

Strategies of Self-Proclaimed Pro-Life Groups in Argentina

Effect of New Religious Actors on Sexual Policies

by

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Over the past few decades political processes recognizing and broadening sexual and reproductive rights have produced a reaction from conservative sectors seeking to block those gains. Although the Catholic Church hierarchy and some Evangelical churches have led the opposition to these rights, various sectors of civil society have begun to foment resistance to pluralist sexual politics. In Argentina self-proclaimed pro-life nongovernmental organizations have become important in the local context, using channels legitimized by contemporary democracy. While they initially devoted themselves primarily to the issue of abortion through activities associated with assistencialism and cultural impact, their actions since the 1990s have diversified, entering into the politico-institutional field and aiming at other issues associated with the country's sexual policy. The movement and religion overlap at many levels and are separate in others. The complexity of the relationship between them requires rethinking of the normative frameworks through which progress on sexual and reproductive rights in Latin America is usually theorized. The separation of religion and politics under the paradigm of laicism can be insufficient to guarantee sexual pluralism in our societies.

En las últimas décadas, los procesos políticos por el reconocimiento y ampliación de los derechos sexuales y reproductivos han generado la reacción de sectores conservadores que buscan obstaculizar dichas conquistas. Si bien la jerarquía católica y algunas iglesias evangélicas han protagonizado el rechazo a estos derechos, distintos sectores de la sociedad civil han comenzado también a activar una resistencia a las políticas sexuales pluralistas. En Argentina las organizaciones no-gubernamentales autodenominadas pro-vida han adquirido relevancia en el contexto local, utilizando los canales legitimados por la democracia contemporánea. Mientras las primeras se abocaron centralmente a la temática del aborto desde acciones asociadas al asistencialismo y al impacto cultural, a partir de los noventa sus acciones se han diversificado, entrando al campo político-institucional y orientándose a otros temas asociados a la política sexual del país. Este movimiento y la religión se superponen en muchos niveles y se separan en otros. La complejidad que reviste su relación implica repensar los marcos normativos mediante los cuales se ha solido teorizar el avance en los derechos sexuales y reproductivos en América Latina. La separación de la religión y la política bajo el paradigma de la laicidad puede

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resultar una estrategia insuficiente para garantizar el pluralismo sexual al interior de nuestras sociedades.

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Over the past few decades controversy has arisen over the setting of boundaries in the realm of sexuality and reproduction in Argentina and Latin America in general. The transnationalization of human rights and its relationship to local recognition of sexual and reproductive rights is one of the factors that have most influenced this dispute. Various sectors, seeing their privatistic concepts of sexuality and reproduction threatened, have opposed the efforts of the feminist, women's, and sexual diversity movements. The inclusion of sexual issues in current public debates has had an impact on social life in a variety of ways. While it has produced a pluralization of positions in some religious sectors, it has incited a fierce defense of a conservative and restrictive sexual order in others. A political activism composed of a wide range of actors, platforms, and strategies has taken shape that firmly opposes the advance of the feminist, women's, and sexual diversity movements. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church, along with some conservative Evangelical churches, has played a leading role in this opposition. Despite some points of discord among them, these churches have presented a struggle linked to the defense of a model of sexuality based on the heterosexual, conjugal, monogamous, and reproductive family.

In the Argentine case, the Catholic hierarchy has a long history of opposition to rights linked to gender equality and the new paradigms in sexuality as a significant political actor on these issues. Specifically, the Argentine Episcopal Conference has historically played a central role in blocking feminist and sexual diversity agendas. The Church represents the principal religious force in the country in both the number of persons who profess the religion, totaling 76.5 percent of the population, and the privileges that the state's political-institutional design grants its hierarchy.¹ Nevertheless, the religion with the greatest increase in the number of followers in recent years is Protestantism, representing 9 percent of the population and constituting the second-most-important religious force in the country (Mallimaci, Esquivel, and Irrazábal, 2008). According to Hilario Wynarczyk (2006), the Protestant camp has two major poles, the "historic liberationists" and the "biblical conservatives." It is the latter, largely made up of Baptist, Free Brethren, and Pentecostal churches represented by the Federación Confraternidad Evangélica Pentecostal (Evangelical Pentecostal Fellowship Federation—FECEP) and the Alianza Cristiana de Iglesias Evangélicas de la República Argentina (Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches of Argentina—ACIERA), that has tended to exhibit a more restrictive stance in sexual matters (Jones, Azparren, and Polischuk, 2010).

The conservative reaction to the new sexual paradigms has, however, taken various forms in recent decades. Today it is not just the leaders of certain churches that are operating politically in order to hold back the advance of the feminist, women's, and sexual diversity movements. A movement has taken shape that has begun to channel its activity toward the use of legal and political

mechanisms, including the central role of the state in achieving its objectives and the arena of civil society as fertile ground for political influence. Along this line, we have seen civil society prioritized, largely through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as a way to block the progress of the feminist and sexual diversity agendas. The activities of these NGOs today pose a series of challenges regarding the way the religious camp operates on the sexual and reproductive rights agenda. Through this essay, we seek to revisit the ways in which the actions of these organizations on sexual policy have complicated not only the impact of religion on sexuality but also the boundary between the religious and the secular itself (Vaggione, 2009).

These actors that converge in support of the conservative activism in sexual matters have tended to present themselves under the banner of “pro-life.” The conservatism of their agenda is positioned as a shared element that defines the sexual policy of these sectors, warning that their struggle is aimed at preserving ideas and standards covered under the auspices of “tradition” (Mujica, 2007). This sense of “tradition,” as Coontz (2000) says, entails a fictional image projected over a past built retrospectively that operates as a yearning to recover a moral sense that has been lost in the contemporary world. Although the idea of conservatism may be ambiguous, it appeals to the ideological aspect of an activism that seeks to maintain a sexual order based on the idea of a “traditional family” that is threatened by the disassociation of sexuality from reproduction and the proposal of new paradigms for understanding sexual matters (Vaggione, 2010).

This article is an attempt to describe the “NGOization” of so-called pro-life activism in Argentina, showing the many modes of movement between the religious and the secular that shape this strategy in the field of contemporary sexual policy. To this end, it is divided into two parts. The first deals with the relevant theoretical debates, among them the relationship between religion and sexual policy, the formation of a social movement in opposition to sexual rights, and the dynamics that strengthen civil society in contemporary democracies. The second offers an empirically based historical analysis of the origin and composition of the self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs in Argentina.²

NOTES FOR A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE ROAD BETWEEN RELIGION AND NGOIZATION

THE RELIGIOUS, THE SECULAR, AND SEXUAL POLITICS

Far from fulfilling the predictions of secularization theories of a weakening and/or privatization of religion in modern times, religions have “deprivatized” themselves (Casanova, 1994), maintaining a leading role in the contemporary public sphere (P. Berger, 2005). 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 certain orders but also to participate in the disputes that are part of contemporary democracy (Vaggione, 2005). In this context, the debates about sexual politics are an area in which the

political presence of the religious factor is quite evident (Htun, 2003), and this has created new challenges for research. On one hand, some studies have begun to delve into the links established between some progressive religious sectors and feminist and sexual diversity movements (for example, Jones and Carbonelli, 2012; Peñas and Sgró, 2009; Vaggione, 2005). On the other, they have examined the development of a religious activism opposed to these movements largely led by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and some factions of Evangelism (Corrêa and Parker, 2011; Pecheny and de la Dehesa, 2009; Ruibal, 2012; Soares, 2011; Vaggione, 2009). 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 models of formal secularism that have been applied in several countries in the region (Oro and Ureta, 2007), 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 (Vaggione, 2009).

Thus, through a variety of settings, strategies, and discourses, conservative religious sectors in Latin America have sought to oppose the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights in specific areas such as the decriminalization/legalization of abortion (Amuchástegui et al., 2010; Htun, 2003; Irrazábal, 2010; Machado, 2012; Rosado-Nunes and Citeli, 2010), the sale and distribution of emergency contraceptives (Dides, 2006; Martin, 2004; Peñas, 2010), civil unions and same-sex marriage (Carbonelli, Mosqueira, and Felitti, 2011; Hiller, 2008; Jones and Vaggione, 2012; Morán, 2011), and comprehensive sexual education initiatives (Araujo, 2005; Jones, Azparren, and Polischuk, 2010). The presence of religion in the public sphere has prompted a series of policy debates about the guidelines and limitations of the relationship between religion and politics. Some of these positions tend to promote an expansion of secularism or laicism, confining the religious factor to the private sphere (Rawls, 1995). Others have acknowledged some dimensions of legitimacy in this relationship, although they have reservations regarding the entry of religion into politics. According to Habermas (2006), for example, religious perspectives can occupy a legitimate place in political debates to the extent that they translate into secular reasons accessible to everyone. Still others question the distinction between religion and politics as a purely Western construction, renewing the debate on the exclusion of religion from the public sphere (Connolly, 1999). Analytical approaches that have shown the “return” of the religious factor or the institution of a “postsecular” order are extremely useful for exploring the public and political forms that the religious spirit assumes in today’s world but overlook the exercise of opposition to sexual and reproductive rights beyond the religious realm. The blocking of feminist and sexual diversity agendas often combines religious and secular elements (Vaggione, 2009), requiring a more complex analysis to avoid falling into dualisms that associate religious mobilization with conservatism in sexual matters and the secular with progressive sexual politics (Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008).

THE SELF-PROCLAIMED PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT

Despite the leading role played by the Catholic hierarchy and some Evangelical churches in opposing sexual and reproductive rights in Latin

America, opposition activism is not limited to church-related spheres. On the contrary, since the 1980s a conservative activism has been taking shape in Latin America that transcends the current activity of these churches. The literature has shown that academic (Morán and Vaggione, 2012), parliamentary (Aldana, 2008; Amuchástegui et al., 2010; Dides, 2006; Peñas and Campana, 2011), and judicial (Lemaitre, 2013; Milisenda and Monte, 2013) actors and nongovernmental organizations (González, 2006; Mujica, 2007; Sgró, 2011; Vaggione, 2009), among others, have converged in this activism. This diversity of actors has tended to present itself publicly as “pro-life,” emulating the “pro-life” groups formed in the United States during the 1960s (Luker, 1984). What to some extent defines it is a political agenda based on the unconditional defense of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, which makes opposition to abortion the pivotal point of its efforts. In this sense, the “pro-life” title functions as a common self-ascribed name, forming a political identity that unites it (Munson, 2008).

The convergence of these dissimilar actors, the political identity they share, and the common politico-social agenda they defend makes it possible to characterize this activism as a social movement, which, for Maria da Gloria Gohn (1997, quoted in Mirza, 2006: 55), can be understood as

sociopolitical actions created by collective social actors belonging to different classes and social levels. . . . The actions develop a social and politico-cultural process that builds a collective identity for the movement, stemming from their common interests. . . . The movements participate, therefore, in the historic social changes of a country, and the nature of the transformations generated could be progressive as well as conservative or reactionary.

Based as it is on their actions in building a collective identity centered on common ideological elements rather than on predetermined historical subjects and on the “ambivalent” nature of their agendas rather than on a clearly progressive view of them, Gohn’s definition makes it possible to accept the self-proclaimed pro-life sectors as a social movement and to separate that movement from viewpoints that tend to reduce it to merely religious institutions or practices. In Latin America, with a few exceptions (such as Ansolabehere, 2010; Ruibal, 2013a; 2013b; 2014) most of the studies that have made interesting contributions showing the multiplicity of actors that converge in opposition to sexual reproductive rights (see Dides, 2006; González, 2006; Htun, 2003; Mujica, 2007) have not discussed the phenomenon theoretically as part of a broad social movement. The paucity of such investigations in Latin America contrasts with the extensive literature on the topic available in the United States and Europe. Various studies have analyzed the self-proclaimed pro-life sectors. Despite the obvious regional differences, reviewing this literature can allow us to retrieve some concepts useful for understanding the patterns of action and the emergence of the self-proclaimed pro-life sectors in our region.

Along this line, Alba Ruibal (2013a; 2014) proposes going back to the concept of “countermovements” to consider the Latin American case.³ In the U.S. literature on social movements there is substantial consensus around categorizing activism that defends a restrictive sexual morality by this term (Fetner,

2008; Lo, 1982; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; 2008; Mottl, 1980; Zald and Useem, 1987). Countermovements have been defined as those that arise and act in resistance to the demands and proposals of other movements (Fetner, 2008; Lo, 1982; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Zald and Useem, 1987). In this sense, a countermovement may promote or reject social change (Lo, 1982) but is always born in reaction, generally locating its demands in reference to the demands of the movement it opposes (Andrews, 2002). This characteristic of countermovements is what becomes relevant in analyzing the self-proclaimed pro-life movement, although in observing the Argentine case in particular it is necessary to make some conceptual clarifications in light of the empirical evidence. In general terms, many theoreticians of countermovements have tended to base their analysis of the local relationships between movements and countermovements on the United States (Andrews, 2002; Fetner, 2008; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). As we will demonstrate, the self-proclaimed pro-life movement in Argentina arose in the early 1980s with an agenda focused on blocking access to abortion at a time when legalization/decriminalization had not yet become a lead issue on the agenda of the local feminist movement (Bellucci, 1997), much less on the national public agenda (Brown, 2008). Thus, although it is not possible to think of the emergence of these countermovements as a reaction to the national landscape, it is conceivable to see it as a reaction to the advance of feminisms globally and to the internationalization of the "pro-choice" agenda in favor of decriminalization/legalization of abortion (Cook and Dickens, 1978; 1988). Accordingly, in contrast to the premises inscribed in the U.S. situation, it becomes necessary to extend the scope of the analytical framework beyond the national, understanding the self-proclaimed pro-life movement as a countermovement in which the local coexists with the global.

NGOIZATION

Among the numerous actors and strategies that make up self-proclaimed pro-life activism, the formation of NGOs has been one of the most significant staging patterns of recent years. This occurrence, so far little studied, has been referenced in some regional research (Dides, 2006; González, 2006; Mujica, 2007; Vaggione, 2005). In contrast to other nonprofit organizations, primarily concerned about the interests of their membership, the NGOs can be considered, apart from their legal status, as networks of freely associated citizens who lack government authority and pursue a goal that they present as public or for the common good (J. Berger, 2003). In this context, the self-proclaimed pro-life movement has shaped an activism that is politically debated through strong action by NGOs aligned with the sexual politics defended by the conservative churches but presenting themselves publicly as defenders of interests that go beyond those of the religious community.

The literature has widely discussed the development of NGOs within social movements, considering them a means of formalization and professionalization (Staggenborg, 1988). From Latin America, Sonia Álvarez (1998) proposed the term "NGOization" to refer to the prioritization of the formation of NGOs that seek to achieve certain social and political effects through

the specialization of their work. NGOization has tended to be considered critically. For Álvarez, for example, the problem with it is that NGOs often end up acting like “neo-” or “for” instead of “non”-governmental organizations.⁴ Thus civil society is reduced to sectors whose behavior is considered “acceptable” according to government standards (Telles, 2001), limited in the scope and radicalness of their demands and actions (Dagnino, 2003). The limitation of this critical approach lies in its tendency to be based on a discussion of the NGOization of progressive movements such as feminism, ignoring the existence of this process in conservative sectors. This theoretical gap leaves open the question whether NGO formation in the self-proclaimed pro-life movement has in fact limited its actions.

To understand this NGOization, it helps to look at it as a strategy that responds to concrete scenarios and political moments. The theory of social movements has coined the concept of “structures of political opportunity” to describe the aspects of the environment in which social movements operate that impact their strategic decisions. Sidney Tarrow (1994; 1996) defines structures of political opportunity as dimensions of the political medium, formal or not, that encourage social or political actors to carry out collective activities affecting their expectations of success or failure. As Gamson and Meyer (1996) have observed, political opportunities vary with changes in the institutional or cultural setting of a movement, in its internal organization, and in the degree to which it is capable of creating them (Meyer and Staggenborg, 2008).

In this framework, it is possible to see the NGOization of the self-styled pro-life movement as a strategy for sociopolitical impact in response to the opportunities presented by changes at the politico-institutional level. In the case of feminisms, the establishment of an NGO entailed new forms of professionalization and specialization that in some cases increased their influence in politico-governmental decision-making circles and links with international agencies (Álvarez, 1998; Staggenborg, 1988). It is therefore possible to think of the NGOization of the self-proclaimed pro-life movement as a response to a strategy for influencing the politico-governmental camp at both the local and the international level. The challenge is analyzing the transformations in the public sphere that opened windows of opportunity for the creation of NGOs opposed to sexual and reproductive rights.

In addition, the NGOization of the self-proclaimed pro-life movement has been accompanied in recent years by an increasing effacement of the religious factor. Many of these NGOs currently present themselves as having no religious identity. Vaggione (2005: 242) has proposed the concept of “strategic secularism” to refer to the adoption by various religious sectors of secular rhetoric, mainly scientific and legal, to confront the feminist and sexual diversity agendas without becoming any less dogmatic. Under this design, the secular and the religious are considered by these actors to be the reflection of a single truth. Strategic secularism has allowed certain religious sectors to impact spaces that religion would be hard-pressed to penetrate. By analyzing the Argentine case it is possible to observe the creation of conservative NGOs with a blurred religious identity corresponding to a strategic secularism that has expanded in recent years.

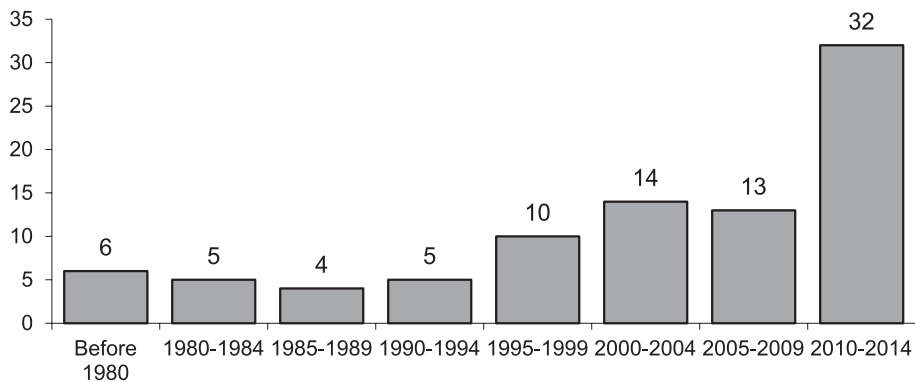


Figure 1. Creation of self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs in Argentina (Morán, 2014).

ORIGINS AND CURRENT MAKEUP OF SELF-PROCLAIMED PRO-LIFE NGOS IN ARGENTINA

The public presence of self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs in Argentina has increased in importance in recent years, especially through the politicization of issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, but their origins precede the inclusion of these issues on the public agenda. Although some of them were established in the first half of the twentieth century, their agendas at that time were not focused on sexual policy. As Mallimaci and Giménez (2007) point out, in the 1920s and 1930s the Vatican promoted what it called “comprehensive Catholicism,” appealing to the community of the faithful to fill political, trade union, university, and professional spaces and take Catholicism to the entire society. Organizations such as the Consortium of Catholic Doctors (Buenos Aires, 1929) and the Corporation of Catholic Lawyers (Buenos Aires, 1935) arose in this context with the goal of promoting Catholicism in professional settings. With democracy once again in force in 1983, these NGOs joined self-proclaimed pro-life activism, adapting their agendas to the sexual agenda that the Vatican began to promote at the end of the twentieth century. Thus their agendas mutated, adapting to the goals of the nascent self-proclaimed pro-life movement.

Other NGOs, meanwhile, were created during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), but it was not until the return to democracy in 1983 that most of these organizations were established. The transformations that occurred in the course of the return to democracy allowed for greater participation of civil society in the political, social, and cultural realms (Torrado, 2000). Along with this, there was a greater politicization of issues related to sexuality and reproduction, often resulting in changes in public policy (Moreno, 2008). Thus the growth of the self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs was neither linear nor single-minded but rather adjusted in different ways to the sociopolitical processes under way in local and international contexts.

One hundred forty such NGOs were identified, and the year of founding of 89 of them was determined. The numbers of these organizations created per five-year period (Figure 1) show a relatively sustained increase over time. From

the latter half of the 1990s on there was an increase in the number of groups coinciding with the international recognition of sexual rights in the United Nations Conferences in Cairo (in 1994) and Beijing (in 1995) and the emergence of the public debate on abortion in the context of Argentina's 1994 constitutional reform.⁵ As of the twenty-first century there were increases in the number of laws and policies fostering sexual and reproductive rights, among them laws on sexual health and responsible procreation (2002), civil unions (Buenos Aires, 2002), comprehensive sexual education (2006), and surgical contraception (2006). However, it was the 2010–2014 period that saw an “explosion” of NGOs in reaction to the intense politicization aroused by the debate over the 2010 marriage equality law. Two major phases of expansion can be identified in terms of the strategic activities prioritized.⁶

FROM THE 1980S TO THE MID-1990S

The first NGOs in Argentina self-identified as pro-life were formed in the 1980s. During those years, groups such as ProFamilia (Buenos Aires, 1983), Grávida (Buenos Aires, 1989), ProVida San Luis (San Luis, 1989), Fundación Argentina del Mañana (Buenos Aires, 1989) and Portal de Belén (Córdoba, 1991) were created to defend a conservative sexual politics. These first NGOs concentrated their activities mainly on abortion. At a time when the interruption of pregnancy was not yet a major issue on the national public agenda (Bellucci, 1997; Brown, 2008)—in contrast to what happened in the United States, where the pro-life organizations were established at time of high politicization of the issue around the *Roe v. Wade* decision (Luker, 1984)—these organizations emerged as “preventive.” Their preventive nature can be considered a reaction not so much to the strictly local moment of public debate on abortion as to the nascent democratic process and the international human rights agenda. Argentina's ratification of a series of agreements and international summits after the dictatorship called for changes in local policies and laws on sexuality and reproduction to adapt them to the new international human rights standards. The formation of these first self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs in the country can be interpreted as a response to the prominence of agendas on sexuality and reproduction in general and on abortion in particular in international settings and their possible expression in local policies. Through their activities, on the whole these organizations attempted to defend their position through symbolic and cultural impacts, on the one hand, and through assistencialist activities with populations considered strategic, on the other. The former activities were generally aimed at influencing opinions, ideas, and social beliefs linked to sexual issues and practices. The Fundación Argentina del Mañana, created with the goal of affecting the programmatic content of the media, is a paradigmatic example of an NGO that aims to have a cultural effect.

The activities associated with assistencialism offered assistance to specific population sectors. In a context in which neoliberal policies had begun to wrest standing from the state in its role of providing basic services to the most disadvantaged sectors (Yamin and Gloppen, 2011), many self-styled pro-life NGOs presented themselves as an alternative in the face of lack of government protection. Assistencialism was therefore transformed by some of these NGOs into a

avored way of achieving social impact with the principal goal of not necessarily overcoming vulnerability but keeping pregnant women from resorting to abortion. In this context, groups such as Grávida or Portal de Belén were created, just as the neoliberal structural reforms of the Carlos Menem government (1989–1999) were getting under way, to house and/or assist pregnant women to prevent them from aborting. In addition to abortion, a pivotal point on the agenda of these first NGOs was divorce, which was approved in 1987. Concretely, the open debates around the divorce law were marked by an opposition mobilization in which, for the first time, some self-proclaimed pro-life organizations, led by the Catholic hierarchy, converged with other religious-linked groups (Fabris, 2008; Htun, 2003).

Lastly, a glaring characteristic of the NGOs in this phase was their Catholic stamp. Many presented themselves publicly as adherents of this religion. In a period when there was as yet no such Evangelical activism, the first self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs were full of the rhetoric and influence of the Vatican hierarchy. Many even came under the wing of international Catholic organizations that began to operate in the region in the 1980s, such as Human Life International.⁷ The great majority of these NGOs showed a marked religious identity and specifically a Catholic one. Moreover, their actions were often designed along the lines of action organized by the Catholic hierarchy. It was not until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that a shift was seen in the shape of their identities and their lines of action.

FROM THE MID-1990S TO THE PRESENT

In contrast to the previous phase, the period beginning in the mid-1990s saw the emergence of self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs that expanded their intervention into government areas, prioritizing action in legislative, judicial, and even international settings. Familias del Mundo Unidas por la Paz (Buenos Aires, 1994), for example, participated in 1995 in the preparatory meeting for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, representing the Catholic opposition to the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights. In the same vein, a series of NGOs was created across the country with the goal of affecting political decision-making spaces through lobbying, follow-up, and legislative advisement, including Pro-Vida (Buenos Aires, 2000), the Fundación 25 de Marzo (Córdoba, 2002), Jóvenes Autoconvocados por la Vida (Córdoba, 2004), Centro de Bioética, Persona y Familia (Buenos Aires, 2009), and Frente Joven (Buenos Aires, 2010). In this phase, some of the NGOs founded in the 1980s and early 1990s, including Portal de Belén, the Fundación Argentina del Mañana, and ProFamilia, reformulated their strategies in order to include political action in their activities.

Some organizations began to make use of strategic litigation during this phase with the goal of halting the implementation of certain policies and/or impeding access to certain sexual and reproductive rights guaranteed by law. In general, the method for facilitating the interventions of these NGOs before the courts was through the legal tool of “collective writ of *amparo*,” introduced in the last constitutional reform of 1994. This reform, in addition to strengthening the language of rights at the social and political level, enabled

civil organizations to file lawsuits in the framework of collective writ of *amparo*, broadening the active legitimation of a legal remedy that previously had been limited to those who held a subjective individual right. Thus, while litigation has been one of the key political strategies of the feminist, women's, and sexual diversity movements for broadening the framework of recognition of rights (Manzo, 2011; Yamin and Gloppen, 2011), it has also become widely utilized by sectors that support conservative sexual morality.

This strategy began to be used by these sectors in the late 1990s, but it was not until after Menem's government that it was prized as a means of resistance against the advance of the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights. As Htun (2003) points out, in Latin America the windows of opportunity for approving policies in favor of these rights usually occurred in political contexts of tension between the conservative churches and the government in office. According to Meyer and Staggenborg (2008), arenas of conflict and tactics of collective action have two dimensions that vary with changes in internal and environmental conditions. While public policy and legislation on sexual matters were generally marked by a conservative stamp in the 1990s because of an alliance between the Catholic hierarchy and the Menem government (Esquivel, 2004), the breakup of this alliance in the following decade (especially during Néstor Kirchner's term between 2003 and 2007) signified a shift in Argentine sexual policy in favor of the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights. With this situation, self-proclaimed pro-life activism readjusted its strategies, prioritizing heavy litigation in the face of the loss of its alliances with the national executive power.

Another consequence of the breakup of alliances between conservative sectors and the national government was the shift in strategies from national to local. Many self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs currently tend to design judicial actions for influence less on national legislation than on provincial regulations, since the local settings are often receptive to their conservative positions. In addition, as Sieder, Schjolden, and Angell (2005) indicate, in the framework of decentralization policies provincial governments can often challenge the federal government through the courts. As a result, legal actions by self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs at the local level attempt to gut the sexual and reproductive rights guaranteed by national laws and policies.⁸

This second phase of self-proclaimed pro-life activism also marks a shift in terms of the public identities assumed by the NGOs. Some of them began to identify with particular population sectors, especially youth and/or women. This gave rise to organizations such as the Fundación Argentina para la Mujer (Buenos Aires, 1998), the Movimiento Cívico de Mujeres (Buenos Aires, 1999), Jóvenes por la Vida (Buenos Aires, 2003), and Frente Joven (Buenos Aires, 2010) as an explicit strategy for identifying youth with the pro-life cause and opposing the portrayal of women as the historical political subject of feminisms. This shift in the public identities of the NGOs was marked by changes regarding their religious identification. Thus the first NGOs that publicly presented themselves with a specifically Evangelical identity, such as the Asociación Argentina de Abogados Cristianos (2001) and Plan 1.5 (Córdoba, 2009), began to emerge. Nevertheless, the Evangelical groups are still a minority within this activism in Argentina, a field largely dominated by Catholicism.

Conversely, the transformations in denominational public identity also translated, in some cases, into an erasure of all religious identification. While in the first phase the great majority of the self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs presented themselves as Catholic, in subsequent decades NGOs that were not tied to a publicly denominational identity began to appear. However, the presence of self-proclaimed faith-based pro-life NGOs and others lacking a religious identity cannot be reduced to a simple religious/secular binary. The ways in which religion runs through these groups are complex. NGOs that do not present a denominational public identity can be classified in terms of two features: internalized religiosity and religious de-identification.

NGOs characterized by internalized religiosity are those whose membership and/or leaders belong to a particular religion despite the fact that the organization does not present itself as religious. The term “internalized religiosity” refers to a secular institutional identity that connects to a particular and concrete internal religiosity of the membership in keeping with Vaggione’s (2005) idea of “strategic secularism.” The adoption of a secular position is in line with a strategy for achieving greater influence in the public debate and penetrating spaces to which access would be difficult with a discourse based expressly on faith and religious dogma. In this category we can find organizations such as the Centro de Bioética, Persona y Familia, which usually presents itself as associated with secular disciplines such as science and law but was created and is led by activists from the Movimiento Fundar, an organization that considers itself Catholic and is recognized by the archbishopric of Buenos Aires.⁹

Religious de-identification is a characteristic of NGOs that present a non-denominational institutional identity and whose members do not expressly subscribe to a particular religion. The religious element is minimized in the area of identity. *Por-Venir* (Santa Fe, 2003) and *Elegimos la Vida* (Buenos Aires, 2005) are examples. One of the clearest cases of this minimizing of religious identities is the Red Federal de Familias, which was established in 2010 after the approval of the country’s marriage equality law and united self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs throughout Argentina. It has not only created spaces for sharing experiences nationally but also established a “lowest common denominator” agenda with regard to the criteria for joining the network and the design of its political activities. Religious identity is not one of those criteria. Omitting religious identity allowed the network to bring together not only NGOs without a particular public religious identity but also Catholic and Evangelical NGOs, enabling it to establish itself as a body that had overcome differences based on theological worldviews or political frictions.¹⁰ Here again, the break in the church-state relation starting in 2003 may have had an effect on the identity shift regarding religion. This break created barriers to influence by the Catholic hierarchy on national politics (Mallimaci, 2005), causing the self-proclaimed pro-life movement to resort to avenues of political impact other than strictly religious ones.

Another factor that could explain this occurrence is the increasing questioning of the Catholic Church regarding its role and links to the actions of the armed forces during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983). The Kirchner and Cristina Fernández governments (2007 to the present) have promoted policies of memory and condemnation of state terrorism that fostered a social dialogue around human rights. In this setting, the discourse of some self-proclaimed

pro-life NGOs has strategically readapted to associate abortion and other reproductive rights with crimes against humanity, drawing on the rhetoric of human rights policies of twenty-first-century Argentina (Carbonelli, Mosqueira, and Felitti, 2011; Morgan, 2011). As Pablo Gudiño Bessone (2012: 174) points out, the political use of and new meaning in the rhetoric of human rights “corresponds to the design of a new political strategy that attempts to operate within the framework of a society that—with the passage of time—has remained sensitive to all that has to do with the memory of the violence and horror.” In Argentina, where the Catholic hierarchy has been questioned for its collaboration with the last dictatorship, the use of the rhetoric of human rights by these NGOs is made possible, in many cases, by their presenting themselves as secular entities, thus appealing to identities and discourses that could be questioned if they were issued by religious leaders.

CONCLUSIONS

The formation of self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs has become one of the most significant means adopted by conservative sectors in recent decades to affect Argentine sexual politics. The importance of these NGOs lies not only in their sustained growth over the years but also in the diversification of their actions and strategic identities. While they initially devoted themselves primarily to the issue of abortion through activities associated with assistencialism and cultural impact, their actions since the 1990s have diversified, entering into the politico-institutional field and aiming at other issues associated with the country’s sexual policy. Another of the mutations evidenced throughout these 30 years is in the public identities of these organizations. While at the outset they subscribed to an explicit denominational identity, specifically Catholic, changes in church-state relations and transformations on the social and cultural levels opened windows of opportunity for identity reconfiguration. Thus not only do Catholic and Evangelical self-proclaimed pro-life organizations coexist today but also religious de-identification and religious internalization have made the relation between the secular and the religious within this movement more complex. Coordination among these organizations has also given them a certain autonomy with respect to the style of action of other actors that make up the self-proclaimed pro-life movement, as is the case of the Catholic hierarchy and some conservative Evangelical churches. Although the agendas of the NGOs around sexual policy remain in perfect harmony with the sexual agenda of these churches, the establishment of a common agenda transcending the differences among the church leaders demonstrates this dynamic.

As Munson (2008) indicates, this movement and religion overlap at many levels and are separate in others. The complexity of the relationship between them requires rethinking of the normative frameworks through which progress in sexual and reproductive rights in Latin America is usually theorized. Privatizing the religious sphere with concepts such as secularism or laicism has tended to be thought of as a way of ensuring a pluralist sexual policy in the region, the assumption being that the inclusion of religion in politics inevitably means the adoption by the state of conservative and antipluralist codes

(Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008). The de-identification regarding religion to which some NGOs appeal and the secular discourses that they put forward demonstrate that secularization does not necessarily mean a pluralist and progressive order. Therefore, following Vaggione's (2009) proposition, the separation of religion and politics under the paradigm of laicism can be insufficient to guarantee sexual pluralism in our societies.

Along with this, by examining the historical development from the 1980s to the present, it is possible to see that the NGOization of the self-proclaimed pro-life movement, far from waning in its capacity for political impact, has been a strategic means of decoupling the resistance to sexual and reproductive rights from the leadership of certain churches. It also permits impact in spaces where the actors and religious discourses would have few opportunities without specifying their agenda or positions. The cause of these NGOs, in this sense, is not opposition to the power systems that produce inequalities (such as patriarchy or heteronormativity) or to the institutions that have historically reproduced these regimes of power and domination. On the contrary, their goal is not to create a new map of power relations but rather to preserve or, ultimately, restore the traditionally hegemonic map of patriarchal and heteronormative relations. The NGOization of this movement has not restricted its agenda or objectives, because its political project is not contrary to the normalization of bodies and subjectivities. Thus, the application of the concept of NGOization to the establishment of these organizations must avoid the critical and negative connotation associated with it by the theory of social movements. It is rather an analytical-descriptive term that allows us to examine the means by which the movement has prioritized the formation of NGOs as a strategy for achieving political and social impact.

Inquiring into the way the self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs operate in public space makes it possible for us to identify the various forms by which the opposition to sexual and reproductive rights has strategically readapted to the rules of democracies. The challenge therefore lies in unraveling the power plays that hide behind the human rights, scientific, and medical rhetoric, among others, formulated by these organizations, focusing particularly on the impact that they have on people's lives.

NOTES

1. Article 2 of the nation's constitution states: "The federal government supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion." In addition, this church is the only one recognized by the civil code as a public legal entity.

2. This research was carried out using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The primary sources consulted were in-depth interviews of 11 members of the self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs in Argentina between 2010 and 2012, the web sites of the NGOs being studied, and the documentary and informational material produced by these NGOs. Also, the national press was reviewed in the newspapers *Clarín*, *Página 12*, and *La Nación* between 2000 and 2011. A mapping of NGOs was performed and supplemented by an online search through specific descriptors and the application of the snowball technique to reach other organizations that were not found in the first investigation stage.

3. We are grateful to Alba Ruibal for providing us with specialized literature on the debates regarding countermovements, which is part of the theoretical framework of her doctoral dissertation on legal mobilization and countermobilization in Latin America (see Ruibal, 2013a; 2013b; 2014).

4. Years later, Álvarez (2009) softened her position on the basis of an analysis of the new configurations of the women's movements and their NGOization in the twenty-first century.

5. Then-President Carlos Menem proposed including the right to life "from conception to natural death" in the constitutional text, a situation that meant important confrontations between the groups in favor of this principle, for the most part linked to the Catholic Church, and sectors opposed to its inclusion.

6. What marks the distinction between phases is not a radical break between them but the emergence of new forms of identification and/or strategic action. In the second phase, organizations with strategies and public identities similar to the previous ones kept appearing, but others were formed with different modes of operation from those previously examined.

7. Human Life International is an organization created in the United States in 1981 to promote leaders and organizations that supported the Catholic hierarchy on issues of sexuality.

8. In recent years various self-proclaimed pro-life NGOs have promoted activities that encouraged declaring certain provinces and/or municipalities as "pro-life" as a form of resistance to the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights, especially abortion. To date, close to 30 cities have been officially declared "pro-life" in Argentina.

9. <http://www.movimientofundar.org/quienessomos.html> (accessed May 28, 2013).

10. One of the points of tension between the main religions in Argentina has been the demand made by Evangelical sectors for religious equality before the state, creating a great confrontation with the Catholic Church, which to date maintains institutional privileges.

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