower levels of society. Compared to the goals of the other CDD branches, CDD-Argentina’s goals reflect the group’s interest in self-reflection. CDD-Argentina echoes the goals of CDD-Latin America when it pledges to strengthen and create ties with allies. Yet instead of desiring to begin academic research projects, the way members in Peru and Columbia planned, CDD-Argentina demonstrated a popular focus once again. The members aimed to produce publications accessible to the poor women in their workshops.

Trillini adds that besides receiving publications and funds from the CDD office in Uruguay, the fact that the Argentina branch of CDD is part of an international organization makes the group unique compared to others in Buenos Aires. She is proud of CDD because it enables activists throughout Latin America to have an international perspective on pro-choice issues, and to receive support from people in nations with “different visions, cultures, languages, traditions.” Trillini believes that this helps members of CDD to understand their own limits and to identify the challenges which face women today. This way, she says, “they do not feel like they are alone” (Trillini, personal interview).
CDD’s international cooperation has been developed by CDD and CFFC since the organization’s formation. Similarly, national cooperation for pro-choice activism and study has been nurtured by the fourth pro-choice organization in Buenos Aires—Foro por los derechos reproductivos.

**Foro por los Derechos Reproductivos**

The most recently formed of the pro-choice groups in Buenos Aires, Foro por los Derechos Reproductivos, was started in mid-1991 by Silvina Ramos, a sociologist from CEDES, and Silvia Coppola, one of the leaders of ELEGIR- Mujeres por el Derecho a la Anti-Concepción y el Aborto Legal. They decided to start an organization for reproductive rights after attending a meeting in São Paulo, Brazil (sponsored by the Worldwide Women’s Network for Reproductive Rights), where Latin American women united to “evaluate the routes of action in the region and discuss strategies to multiply the capacity to respond [to the lack of reproductive rights] through regional organizations” (Foro, pamphlet).

The female professionals who joined Foro—most of whom work in the fields of law, private and university research, social work, government and public health—wanted to start a non-governmental organization for internal study, public advocacy and diffusion of information related to reproductive rights. When the organization began in 1991, the group was mainly a study forum, a ‘meeting of the minds’ to discuss the impact of clandestine abortion, mainly from a mental and physical health perspective. Marta Rosenberg—a feminist psychoanalyst, original member of the organization, and member of Foro’s “Comisión Coordinadora” (Coordinating Committee)—characterizes Foro as different from the other pro-choice groups in Buenos Aires because it is an “informational” organization made up of women who study the abortion issue professionally, from various standpoints. The members seek to act as “multipliers” of information to increase the understanding of the general public about abortion (Rosenberg, personal interview). Self-consciously, leaders of Foro have chosen to approach the issue not directly in the streets or the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, but in academic and legislative circles, as well as in the media.

**Foro** is a much larger organization than either ELEGIR or La Comisión, meeting monthly with about 25 active members. Meetings take place in the office of CEDES, where several of the members work. Frequently, these meetings take the form of seminars, where members will present information from their own research. Therefore, the number of those attending vary from month to month, depending on interest generated by the theme. Themes have included new reproductive technology, contraceptives, abortion, reproductive rights, and the international situation of the women’s health movement (Foro, pamphlet). As with other pro-choice groups in Buenos Aires, Foro received additional public support that made their meetings larger during recent political campaigns, such as the one started before the 1994 Constitutional Convention.

Like the other groups in Buenos Aires, Foro does not have a very formal organizational structure, choosing to make decisions with a “directive commission,” made up of twelve women, that is “highly informal.” Rosenberg says that the informal shared leadership goals of Foro are currently not being met because the same people tend to do most of the work. She also says that the “directive commission” is not advantageous, adding “we must institutionalize to avoid inconveniences... decisions are often made at the spur of the moment” (Rosenberg, personal interview). However, she denies that there are problems in coming to a consensus when important decisions must be made quickly.

Foro identifies itself as “an autonomous non-profit organization of women that defends and promotes reproductive rights, understood as human rights related to the free choice of women and couples on issues regarding biological reproduction: to have children or not, when and how to have them.” (Foro, pamphlet). Although the members of Foro have united with organizations and
individuals who are not female, the group has continued to define itself as a women’s organization and
has preferred to collaborate with organizations that are mainly concerned with women’s issues.

The organization’s collaborative goals are also evident in the objectives Foro published in a
pamphlet printed on recycled paper, under the heading “What we propose, Objectives”:
1. To promote social participation and debate about reproductive rights.
2. To support activities and campaigns oriented towards the strengthening of reproductive
rights.
3. To produce and diffuse medical, social, psychological, economic and legal information
about reproductive rights.
4. To create proposals so that the participation of women in the reproductive process will be
recognized and, consequently, to improve their situation in practice of their rights.
5. To intervene in the redefinition of public health policy and assistance connected to
reproductive rights.
6. To aid in the implementation of integral reproductive health programs in the public services
and in social security [Argentine state sector insurance], promoting the preparation of health
care providers to respond to the necessities of the population with regards to reproductive
rights.
7. To bring women and men together to create social, legal, cultural and economic conditions
which will make the freedom of choice possible regarding the reproduction of all people,
without distinction of age, sex, civil status, ethnicity or socioeconomic condition. (Foro,
pamphlet)

This formal mission statement emphasizes a more academic approach to the reproductive rights battle
than those proposed by the other organizations in Buenos Aires. The language of the list itself is more
sophisticated and concurs with the wording of United Nations documents regarding reproductive rights
from Cairo and Beijing. Unlike the more radical words used by ELEGIR and La Comisión, this list of
objectives would be less applicable in a grassroots setting. Nonetheless, the statement mentions both
freedom and choice, and places a strong emphasis on health and social issues.

Furthermore the seventh goal mentions the need for all people to be involved in the fight for fair
reproductive rights laws, especially both men and women. This is also hinted at by the self-conscious
symbolism contained in the organization’s logo. Instead of using a woman symbol the way ELEGIR
does, Foro’s logo depicts a sperm entering an egg, or more notably, an egg engulfing a sperm in a bold,
stylized image. Foro uses this logo on all its publications, emphasizing the fact that fertilization requires
two parties: This powerful symbol places reproduction at the forefront of the organization’s argument
and is ambiguous enough to generate discussion among those who see it on pamphlets or in
advertisements. Furthermore, because the logo is a stylized image of a scientific phenomenon-- after all,
human conception cannot even be seen with a naked eye-- it can be seen as emphasizing a scientific,
medical approach to the situation (as opposed to more political or grassroots strategies).

Another aspect of Foro’s more scientific or academic (as opposed to radical feminist) approach
to the pro-choice movement has been the organization’s willingness to manipulate its ideological beliefs
in order to be more successful. This strategy is most apparent in the fact that Foro initially used the
same motto as La Comisión, “Contraceptives to prevent abortion, Abortion to prevent death.” The two
phrases of this motto, phrases which La Comisión considers ideologically inseparable, were divided by
Foro during their battle for reproductive rights at the 1994 Constitutional Convention. Members of
Foro thought that this tactic was reasonable because they believe that it is more practical to first
demand contraceptives, then decriminalization of abortion under increasingly frequent circumstances,
and then finally legalization of abortion. According to leaders of Foro an incremental approach is wiser
in Argentina and groups who are inflexible about the motto are being impractical and ideologically unsophisticated (Rosenberg, personal interview; Coppola, personal interview).

Therefore, the organization differentiates decriminalization and legalization very carefully. Rosenberg says that the focus of Foro is decriminalization of abortion, not legalization. She believes that more support can be garnered for decriminalizing abortion in steps, since immediate legalization would require more difficult consensus. Foro believes that the Argentine public does not fully support legalization, but will stand behind decriminalization in some cases. She said that decriminalization and legalization are not similar in “ideological content”, but the two goals have similar practical results (Rosenberg, personal interview).

Moreover, Rosenberg believes that decriminalization is linked to health while legalization is linked to rights. Because Foro is more interested in abortion as a health issue than one of women’s rights, members think that it is admissible to work towards reform of the current laws with decriminalization. By using the political tactic of pushing decriminalization, Rosenberg says that Foro can achieve their goal by increments (Rosenberg, personal interview). In fact, Foro publications use this kind of language to state this goal clearly: “The decriminalization of abortion will avoid deaths and eliminate the physical and psychological risks of clandestine abortion.” (Foro, “28 de May”).

Foro’s scientific or academic approach to reproductive rights activism may be rooted in the initial situation that the group encountered, because members may have been initially hesitant to get involved in politics after El Proceso. Members of the group had good reason to prefer a private “forum” for the discussion of research and information at the beginning of their activities, rather than a grassroots political group that would have to be more public about its activism. This period of self-reflection may have been helpful to Foro because it prepared members for external discourse and conflicts. Though Foro remains mainly an academic forum where members can speak about their research and indirectly influence politics, the group has increasingly participated in direct political activity.

In 1993, the organization first publicly campaigned for abortion rights, collecting over 1,500 signatures of established and notable members of Argentine society and publishing them in national newspapers. According to Rosenberg, this political campaign was very successful because it thrust the issue into the “public agenda” and facilitated discussion in the printed media and on radio and television programs (Rosenberg, personal interview).

Yet this method shows a fundamental ideological difference between Foro and the other organizations, especially La Comisión. Though both Foro and La Comisión solicit signatures, it is telling that Foro collects signatures of well-known Argentines while La Comisión prides itself on the support of the man or woman on the street. Rosenberg says that by acting first and foremost as a group of “multipliers” of information, Foro “tries to produce knowledge about the issue that can be used in political campaigns” (Rosenberg, personal interview). Foro clearly believes that some supporters-- such as artists, actors, politicians and intellectuals-- bring greater strength to play in political media campaigns for reproductive rights.

Foro was the catalyst for the formation of an umbrella group for the pro-choice movement, called Mujeres Autoconvocadas para Decidir en Libertad, an organization of more than 100 non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) which joined together in 1994 to start a campaign for reproductive rights in the Constitutional Convention. This single-issue campaign was important, according to Rosenberg, because it was successful in uniting so many feminist organizations-- almost all of the women’s movement in Buenos Aires-- for the support of choice (Rosenberg, personal interview). Though more than 100 NGO’s joined Mujeres Autoconvocadas, Foro’s leaders maintained a great deal of control over the publicity and activism of the larger group. One reason for their leadership may be that they gained respect as researchers with professional expertise, as feminists, and as activists.
Furthermore, Foro’s success at convening a larger organization can be attributed to the fact that members belong to many other organizations, such as ELEGIR, ATEM, and CEDES. These organizational and personal connections may have enabled Foro to unite a network of groups for Mujeres Autoconvocadas.

Like Foro, Mujeres Autoconvocadas emphasizes decriminalization of abortion as its goal. This argument was especially important during the days before the Constitutional Convention, and Foro published advertisements in newspapers to summon support for decriminalization. The organization also collaborated with Mujeres Autoconvocadas to distribute glossy pro-choice dossiers to senators which discussed the benefits of decriminalization (Rosenberg, personal interview).

These advertisements and publications are funded by the individual members of Foro, and from minor contributions from Argentine organizations which support Foro. Although Foro does not currently receive international financial grants, it hopes to obtain money from international organizations such as the United Nations Development Fund Program to create a series of workshops with journalists, legislators, health care providers and women in non-governmental organizations related to health and reproductive rights. Foro applied for a grant from UNICEF in 1994, but was disappointed. However, in the future, the leaders hope to be able to be funded by international agencies so they can create workshops, publications, and even radio ads about abortion (Rosenberg, personal interview).

Moreover, even though Foro is not directly subsidized by CEDES, the group is able to use the office for meetings, and its headquarters is at this location. In addition, Foro uses the facilities of CEDES to receive and send correspondence, and for other supportive functions. Individual members of Foro have published many academic papers on issues related to abortion (both before and after the formation of Foro) and many of these have been published by CEDES. Others have had research funded by grants from various organizations, including the Ford Foundation, and thus these foundations may indirectly-- and unknowingly-- support the goals of Foro.

Although other organizations would heatedly argue that Foro risks co-optation by CEDES or funding sources, the leaders of Foro are not concerned. The conflicting ideological viewpoints of the four porteña pro-choice groups regarding co-optation, financial assistance, and many other issues are discussed in the following chapter.

**CONCLUSIONS**

1. **The Abortion Issue Frames:**

There are three central ways of looking at abortion: as a health issue, as a social/humanitarian issue, and as a women’s rights issue. The abortion issue frame chosen by each group in Buenos Aires, or the combination of frames emphasized by the activists, is a conscious choice that influences many of the other ideological frames that the group employs. For example, groups which frame abortion as a women’s rights issue are less likely to frame liberalization of abortion laws as their goal than to seek full legalization of abortion.

This is the case for La Comisión. In fact, this group’s strong women’s rights collective action frame is a central tenet in the organization, which currently makes La Comisión members the most rigid and confrontational of all the activists in Buenos Aires. They are also the least eager for cooperation. However, the strength of this rigid frame is that it contributes to firm solidarity among members and a coherent theoretical argument that has withstood years of questioning and attacks. The organization may use other arguments to back their women’s rights collective action frame, but this is the most important emphasis. In fact, La Comisión’s unchanging and coherent abortion issue frame protects the group from critics who might say they had wavering beliefs. This frame has not changed during the history of La Comisión, as evidenced by the fact that the group has staunchly maintained its original
motto: “Contraceptives to prevent abortion, abortion to prevent death”, and has continued to produce feminist publications and demand abortion as a women’s right.

On the other hand, **ELEGIR**, sees abortion mostly as a health issue because its members wish to emphasize contraceptives. As a medical doctor, Coppola often illustrates her arguments with stories about situations of abortion which she treated in the public hospitals and cites high mortality rates to back her claims in the media and in **ELEGIR**’s publications. This collective action frame is more flexible and less confrontational than the rigid ideology of **La Comisión**, and it aims for inclusiveness with the health care community and with politicians, because the organization avoids producing radical feminist views and instead stresses health. Feminist ideology is also used as a secondary collective action frame since **ELEGIR**, like **La Comisión**, has its roots in feminist groups like ATEM. **ELEGIR** also publishes feminist materials, but most are not directly produced by group members. Using a collective action frame that focuses on health enables **ELEGIR**’s members to address the issue of contraceptive provision without tackling abortion directly.

**CDD** frames abortion as a women’s rights issue, a human rights issue and a moral/religious issue because CDD members aim to influence the Catholic Church hierarchy. This collective action frame is unique because it prescribes prayer and spiritual and moral examination for the individual, and de-emphasizes the political aspects of abortion. By recommending individual self-reflection on abortion, CDD and CFFC both aim to gain support from women who are made more conscious of the need for choice. However, CDD’s multiple abortion issue frames may be overly broad and unfocused, and may detract members from becoming involved in direct political action.

Lastly, **Foro** sees abortion as a social issue and a health issue, and supports its arguments with studies about the health costs of abortion, and the social and economic injustice that clandestine abortion entails. Because women’s rights are less of a concern, **Foro** (like **ELEGIR**) is more willing to compromise and negotiate with political forces. as it did during the Constitutional Convention of 1994. Like **ELEGIR**, the group frames abortion as a health issue. Yet, **Foro**’s leaders also stress the injustice of a system that enables middle and upper class women to access clandestine abortion safely while it claims the lives of poor Argentines-- a social issue collective action frame.

The central disadvantages to the health issue frame is in the fact that if abortion is considered a health issue and legalized for this reason, the medical community may very well achieve control over the procedure and may be able to regulate abortion in ways which would harm women or ultimately take choice away from them (Hadley 1996; Cisler 1970). Lucinda Cisler, an American feminist and abortion expert, recorded that even after abortion was legalized in the US, many states had restrictive laws that forced women to get permission for abortion from hospital boards (91).

Framing abortion as a social issue may avoid this problem in the long run because it will not legitimize the control of health professionals. Yet, this argument may be less convincing because it implies that if social and economic injustices were lessened, then the need to legalize abortion would not be as acute. Politicians could argue that the best path to end the social problems related to abortion would be to argue for structural change so that the poor would have more resources to support their families. Moreover, the social/humanitarian issue frame also risks the danger of coinciding with population policy ideas, which stress the need to stop rapid population growth and often harbor Malthusian ideals (Hartmann 1995).

However, using supporting arguments from these two frames in conjunction with a central women’s rights action frame may be the most successful and effective option. Basically, all of Argentina’s pro-choice activists are women, and it makes sense to appeal to future female supporters by stressing women’s rights. After all, restrictive abortion laws most directly impact women’s choices and women’s lives. They also reflect the secondary status and oppression of women in society, because men are not targeted. The pro-choice movement in the US has succeeded in protecting many of the
provisions of Roe vs. Wade—despite fierce anti-choice protests—because of the activism of feminists who believed the right to choose abortion is fundamentally a woman’s right. Furthermore, the women’s right action frame, marked by feminist theory, can most easily explain and advocate against social and health problems related to abortion because these problems are exacerbated by an overall lack of women’s rights.

2. The Finance and Co-optation Frame:

Ideologies regarding financial assistance and co-optation are a second central collective action frame. One of the most controversial issues between the groups in Buenos Aires is how funds should be procured to fight for abortion, and whether foreign or outside assistance translates into co-optation. The debate about the possible changes that financial assistance directly brings to a group’s autonomy is a difficult argument. Money from outside sources seems like a “double edged sword” which can help an organization get its message across effectively or enable a group to launch projects, but can also co-opt the group into a less-autonomous role. Even groups which seek grants normally develop projects that will be suitable for the granting institution and can thus be seen as altering their original plans to some extent.

Both ELEGIR and La Comisión trace their ideology about fundraising to the “pioneering principals” of ATEM (Campos and Costa, personal interview). In this collective action frame, fundraising must be accomplished autonomously. According to La Comisión leaders, “subsidies always imply a condition— one which is generally an ideological condition” (Campos and Costa, personal interview). ELEGIR also believes that financial independence is key to the autonomy of a social movement organization. In order to avoid co-optation, neither group will accept money from outside foundations or agencies.

In contrast, CDD in Argentina relies on the funding of CDD’s headquarters in Uruguay, which is in turn funded by CFFC in Washington. Furthermore, CDD-Argentina is actively looking for funding from philanthropic foundations which support population planning or women’s health related endeavors. This reflects the fact that CDD is an international organization, and does not see its mission as independent from those of the other branches throughout Latin America. CDD’s finance and co-optation frame is most similar to that of CFFC and other pro-choice organizations in the US. However, CDD is unlike CFFC and groups such as the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) because it does not solicit funds in exchange for membership in Latin America. CDD accepts individual donations, but membership is free.

The fact that Foro is actively looking for financial assistance is not surprising because many of its members have received funding via grants from national and international bodies to perform research about population and family planning issues. The individual members do not have problems with receiving aid, and project this upon the group. Instead of worrying about losing autonomy or being co-opted, Foro feels that it could be a more respected, productive and powerful organization if it were to receive financial support.

Because financial assistance can be like a “double edged sword,” there is not an easily identifiable superior collective action frame. However, the strongly critical policies of La Comisión and ELEGIR regarding co-optation can serve as warnings to the other two pro-choice groups in Buenos Aires. CDD and Foro should be cautious about outside assistance (both foreign and non-foreign), even if they are able to get grants in the future. One way to maintain the greatest autonomy would be for these groups to thoroughly investigate any conditions attached to grants, and to research the background and intentions of the funding organization. CDD and Foro might also learn how funds

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1Mass- mailings for membership donations to philanthropic and activist organizations is much less common in Argentina than in the US.
from the assistance source have influenced or affected similar activist organizations in the past, and consider how they would be harmed or manipulated if they relied on these funds and then later found them withdrawn.¹

3. The Activist Strategy Frame:

The activist strategies of each organization are shaped by the collective action frame that group leaders use to decide which is the targeted audience of the movement. This third frame has a great impact on the kind of action taken by each organization. As noted in the discussion of the four organizational case studies, each pro-choice organization in Buenos Aires employs unique methods to challenge the government, laws and public opinion of Argentina.

Women from one group may see the work done by another group as less effective, or ideologically conflicted, and therefore see their own work with a group as more appropriate. This may explain why there are few pro-choice activists in Buenos Aires, yet there are still four issue groups (five if you count Mujeres Autoconvocadas, the activist umbrella organization connected to Foro).

La Comisión has a broad goal strategy of reaching the person on the street. They have a long and lasting presence, but they are seen as “loca” (crazy women) by some (Campos and Costa, personal interview). Ironically, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo were also labeled “Las Locas” in a campaign by the military regime (Guzman Bouvard 1997). In fact, La Comisión is bolstered significantly by the legacy of the Madres, which continues to be visible in Buenos Aires and has standing as a human rights organization which is recognized all around the world (Guzman Bouvard 1994). There is a sense that what the members of La Comisión do in their activism on the corner of Rivadavia and Callao-- pro-choice activism with regularity, visibility, and meaningful costumes--reminds people of the Madres.

Although it maintained La Comisión’s collective action frame regarding finances, ELEGIR did not continue the group’s street protest tactic. Instead, ELEGIR has a two-fold goal of reaching academic or professional audiences with publications and conferences, and extending its message in cursillos held in community centers and other group settings. Thus, ELEGIR has a smaller public presence than La Comisión, but the organization does gain attention in the media. This tactic is especially appropriate because of the charisma of Dr. Coppola, and her willingness to speak out about her personal and professional experiences with abortion.

CDD-Argentina aims its strategy at clerics, politicians and individual women, using consciousness-raising publications to gain support. Partly because CDD is sponsored by CFFC, the group’s collective action frame has focused on changing the Church. This can be explained due to the fact that CFFC publications seek to undermine the one-sided anti-choice power of Catholic Church bishops in the US, where abortion is in the most part much more legal than in Latin America. Many of these CFFC publications are translated into Spanish and distributed by CDD, but CDD’s focus is inherently different because abortion is not legal in most Latin American nations. Therefore, the focus or goal of many of these publications does not directly apply to the legal situation in Latin America. For example, the CDD publications which reflect the spiritual and moral nature of abortion, and resolve ethical issues for women considering abortion are less relevant in Argentina because abortion is clandestine and illegal. They may help women who are considering clandestine abortion, but they will not directly make abortion safer or less illegal.

¹For example, the “Mexico City Policy”-- a policy that President Reagen enacted after the 1984 United Nations’ International Conference on Population-- prohibited private groups providing abortion counseling or services from receiving US funds. International Planned Parenthood Federation cut itself off from receiving millions of dollars of funds from the United States Agency for International Development in order to continue providing services. However most smaller organizations were forced to cease advocating abortion in order to continue to receiving US funds (Jacobson 1990; Hadley 1996).
On the other hand, Foro’s activism is aimed at an educated professional audience. Members produce press reports and editorials, and maintain a legislative focus instead of a grass roots approach. For example, Foro produced a 1994 petition campaign that solicited the signatures of well-known Argentines, an approach that can be seen as elitist. Foro has a strong presence in the media and yields more power with the government and with academic and professional groups. It was able to amass support via Mujeres Autoconvocadas and to draw other organizations together, although Mujeres Autoconvocadas has been active since the Constitutional Convention. Foro’s projects, because they are academic in nature, do not aim at the general population. However, the results may affect the general population when Foro encourages projects via politically established channels. For example, undertaking research projects about clandestine abortion’s impact on women’s mental or physical health may produce powerful lobbying tools to encourage citizens and legislators to demand reform of the laws that govern reproductive policy in Argentina.

Even though the leaders of each group ideologically envision the abortion problem differently and plan their pro-choice stance accordingly, they also have common interests. In a society where abortion was not long ago a taboo subject (Campos, personal interview), these groups are remarkable because they represent the efforts of women who were and are animated to fight for their rights and those of their fellow Argentines. By determining the goals of the movement, leaders not only decide what strategies and actions are ideologically appropriate to the group, but they achieve strength and solidarity within the group.

Therefore, the leaders of pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires seek goals and strategies which are consistent with the membership of the group and will rouse support and solidarity. Members feel most connected to the group when they know that they can contribute effectively, and see change come from their collective action. For instance, the groups with members who have the advantage of political and legal negotiation skills have leaders which advocate employing these methods to reach their goals. The women who work in academic settings use their positions and specialized knowledge to launch investigation and studies, for example through CEDES and Foro. At the same time, militant La Comisión takes to the streets with powerful symbolic images such as puppets of military figures and well-known priests.

4. The Cooperation and Conflict Frame:

Finally, the way that an organization and its leaders sees the pro-choice movement as a whole greatly influences the level of cooperation, inter-group support, and networking that the group does with other individuals and organizations. The cooperation and conflict action frame also affects how the movement is perceived, the strength that it has in Buenos Aires, and its links to the larger international struggle.

Though most of the organizations expressed a current ability to work around differences of opinion, conflicts have also occurred between members of the same group who found themselves unable to continue working together. As discussed earlier in this chapter, La Comisión is the most ideologically rigid of the groups, and has been reluctant to makes links with other organizations since the 1994 Constitutional Convention. At that time, members networked with other groups, and wound up feeling hurt because the groups wanted to negotiate and manipulate La Comisión’s original motto. The existence of open conflict between the groups, especially between La Comisión and other groups, demonstrates the strong role of ideology in separating the organizations. Fortunately for the movement, this internal conflict has not surfaced too much in public or in the media, and has therefore not left the organizations open to attack as it might have had the groups aired their grievances on television! This was probably a conscious political decision on La Comisión’s part.
Although these conflicts may be painful for the members and leaders within the *porteña* pro-choice movement, they serve as a demonstration to others who attempt to unite and fight against unfair laws or policies. In fact, the varying positions of *La Comisión*, *ELEGIR*, CDD and *Foro* exemplify the ideological and practical debate inherent in democracy. Furthermore, the differences of opinion visible within the pro-choice movement-- and the cooperative networks that activists are able to forge despite challenges-- stand as evidence of the emergence of a democratic civil society.

**The Future of the Pro-Choice Movement in Argentina**

Many see a “transformation and re-composition of civil society in Argentina” since the return of democracy and the institution of neo-liberal economic policies (Bellucci 1995: 5). According to Bellucci, the economic adjustment “goes against the tradition of the state to regulate the common good and also against the legitimacy of political institutions” (Bellucci 1995: 4). In this changing world, the traditional power of the state as protector has eroded, leaving the population with reduced social services and vulnerable to high unemployment.

Compared to pro-choice organizations in US cities, the groups in Buenos Aires are tiny. Even compared with pro-choice groups in other Latin American cities, such as Mexico City, Bogota, Rio de Janeiro, etc., the movement in Argentina’s capital is small. There are approximately forty to fifty active core members and leaders of all four pro-choice organizations in Buenos Aires, with another 300 or so sympathizers, or adherents, during important and visible campaigns.

Therefore, another important step will be to increase participation in the overall movement by gaining new members for the groups in Buenos Aires. Gaining the support of young Argentines would be especially valuable, since these women will be the leaders of the next generation of activists. The anti-choice movement in Buenos Aires has strong student participation in organizations such as *Estudiantes por la Vida*, but the pro-choice movement has not focused on this large group in the same way. None of the pro-choice groups in Buenos Aires has strong contacts with the active political groups in the broad system of schools which compose the University of Buenos Aires. *La Comisión* attempted to gain support by speaking at forums in the medical school, but was forced to stop when a conservative president prohibited their participation. The movement would gain participation if they could find access to students in the medical school and other branches of the University, a center of cultural, intellectual and political activity.

One way to gain attention and support for the movement might be to personalize the abortion issue by emphasizing the tragedies connected with clandestine abortion. Even though approximately 200-300 women die each year due to botched abortions, there has never been a personal tragedy related to abortion that has been highly publicized in Argentina. Pro-choice groups in the US and Ireland, for example, have appealed to the public by championing the stories of women who have died or suffered because of unfair laws. For example, the US movement publicized the death of a girl named Becky Bell from Indianapolis, who had an illegal abortion rather than obtain her parents’ permission (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League). The case in Ireland involved a teenager who had been raped and wanted to get an abortion in England, but was prevented from leaving Ireland by authorities (Hadley 1996).

When a woman dies of clandestine abortion in the future, the pro-choice groups might investigate the situation and publicize the case in order to gain sympathy by forcing Argentina’s population to see what the effects of the laws are in a more personal and striking way. *ELEGIR* uses “*Calladita la boca*” to do this, and the film is effective to get discussions started in workshops. However, the fact that “*Calladita la boca*” is a fictional story about a poor women who suffers from complications of a botched abortion, and not a true story about this, shields audiences from some of its
impact. The death of a woman, poor or middle class, might become a symbol for the cause and also might draw attention to class divisions that aggravate the problem.

Another means of accomplishing the same goal might be to encourage journalists to investigate deaths caused by unsafe clandestine abortions and write articles. This tactic was employed in Chile, where organizations in the women’s movement awarded a prize to the journalist who wrote the best newspaper story on abortion (Hartmann, personal communication). Journalists have written investigative articles about abortion-related deaths, but they have focused on the castigation of doctors who performed the illegal abortions. One article, for example, ignored the teenage victim’s difficult choice to have a dangerous clandestine abortion and the reasons why she was faced with this crisis (“Preven tracka dos médicos por aborto y muerte de una menor”).

Similarly, it is important for women in the pro-choice movement to tell their stories about abortion, both as women who have had abortions, and women who have been confronted professionally or personally by women in crisis situations. Movements in the US and Europe have used speak-outs to publicize the fact that many women have had abortions, and to make powerful statements about reproductive rights at a more personal level.

Just as these personal testimonies are powerful and convincing, some of the strongest arguments to be made by the pro-choice movement are culturally specific to Argentina, and thus based in recent history. For example, to suggest that former President Menem was being authoritarian when he tried to impose his anti-choice opinion on the nation reminds Argentines of the authoritarian history of the military years. For example the pro-choice groups used this tactic when they argued that the President and anti-choice politicians tried to push anti-choice legislation through the Constitutional Convention, even though the delegates did not have a voter mandate to judge this issue.

Using language reminiscent of UN documents which equate reproductive rights and human rights also has resonance in Argentina, where human rights groups like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo have strong voices. Stressing that reproductive rights are human rights may enable activists in Argentina to gain support from people who feel strongly about their civil liberties in a democracy. This language may even convince Argentines who are against abortion, but still believe that women should have a right to choose, to support freedom of choice.

In conclusion, as pro-choice activism approaches its tenth year in Argentina, pro-choice organizations should take time to consider how far they have come, the abilities that they have gained, the legal measures that they have protected and won, and how they can work together to increase support for reform in the future. There is a great deal of potential for growth in the organizations, and the pro-choice movement will gain strength and vitality if young Argentines and other women begin to participate. By thinking about the ways that they express their ideology and frame their messages, the movement’s leaders would also gain a greater understanding of the tools that they use to struggle against unfair abortion laws. The next decade brings opportunity for pro-choice activists in Buenos Aires to earn a place in history, and to improve the lives of women in Argentina.
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