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The Development of 'Pro-Life' NGOs in Argentina: Three Strategic Movements

JOSÉ MANUEL MORÁN FAÚNDES*

Abstract

In Latin America, the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights advocated by the feminist and LGBTI movements has challenged the hegemony of the sexual order held by traditionalist sectors, especially the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and conservative evangelical churches. These religious groups have reacted, in turn, to arrest the advance of feminist and LGBTI agendas. Beyond conservative Catholic and evangelical hierarchies, opposition activists also include religious academic institutions, politicians, Christian lay movements, and civil society groups, among others, all committed to a more restrictive view of sexuality. One important strategy of this 'Pro-Life' activism in recent years has been the conformation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This article offers an analysis of the emergence and development of 'Pro-Life' NGOs in Argentina. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, it examines three strategic movements made by these NGOs from the 1980s to the present: a state-political turn that favored strategies aimed to colonize the state and to impact sexual policies and the law; a blurring of religious identities; and a process of federalization and civil ecumenism.

Keywords

Conservatism; Religion; Civil Society; Sexuality; Argentina; NGO.

Author affiliation

Sociologist. Assistant Researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, CONICET-Argentina. Professor of Sociology of Law at the National University of Córdoba (UNC). Researcher of the Sexual and Reproductive Rights Program, School of Law, UNC.

Introduction

Sexuality constitutes a dynamic and publicly contested terrain that is subject to power struggles that constantly transform it. Expressions of sexuality outside

*Correspondence: National University of Cordoba, Argentina. E-mail: jmfmoran@gmail.com
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the context of reproductive and matrimonial mandates have come into conflict with traditional ideologies that had confined sexuality exclusively within the limits of heterosexuality, conjugality, monogamy, and procreation (Htun 2003; Vaggione 2005). The widespread use of new reproductive and non-reproductive technologies developed in recent decades has led to radical transformations and new possibilities for the sexual practices (Plummer 2003). At the same time, in Latin America, the struggles initiated in the 1970s by groups excluded based on their gender and sexual expressions, organized around the agendas of feminisms and LGBTI¹ movements, have successfully politicized sexuality while validating new paradigms that move sexuality from the territory of what is assumed to be natural and given toward a greater recognition of the role of social and political power in determining sexual identities.

Codified in the language of 'sexual and reproductive rights,' feminist and LGBTI movements have sought to consolidate a sexual agenda that overcomes sexual and gender stratifications (Miller 2000). Diverse demands have converged under this umbrella, including legalization of abortion, same-sex marriage, access to modern contraceptives, recognition of transgender bodies and expressions.

The sexual and reproductive rights agenda has called into question the predominance of the sexual order defended by more traditionalist sectors. In Latin America, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and more conservative factions of Protestantism are the principal actors whose sexual mores have been questioned by this robust agenda. Faced with this reality, traditionalist religious sectors have reacted by seeking to utilize political power and intervention in order to slow the advance of feminist and LGTBI agendas (Htun 2003; Vaggione 2005).

However, the ways in which activism in opposition to sexual and reproductive rights has developed have not been uniform. Conservative churches have not been the only organizer of anti-feminist and LGBTI agendas. There has also been a convergence of other actors committed to an agenda practically identical to that of the ecclesiastical hierarchies, that is prioritizing the defense of a traditionalist sexual morality. Academic religious institutions and actors, lay movements, bioethicists, and parliamentary groups, among others, compose an activist front opposing sexual and reproductive rights and participate in disputes around sexual policies (Felitti 2011; Gudiño Bessone 2014; Irrazábal 2013; Peñas Defago 2010). The diversity of actors that take part in this activism has largely converged under the label of '*Pro-Vida*,'² emulating the 'Pro-Life' groups formed in the United States in the 1970s. The 'Pro-Life' coalition operates as a social movement with a political identity. Under this self-assigned name, these actors sustain a common agenda centered on the defense of a conservative

¹ This acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex.

² '*Pro-Vida*' is the Spanish translation of 'Pro-Life'. I intentionally use the term 'Pro-Life' with capital letters in order to highlight the concept in the grammatical form of a proper name and not as an adjective. The use of the concept as an adjective responds more to a political exercise than to a descriptive category, by which self-recognition as pro-life or 'in favor of life,' automatically assigns a character of attacking the lives of those who oppose their worldview and demands, especially feminist and LGBTI movements. In the same way, I emphasize the idea that the label 'Pro-Life' is a way in which these organizations name themselves, and not a label that enjoys academic or political consensus. However, and despite being a self-designation, the 'Pro-Life' label generates controversy even within the conservative field (see Irrazábal 2013).

sexual order based on heterosexuality, matrimony, monogamy, and reproduction.

The forms of collective action with which 'Pro-Life' activism in Latin America experiment have also evolved over time. One of the most important transformations is the designation of civil society as a battleground for practices of activism. Among the multiplicity of actors that converge under the 'Pro-Life' agenda, in recent decades the 'Pro-Life' movement has created a series of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to oppose sexual and reproductive rights. 'Pro-Life' NGOs have come to represent a nucleus of opposition that transcends the actions of churches, professionalizing their actions and developing impact strategies that complement the traditional religious forms of resistance consecrated by the ecclesiastical leadership.

In this article, I seek to describe the ways in which the field of 'Pro-Life' activism has come to prioritize the formation of NGOs as an impact strategy in disputes about sexual politics in Argentina, especially from the eighties.³ At the same time, I analyze the principal transformations that these new actors in the field of opposition to sexual and reproductive rights have undergone in recent years. To do so, I concentrate on three strategic NGO actions: the turn towards the state, the erasing of the religious, and their process of federalization and civil ecumenism.⁴

Religion, Secularization and Sexual Politics

From its beginnings, classical social theory assumed as evident the hypothesis that the world would progress towards a complete secularization (Casanova 1994). Auguste Comte, for example, conceived religion as a primitive stage, contrary to the positivist stage that characterizes modern age. Karl Marx understood religion as a conservative force that supported the dominating bourgeois structure, and augured its demise with the arrival of the communist society. Max Weber observed, in contrast to the prominent religious order of the pre-modern world, a gradual process of rationalization and disenchantment of societies. Thus, in one way or another, classic authors of modern social theory embraced the paradigm of secularization that foreshadowed the decline of religion, influencing a number of twentieth-century sociologists.

³ For methodological purposes, I consider as 'Pro-Life' all those NGOs that defined themselves as such, or that indicate that their work is oriented to the defense of life from conception, heterosexual family or related.

⁴ This research was carried out using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The primary sources consulted were: a) in-depth interviews with 13 members of the self-proclaimed 'Pro-Life' NGOs in Argentina, carried out between 2010 and 2014; b) websites of the NGOs being studied; and c) documentary and informative materials produced by these NGOs. A review of national print journalism was also carried out, utilizing the newspapers *Clarín*, *Página 12*, and *La Nación*, for the years 2000 to 2011. Based on the data generated, a mapping of the NGOs was also carried out, complemented by an online search using specific search terms and the application of the snowball method to reach other organizations that were not found in the initial exploration.

However, the sociology of religions has undergone transformations that today allow us to understand the relationship between politics and religion in a different way. As Peter Berger says, 'it is important to relegate to oblivion a notion [...] (often termed "secularization theory") that modernity brings the decadence of religion' (Berger 2005: 7). One of the most important analyzes for understanding the failure of the secularization paradigm is provided by sociologist José Casanova (1994). For him, the theory of secularization traditionally defended by sociology was based on three theses. The first one argued that modernity would lead to a growing process of privatization of religion. The second thesis announced that religion was advancing towards its decay, in a process whereby religious beliefs would definitely disappear. And the third one proposed that the secularization process will lead to the increasing of an structural differentiation between different social areas, including the separation of religion from politics.

The predictions of these theses, as Casanova points out, are now unsustainable. Empirical evidence has shown that, with specific exceptions, not only the number of people in the world who nowadays ascribes to a religion has remained (and in some cases even increased), but religion, far from being privatized, remains politicized and keep on influencing decision-making processes in various ways (Berger 2005; Casanova 1994). While religious institutions are no longer the hegemonic center that organizes institutions and social ties (Casanova 1994), 'the religious realm takes on new forms that are neither single-minded, centralized, nor covering all of social reality' (Mallimaci and Giménez 2007: 47).

Religion today enters the political arena to defend specific ideas but also to participate in the disputes that are part of contemporary democracy (Vaggione 2005). The debates on sexual politics are an area in which the political presence of religion is quite evident (Htun 2003), and this has created new challenges for research. On one hand, some scholars have begun to delve into the links established between some progressive religious sectors and feminist and LGBTI politics (Jones and Cunial 2012; Vaggione 2005). The agenda of sexual and reproductive rights has allowed some religious sectors to pluralize their ideas on sexuality. Feminist theologians, or groups such as Catholics for Free Choice who defend the right to abortion from a Catholic identity, challenge traditional mandates held by more orthodox religious factions. On the other hand, the advance of the feminist and LGBT agendas have provoked the reaction of the most conservative religious sectors, largely led by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and some factions of Evangelism (Vaggione 2005).⁵ These religious sectors have sought to halt the advance of the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights (Htun 2003) through what Juan Marco Vaggione (2005) has called 'reactive politicization.' Despite the legal models of formal secularism (or *laicidad*) that have been applied in several countries in Latin America, religion continues to be a key player in defining certain politics, and it is precisely in sexual politics that its presence has intensified in recent years.

⁵ The evangelical field in Argentina is divided into two major poles, the 'liberationist historical' and the 'biblical conservative.' While the former has tended to support recognition for some sexual and reproductive rights, the latter has a conservative ideological position (Jones and Cunial 2012).

The attempt of some religious actors to control sexuality intensified during the second half of the twentieth century, as a reaction to the changes generated by the feminist and LGBTI agendas. The politicization of the body, the deprivatization of intimacy, the sexualization and gendering of the public sphere, among other political processes, are resisted by the most conservative factions of religions. Although regulation of sex and pleasure were always part of the concerns of the ancient religious systems (Figari 2007), the emergence of a new conservative religious activism, obsessed with sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights, marks a new temporality in the relationship between religious politics and sexual politics. We witness the emergence of a phenomenon that, although it maintains continuities with the past, presents novelties that allow to characterize it as a new kind of religious conservative movement.

Prioritization of Civil Society: 'Pro-Life' NGOs

While the Catholic hierarchy and conservative evangelical churches play a key role in the opposition to the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights in Latin America, since the 1980s 'Pro-Life' actors have developed other forms of activism that transcends the actions of these churches. Given the diversity of strategic actions, multiplicity of fields of action, and their reach, perhaps the most notable form such actions have acquired is as 'Pro-Life' NGOs (Mujica 2007; Vaggione 2005). These organizations sustain sexual politics consistent with the positions of conservative churches. However they appeal to broader audiences and project a public image that garners more legitimacy than the churches do.

In contrast to other not-profit organizations, such as universities, sports clubs, unions, or churches (that is, organizations concerned primordially with the interests of their own members), these NGOs can be considered as networks of freely associated citizens that lack state authority and seek a good that they present as common or public (Berger 2003). 'Pro-Life' NGOs constitute actors that present themselves in public space as representatives of interests that they take upon themselves on behalf of the social body as a whole. Conservative religious activism utilizes the mobilizing power of NGOs to defend the same conservative sexual politics of the church, under the guise of defending greater public interests and encompassing a wider community beyond that of the church. This process of collective mobilization seeks to transcend the ecclesiastical, and legitimates itself as a form of democratic participation capable of achieving a greater social and political impact.

In the regional context of social transformations in which civil society has acquired growing protagonism, the presence of NGOs responds to a way in which conservative religious activism has adapted to the particular contexts of contemporary Latin American democracies. As Nuria Cunill Grau points out, civil society's current protagonism resides in its capacity to mobilize 'social sectors and public opinion on issues of public interest to influence the direction of policies...based on democracy itself' (2007: 120). So, the formation of 'Pro-Life' NGOs implies a direct form of acting through the use of channels opened and legitimated through post-dictatorial processes. As such, the political incidence of these sectors is situated in strictly democratic terrain; based on an image and legitimacy different to that which religious leaders or civil organizations portray

when principally advancing their members' interests. In the words of an activist from a 'Pro-Life' NGO:

Civil society, the fact that you're the man on the street, helps for people to listen to you and not to label you before listening to you. That is, 'What do you think about abortion?' 'Well, I'm against it.' Then they say, 'Okay,' and maybe they label you and don't let you say why and convince them, or give them arguments that at least leave them thinking about it ('Pro-Life' Activist, Córdoba 2012).

Although the public presence of 'Pro-Life' NGOs has become relevant, especially after the politicization of such issues as abortion and marriage equality,⁶ their origins in Argentina precede the emergence of these issues in the public agenda. Some of these NGOs were founded in the first half or in the middle of the twentieth century, even before the 'Pro-Life' movement was founded in the United States and Europe. It was only at the end of the century when they incorporated this activism, adapting their agendas to the issues of sexual politics based on rhetoric strongly centered on the idea of 'life'.

Thus, even though throughout the twentieth century there existed in the country a form of conservative activism that operated within civil society through NGOs, it was not until the eighties that they began to use the label 'Pro-Life' as a form of political identification. As Fortunato Mallimacci and Veronica Gimenez Beliveau (2007) indicate, in the twenties and thirties the Vatican promoted what it called 'integral Catholicism', that is, a call to the faith community to occupy political, economic, educational, and professional areas, among others, to bring Catholicism to society. Through this framework organizations such as the Consorcio de Médicos Católicos (Consortium of Catholic Doctors) (Buenos Aires, 1929) or the Corporación de Abogados Católicos (Corporation of Catholic Lawyers) (Buenos Aires, 1935) emerged, with the goal of promoting Catholicism in professional spaces. Other organizations were formed in the middle of the twentieth century as a response to the debates provoked by the social transformations that began to question the traditional roles of men and women in public and domestic spaces. This is the case of organizations such as Liga de Madres de Familia (League of Housewives) (Buenos Aires, 1951) and Liga por la Decencia (League for Decency) (Santa Fe, 1963) or Tradición, Familia y Propiedad (Tradition, Family, and Property) (Buenos Aires, 1967), to name a few. The debates of the mid-twentieth century around divorce, the incorporation of women in the workforce, and the regulation of sex work were some of the issues prioritized by this activism, organized around a discourse focused on the idea of 'the family', always understood as conjugal, monogamous, heterosexual, and reproductive. But it was only with the sexual agenda that the Vatican promoted in the last quarter of the twentieth century, which was reinforced through a discourse based on defense of 'life,' that the agendas of these organizations founded in the early and mid-twentieth century evolved, adapting to the configurations of the budding 'Pro-Life' movement.

Other current 'Pro-Life' NGOs were created during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983). But it was not until the return of democracy in 1983 that the majority of these organizations were constituted. This is how the idea of 'life'

⁶ In 2010 the law that allows for marriage between people of the same sex was approved in Argentina, after an intense period of politicization and debate.

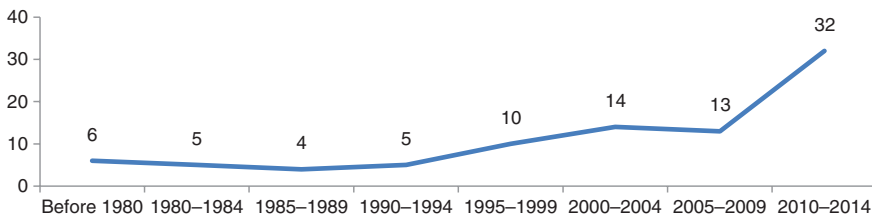


Figure 1 'Pro-Life' NGO Foundation in Argentina (absolute values). N=89 (NGOs with information available regarding date of founding) Source: Original work.

slowly introduced itself as the central axis of this activism. The Catholic Church coined the term 'Pro-Life' in conjunction with the international Catholic agenda, prioritized by the Pope John Paul II, in opposition to abortion. Of course, the discourse in defense of 'the family' has not been abandoned by this new activist turn, but since the last quarter of the twentieth century it gradually began to be reinforced through the idea of 'life,' which would acquire a dominant position as the organizing theme of conservative religious activism.

The development of these NGOs has not been linear, but rather has accommodated itself in various ways to the socio-political processes of the local context. Figure 1 shows their development in Argentina. Through an overall mapping, 140 'Pro-Life' NGOs were found in the country, the majority of which still operate. Among these, information regarding the year they were founded was retrieved for 63.6% of the total organizations mapped.

Compared with the incipient process of NGO creation in the 1980s and early 1990s, beginning in the mid-1990s we can note an increase in the quantity of groups formed in Argentina. On one hand, this coincides with the celebration of two international United Nations conferences focused on the consolidation of sexual and reproductive rights at the international level: the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. On the other hand, it also coincides with the process of constitutional reform carried out in 1994 in the country, for which the issue of abortion was a highly contested issue after the attempt by the government of Carlos Menem to introduce a constitutional clause to protect life beginning at the moment of conception. In this context, various 'Pro-Life' NGOs were formed in response to the advance of sexual and reproductive rights at the local and international levels in order to combat these advances; which worked to mobilize political participation in key moments. Then, beginning in the twenty-first century, another small increase in 'Pro-Life' NGOs is observed, precisely in the period when the demand for the decriminalization/legalization of abortion began to gain strength once a series of laws and policies favorable to sexual and reproductive rights was debated and approved. However, from 2010-2014 we have witnessed a virtual 'explosion' of NGOs, many of which were formed in reaction to the greater intensity of politicization as a result of the debate over the legalization of same-sex marriage in the country in 2010.

In the face of the politicization of issues linked to sexuality and reproduction, civil society became a preferred arena among 'Pro-Life' activists to dispute sexual politics. However, this has not always led to uniform action. We can

identify three general strategic movements taken by 'Pro-Life' NGOs in recent decades. The first of these is linked to a 'turn to the state', that is, a change in their strategic footing in which activists shifted from primarily seeking impacts at social and cultural levels to trying to influence legislation and public policies. Secondly, there has been an 'identity movement' which has had the effect of erasing the religious identities of public institutional actors. Finally, these organizations are also undergoing a process of 'civil ecumenism and federalization' at present through which they have tried to coordinate activism at the national level in a way transcending religious divisions.

First Movement: 'Pro-Life' NGOs' Political-State Turn

Following the experience of the United States and the formation of the 'Pro-Life' movement in the 1970s, the first Argentine NGOs self-identified as 'Pro-Life' were formed in the 1980s, including ProFamilia (ProFamily) (Buenos Aires, 1983), Movimiento Familia y Vida (Family and Life Movement) (Tucuman, 1983), Grávida (Pregnant) (Buenos Aires, 1989), ProVida San Luis (Pro Life San Luis) (San Luis, 1989), Fundación Argentina del Mañana (Argentina Tomorrow Foundation) (Buenos Aires, 1989), and Portal de Belén (Bethlehem Nativity) (Cordoba 1991). In a period during which the interruption of pregnancy still did not enter strongly into the public agenda of the country and of the media (Brown 2008), conservative organizations, these first NGOs concentrated their actions preemptively on the issue of abortion. This contrasts with the United States, where the 'Pro-Life' organizations were created in a moment of great politicization of the issue (Munson 2008). Only beginning in the early twenty-first century did issues associated with sexual diversity enter more strongly in the agendas of these organizations, in keeping with incipient debates that developed publicly around these issues at that time.⁷

In general, the first 'Pro-Life' NGOs tried to defend their position by seeking symbolic and cultural impact with the intention of influencing social opinions, perceptions, ideas, and beliefs connected to sexuality, reproduction, and practices in these areas. Fundación Argentina del Mañana, created with the goal of influencing program content in the media, is a paradigmatic example of this approach. Through diverse strategies, such as sending letters to television stations, making presentations to the Federal Radio Broadcasting Committee (COMFER), or establishing alliances with the sponsors of certain television programs, over the course of more than 20 years, this NGO has sought to influence media content in Argentina according to the Catholic Church's sexual ideologies and as a way to impact public opinion.

Another method of strategic action carried out by the first 'Pro-Life' NGOs focused on the provision of services in order to care for specific sectors of the population, principally pregnant women of limited resources, in efforts to decrease their use of abortion. In the Latin American context neoliberal policies of the 1980s had limited the power of the state as an entity capable of providing certain basic services to the most disadvantaged sectors of the population.

⁷ Especially after the debate and approval of the civil unions law in the city of Buenos Aires in 2003.

These policies were most actively implemented in Argentina during the government of Carlos Menem between 1989 and 1999, and as a result, many 'Pro-Life' NGOs presented themselves as an alternative to the state's diminished capacity. As such, providing welfare services was transformed into a privileged way of working for some of these NGOs, such as Grávida or Portal de Belén, to achieve social impact on specific sectors of the population, with the principal goal not necessarily that of personal development of those helped or of overcoming the conditions of vulnerability, but rather that of avoiding pregnant women turning to abortion. In the words of an activist from a 'Pro-Life' NGO:

Who are we going to help, principally? We decided that it had to be helpless women. Some women might need shelter, food and shelter, others might need medical attention, others might need legal attention too. So the idea is to be the friendly hand that every pregnant woman in a situation of conflict needs to not abort ('Pro-Life' Activist, 2010).

However, the further politicization of abortion beginning in the 1990s (Brown 2008), and the creation of the pro-choice group MADEL (Women Self-Organized to Decide Freely) in 1994, coupled with the trans-nationalization of sexual and reproductive rights, resulted in the reorganization of these 'Pro-Life' NGOs. Their traditional activities in the cultural and welfare areas were complemented by new strategies that sought not only to impact certain populations but also to colonize the state and influence the configuration of public policies and the law.

During the 1990s, international United Nations conferences (especially the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995) were instances of great political prioritization and visibilization of feminist agendas (Álvarez 1998). These spaces also marked a moment of intense mobilization on the part of conservative religious sectors at the global level, as they created forms of activism aimed at resisting the international recognition of sexual and reproductive rights. At this time, the Vatican established alliances with some states that supported its sexual politics (among them, Argentina). A series of NGOs joined this alliance and since then have used international activism in defense of a sexually restrictive model. Some 'Pro-Life' NGOs came to the fore in Argentina oriented more to political work in international spaces. For example, in 1994 the Catholic NGO Familias del Mundo Unidas por la Paz (Families of the World United for Peace, FAMPAP) was formed in Buenos Aires, which would participate in 1995 in the preparatory meeting for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.⁸

In the same way, beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s, a series of NGOs began to appear throughout the country that incorporated local impact strategies on state decision-making spaces into their agendas. These organizations gradually began to develop lobbying strategies: presentations in legislative arenas, follow-up on bills, consulting for provincial and national legislators, collections of signatures to solicit the modification of certain laws or policies, etc. NGOs like the Unión de Entidades por Una Vida Más Humana (Union of Entities for a More Human Life) (Mendoza 1995), SOS Vida (SOS Life) (Chaco 1998), Pro-Vida (Pro-Life) (Buenos Aires 2000), the Fundación 25 de Marzo (March 25th

⁸ See <http://www.fampap.org/actividades.html>.

Foundation) (Córdoba 2002), and the Centro de Bioética, Persona y Familia (Center for Bioethics, Person, and Family) (Buenos Aires 2009), among many others, make up only some examples of this. Additionally in this period, some of the organizations founded in the 1980s and early 1990s reorganized their strategies in order to incorporate political action in their activities.

The political impact on the state was reinforced in some cases by the incursion of some activists into the field of electoral politics. While it is not a uniform strategy within the movement, some activists in 'Pro-Life' NGOs gradually began to run for popularly elected office in order to enter into legislative spaces. This has been the case, for example, with the organizations from Córdoba, *Mujeres por la Vida* (Women for Life) and *Portal de Belén*. Cristina Gonzalez de Delgado, president of *Mujeres por la Vida*, ran in 1999 as candidate for provincial legislator for the party *Acción por la República* (Action for the Republic), founded by Menem's ex-minister of economics, Domingo Cavallo. Similarly, Rodrigo Agrelo, member of *Portal de Belén*, was provincial legislator for the party *Unión de Centro Democrático* (Democratic Center Union) and candidate for deputy governor in the province of Córdoba in 2003 for the multi-party alliance *Frente de la Lealtad* (Loyalty Front), whose presidential candidate was Menem. In 2009, founder and then president of *Portal de Belén*, Aurelio Garcia Elorrio, participated in provincial legislative elections for the party *Encuentro por Córdoba* (Meeting for Cordoba). Additionally, although he was not elected at that time, in 2011 he gained a seat in the provincial legislature as part of the party *Encuentro Vecinal Córdoba* (Cordoba Neighbors' Meeting).

In addition to their impact on the political decision-making process, in the early twentieth century some NGOs began to develop strategies for legal action in the courts. The constitutional reform of 1994 allowed civil society organizations for the first time to initiate legal actions in the form of a writ of *amparo* (Peñas Defago 2010). This new form of political intervention and the end of the Menem regime led various 'Pro-Life' NGOs to make extensive use of legal strategies, with the goal of delaying the implementation of certain policies or avoiding people having access to certain sexual and reproductive rights guaranteed by law (Peñas Defago and Morán Faúndes 2014).

As Mala Htun (2003) points out, in Latin America the windows of opportunity for the approval of policies favorable to sexual and reproductive rights usually come in political contexts of tension between the Vatican hierarchy and the administration in office. While in the 1990s public policies and legislation on sexual issues were generally marked with a conservative stamp because of the alliance between the Catholic hierarchy and the Menem administration, the breaking up of this alliance in the following decade (especially under the administration of Nestor Kirchner) implied a turn in Argentine sexual politics that was favorable to the proliferation of sexual and reproductive rights. Although many of the demands of feminisms and of LGBTI movements are still pending, the proclamation of the Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation law in 2002, the approval of the laws of surgical contraception and holistic sexual education in 2006, the proclamation of marriage equality in 2010, the approval of the gender identity law in 2012, among others, are examples of the advances in issues of gender and sexuality that Argentina has experienced in the last fifteen years. Faced with this panorama, various 'Pro-Life' NGOs, such as *Portal de Belén*, *Fundación 25 de Marzo*, *Mujeres por la Vida*, *Consortio de Médicos Católicos*, *Corporación de Abogados Católicos*, *ProFamilia*, and many others,

began to privilege legal strategies against sexual and reproductive rights even more in the face of the loss of alliances with the national executive power.

Second Movement: Erasing the Religious

A notorious characteristic of the initial 'Pro-Life' NGOs was their strong Catholic stamp. In a period in which important evangelist civil activism had not yet appeared, the organizations created in the 1980s and early 1990s were strongly marked by the rhetoric and influence of the Vatican hierarchy, and many only presented themselves in public space as Catholic. Some of these were born under the protection of international Catholic organizations that began to operate in the region in the 1980s. Human Life International, a Catholic organization created in the United States in 1981, was one of the most important in this regard. Among its institutional goals is the training of leaders that defend the Vatican position on issues of sexuality, as well as the promotion of organizations aimed at the same end. Under its wing, diverse organizations from different countries in Latin America, such as Ceprofarena in Peru (1981), Movimiento Anónimo por la Vida (Anonymous Movement for Life) in Chile (1985), and ProFamilia in Argentina (1983), began to coordinate, with the common purpose of defending the sexual morals promoted by the Vatican. Of course not all of the 'Pro-Life' NGOs organized in Argentina in the 1980s were formed within the Human Life International circle. But this organization contributed to the growth of some NGOs and strengthened the activism of others, favoring the creation of a first wave of organizations that largely subscribed to an explicitly Catholic identity.

However, in the following decades, a shift occurred in the religious identities of these NGOs. On one hand, the first organizations began to unite Catholic activists and conservative evangelicals. Some even began to appear under a specifically evangelical identity, as was the case of Asociación Argentina de Abogados Cristianos (Argentine Association of Christian Lawyers) (Buenos Aires, 2001) or the NGO Plan 1.5 (Córdoba 2009). However, specifically evangelical groups remain a minority within this broader activist front (Table 1).

In some cases, however, transformations in the public religious identity also resulted in an erasure of any religious identification. This is the case of Asociación Civil Por Venir (Civil Association What is to Come) (Santa Fe, 2004), Elegimos la Vida (Choose Life) (Buenos Aires, 2005), Centro de Bioética, Persona y Familia (Buenos Aires, 2009), among many other NGOs that present themselves in public space without an explicitly religious identity. As such, today in Argentina 'Pro-Life' organizations present themselves in public spaces heterogeneously, with some of them appealing to an explicitly religious identity, either Catholic and/or evangelical, and others an identity not tied to religion, as seen in Table 1.

However, the presence of faith-based 'Pro-Life' NGOs and other 'Pro-Life' NGOs without a religious identification should not be reduced to a simple religious/secular binary. The forms in which religion penetrates these groups are complex. With attention to the connection between the public institutional identities currently held by these organizations and the religious affiliations of their members and leadership, it is possible to sort this relationship in three general analytic categories:

Table 1 Public religious identities of 'Pro-Life' NGOs.

		n	%
With a public religious identity	Catholic	51	36.4
	Evangelical	6	4.3
	With unspecified religious identity	2	1.4
Without a public religious identity		32	22.9
No data		49	35.0
Total		140	100

N=140. Source: Original work.

a) '*Institutionalized religiosity*':

These NGOs are those whose members belong to a specific religion that is explicitly and publicly expressed as an identifying characteristic of the organization. This is the case of the exclusively Catholic organizations that began to join the movement in the eighties and those that later followed this model, such as Consorcio de Médicos Católicos, Corporación de Abogados Católicos, Portal de Belén, Fundación 25 de Marzo, and others. On the evangelical side are organizations such as Asociación Argentina de Abogados Cristianos, Mujeres Cristianas Marplatenses Alfa (Christian Women of Mar de Plata Alpha), and Fundación Red Para el Mundo (Foundation Network for the World).

b) '*Internalized religiosity*':

These correspond to NGOs whose membership and/or leaders belong to a specific religion and who are committed to this religion's ideas on issues of sexual politics, despite the fact that the public identity of the organization is not presented as religious. So, the denomination 'internalized religiosity' refers to the use of a secular institutional identity connected to a concrete internal religiosity of the membership. In this category we find organizations such as Centro de Bioética, Persona y Familia, for example. This organization usually presents itself publicly as associated with the field of science and law, and the discourses that its members use in spaces of political incidence usually refer to exclusively secular elements. However, this NGO was created by and is led by activists from Movimiento Fundar (Founding Movement), an organization recognized by the archbishopric of Buenos Aires and made up exclusively of Catholics who 'work in cultural evangelization' (Lafferriere n.d.). So, despite the commitment of the leaders of this NGO to the vision and position of the Catholic Church hierarchy, the religious aspect is often minimized when the group presents itself in the public sphere, consistent with Juan Marco Vaggione's (2005) idea of 'strategic secularism'. In this concept, it is assumed that the adoption of a secular position responds to a strategy to achieve greater incidence in the political debate and penetrate spaces that would be difficult to enter with a discourse expressly based in faith and religious dogmas.

This does not mean that appealing to a secular public identity necessarily responds to a strategy of camouflage to hide the religiosity of the group's

membership. In the case of some NGOs, the activists do not necessarily hide their personal beliefs when presenting themselves in public spaces, but rather they make them secondary in order to strategically privilege secular arguments.

c) 'Religious non-identification':

This corresponds to the 'Pro-Life' NGOs that present a non-religious institutional identity and whose membership does not belong to one particular religion. This does not mean that they represent atheist groups (as a matter of fact, there are no 'Pro-Life' NGOs in Argentina that identify as atheist), but that in these NGOs the religious element is minimized with respect to the organization's identity and that of its members in such a way that the organization lacks a specific religious identification, receiving activists who come from diverse religious practices or who do not practice any religion. As such, this kind of NGO favors a kind of 'inclusive ecumenism' among its members, that is, the participation of Catholic and evangelist activists, but also of activists who do not necessarily have a religious affiliation. Organizations like *Por-Venir* (Santa Fe, 2003), *Jóvenes Autoconvocados por la Vida* (Self-Organized Youth for Life) (Córdoba, 2004) or *Elegimos la Vida* (Buenos Aires, 2005) are examples of this kind of NGO. In the words of one activist belonging to an NGO of this kind:

[The organization] that I belong to does not have a religious or political identity...there are members of the Catholic faith, evangelical, there are guys that don't practice a religion...What I want to say to you is this: we have understood that the only requirement for entering [the organization] is understanding that life is a valuable good that transcends the faith that each one of us believes in ('Pro-Life' Activist, 2012).

These three categories correspond to ideal types whose purpose is only to present synthetically the forms taken today by the relationship between religious phenomena and 'Pro-Life' NGOs in Argentina. Through these categories, it is possible to observe the impossibility of immediately qualifying this movement as purely religious (Munson 2008), because within the movement religious and secular elements are brought together in a way making their relation with religious sectors more complex.

Third Movement: Federalization and Civil Ecumenism

The approval of same-sex marriage in July 2010 marked an inflection point in the development of the 'Pro-Life' movement in Argentina. The opposition to the legal reform galvanized the mobilization of this movement (Sgró Ruata 2011), who reached new levels of coordination at both the provincial and national levels. On the one hand, many of the NGOs that had worked primarily on the issue of abortion shifted their agenda in order to oppose marriage equality. On the other hand, the politicization of the debate generated an exponential increase in this kind of NGO throughout the country, many of which were created during the process of discussion of the legislation after it was passed and as a reaction to it. Examples of the latter are the NGOs *S.O.S. Familia* (S.O.S. Family) (Catamarca 2010), *Frente Joven* (Youth Front) (Buenos Aires, 2010), *Salvemos la*

Familia (Save the Family) (San Juan, 2010), Familia Viva (Living Family) (Jujuy, 2010), among others.

The approval of marriage equality was understood as a political defeat for these sectors and it triggered 'Pro-Life' activism to establish strategic initiatives aimed at strengthening connections among like-minded NGOs and capitalizing on the mobilization achieved in opposition to the legislative reform. Interest in consolidating institutional coordination at the national level among 'Pro-Life' NGOs was sparked by the successful campaigns led by liberal sexual and reproductive rights organizations in 2005, such as *Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito* (National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion),⁹ and which placed abortion on the public agenda in 2006, as well as the creation of the *Federación Argentina de Lesbianas, Gays, Bisexuales y Trans* (Argentine Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Trans, FALGBT), which united a series of organizations dedicated to marriage equality. As a result, the *Red Federal de Familias* (Federal Family Network) was created in 2010 to achieve a greater impact on national and provincial political agendas. The *Red Federal de Familias* united various NGOs under a common ideology founded on four ideas: 1) defense of human life from fecundation; 2) defense of marriage between a man and a woman; 3) respect for the 'natural' end of life; and 4) defense of the inalienable right of parents to educate their children. So, beyond the religious or party identities of the NGOs, the participation of each one in *Red Federal de Familias* is dependent on commitment to these 'common minimums'.

This policy of common minimums has allowed these NGOs to bring together both Catholic and evangelical organizations, establishing themselves as a coordinating node that manages to overcome the eventual differences based on theological world views or political difficulties derived from religious belief. In their upper echelons, tensions have existed for years between the Catholic hierarchy and the Argentine evangelical churches regarding the entrance of evangelical leadership into a public space traditionally marked by Catholics. Although Catholic and evangelical religious leaders managed to establish alliances in their senior leadership during the discussion of marriage equality and to coordinate joint actions in order to defend conservative sexual politics, this alliance did not necessarily imply overcoming the issues that had historically divided both sectors in the country (Jones and Cunial 2012). In contrast, at the level of 'Pro-Life' NGOs, activists have sought to minimize these differences, especially through the formation of *Red Federal de Familias*, setting aside the disputes between the leaders of each church:

We are also careful to not send a message as a group. It is not a matter of us being the church and all thinking alike. In some ways, the church sometimes, when it takes uncompromising positions, ends up cutting off dialogue...Red [Federal de Familias] is not religious. What it does have is respect, because the identity of each member organization is respected ('Pro-Life' Activist, 2012).

⁹ This initiative brings together various Argentine feminist and women's organizations in favor of legal abortion (see *Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito* 2015).

In this way, after the approval of marriage equality, the same 'Pro-Life' NGOs have reorganized based on what can be called 'civil ecumenism', that is, an alliance in which they have sought to form an activism that sets aside the tensions between ecclesiastical leaderships for the sake of identifying and pursuing a shared agenda. This ecumenism at the level of NGOs, while made firm in 2010, has its origins some years earlier in the formation of the first organizations that presented themselves in public spaces without a particular religious identity, which I have called 'religious non-identification'. However, civil ecumenism can be considered another step in the organizational dynamic of these groups, as it does not only relegate religious identity to the background to achieve coordination among NGOs belonging to different religions, but it also makes explicit an agenda of common minimums that favor the inclusion of diverse religious organizations in one federalized entity.

Conclusions

Civil society has been an arena given high priority by Argentine 'Pro-Life' activism in order to impact local sexual politics, directly confronting the posture adopted by feminist and LGBTI movements. In this area, the formation of NGOs has been an integral mechanism utilized by this movement in recent decades. The relevance that these organizations have acquired resides not only in the sustained increase in their number, as evidenced over the years, but also in the diversification of their strategic actions over time.

In the late 1990s Sonia Álvarez (1998) proposed the term '*NGOization*' to refer to the way social movements had prioritized the formation of NGOs that seek to achieve certain social and political impacts through the institutionalization, specialization, and professionalization of their work. This dynamic, viewed critically through the lens of social movements theory, suggests that NGOs often end up acting as 'neo-' or 'para-' organizations instead of as 'non-governmental'.¹⁰ Following Evelina Dagnino (2003), the state privileges NGOs, specifically by characterizing them as 'the' representatives of civil society. This has essentially led NGOs to abandon their organic links with social movements, reorienting their priorities in order to remain legitimate toward the state and the international agencies that finance them. These conflicting interests limit the discourses emanating from NGO, lessens the radicalism of their demands, and reduces the possibility of adopting politics that challenge injustices and exclusions reproduced by state, judicial, and economic structures.

However, for the case of Argentina's 'Pro-Life' movement, the dynamic of *NGOization* does not appear to have 'domesticated' the demands and actions of this movement, precisely because these demands do not imply opposition to the forms of domination or political and economic exclusion that are denounced by other types of social movements. The cause of 'Pro-Life' activism does not aim its weapons against a system of power that produces inequalities (as patriarchy and heteronormativity do for feminist and LGBTI populations), or against institutions that have historically reproduced these regimes of power

¹⁰ Álvarez (2009), however, later revises her critical position regarding this process.

and domination. On the contrary, its agenda from the beginning has sought to impact judicial and political institutions so that they reproduce conservative sexual morals aligned with certain traditional structures of domination. Thus their goal is not to create a new map of power relations, but rather to conserve or restore the traditionally hegemonic map of patriarchal and heteronormative relations. This is why the process of *NGOization* of this movement, in its search to influence the state, the law, and sexual practices, has not restricted its agenda or goals, as its political project is not necessarily contrary to the normalization of bodies and subjectivities carried out historically by political power. The application of the concept of *NGOization* within the context of 'Pro-Life' activism encourages treating it as an analytic-descriptive term that allows us to observe how the movement has privileged the formation of NGOs as a strategy for political and social impact.

A second definition of the concept of *NGOization* has been offered by Vaggione (2005), who has applied the term to refer to the ways in which religion has revitalized itself recently through the action of civil society organizations that mobilize in defense of religious doctrines sustained by certain churches. In applying this term to the self-proclaimed 'Pro-Life' movement, the concept is of great utility in explaining the emergence and actions of organizations that explicitly hold a specific religious world view, as a kind of 'civil arm' of certain churches. However, the term's utility is limited because it does not allow us to completely capture the non-religious identity that some of the movement's organizations have acquired. Principally, as I have shown above, some NGOs have sought to create a kind of activism that transcends religion, minimizing or erasing religious aspects as a form of presenting themselves in public spaces. Precisely the NGOs that I named under the concept 'religious non-identification' have stimulated coordination among activists of faith with others that do not necessarily belong to any religion, thus showing the difficulty of automatically associating the movement's cause with a purely religious foundation. At the same time, the literature has shown that their discourse has also been uncoupled from religious ideas, appealing to secular arguments principally associated with law and science (Vaggione 2005).

Following Ziad Munson (2008), the link between this form of activism and religion should not be thought of as an all-encompassing relationship, but rather as two spheres that overlap in many points, but separate in others. While the Catholic hierarchy and some conservative evangelical churches are an active part of the activism against sexual and reproductive rights, the 'Pro-Life' movement is not a mere extension of these churches. Its organization, which has been refined in recent years following the creation of Red Federal de Familias and which has united Catholic and evangelical organizations in the same space, has allowed 'Pro-Life' NGOs to free themselves from the historic frictions that permeate the relationship between the Argentine Catholic hierarchy and evangelical churches, enabling them to advance in political coordination separate from the disputes that can exist between religious leaders. As such, it is not possible to consider the self-proclaimed 'Pro-Life' movement as a movement that is organized as a civil extension of churches. Today these sectors are undergoing a process of organization with uncertain consequences, and as such it is necessary to continue observing it attentively and analytically.

Assuming that the opposition to sexual and reproductive rights can transcend religious associations implies rethinking the ways in which we tend to

consider the relationship between religion, secular life, and sexuality. In general terms, the entrance of religion in contemporary sexual politics has tended to be interpreted under paradigms that associate the secular with advances in issues of sexual and reproductive rights and religion as inevitably connected to conservative positions. However, these binary frameworks of understanding restrict our appreciation of the dimensions through which the religious and the secular interweave with sexuality (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Vaggione 2005). This stereotype is called into question, among other things, by observing the ways in which 'Pro-Life' activism circulates a series of secular discourses and expressions of identity in order to defend sexually restrictive politics. Thus, by freeing themselves from the connection with religion, parts of these sectors have adopted a variety of mechanisms for defend a patriarchal and heteronormative sexual order while also appealing to discourses that traditionally have been understood to be outside of religion. The challenge becomes one of making analytical frameworks sufficiently complex to overcome the limitations of perspectives that associate the secular with sexual progressiveness and social mobilization as necessarily a space of the transgression of traditional systems of power.

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