

The social movement that shifted the debate on abortion in Colombia

Colombia's Constitutional Court decriminalised abortion last February. From now on, any woman or pregnant person will now be able to interrupt their pregnancy voluntarily up to the 24th week, but the road to the court's ruling has involved a series of educational, activist and awareness-raising efforts, as [Ana Cristina González Vélez](#) (Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres) resembles.

Lee este artículo [en español](#)

The [Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres](#) is a feminist organisation founded in 1998 to achieve the complete decriminalisation of abortion in Colombia. In its early days, and because the country was one of the few in the world where abortion was totally prohibited, we helped open the debate with arguments to normalise the conversation about termination of pregnancy in any setting where it was possible.

In 2006 the Constitutional Court decriminalised abortion in three circumstances which can be summarised in three ways: in cases of risk to health or life, in cases of foetal malformation incompatible with life outside the womb and in cases of rape. Neither category established limits on gestational age but introduced requirements to access to abortion— medical certification for the first two and a criminal complaint in the latter.

From that moment on, the Mesa was committed to contributing to the implementation of the verdict and carried out a strategy that can be divided into five lines. I discussed this in depth in the book [La batalla por el derecho al aborto. El caso de la Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres. \(2021\)](#), co-authored with Isabel Cristina Jaramillo.

First, we established case tracking to ensure women's access to services and document the barriers to its access. We also promoted work in the regions to build capacity among health and judicial authorities and strengthen women's networks. The third point consisted of designing and enhancing dissemination and communication strategies. We also generated advocacy in Congress to avoid setbacks, promote progress and, finally, we pushed for expert knowledge and pedagogical work to implement the legal causes for abortion.

These efforts have been crucial to transforming access to abortion services and achieving the implementation of the 2006 ruling. But it was mainly through case monitoring and producing expert knowledge which enabled us to turn around the debate on abortion in Colombia and achieve the Court's historic ruling in February 2022.

Causa Justa emerged with the aim of promoting a democratic, argumentative and pedagogical public conversation that would allow people to understand that abortion as a crime is counterproductive, unfair, ineffective and discriminatory.

Both actions strengthened the ideas that gave rise to the Causa Justa Movement. On the one hand, they gave us the legitimacy of being those who had bet on complying with the rules proposed by the Court in 2006 to implement it. On the other, they gave us the credibility that came from being central stakeholders in its execution and from knowing first-hand the barriers to access experienced by women seeking an abortion in Colombia. At the same time, we were able to have the necessary knowledge based on the empirical evidence available to propose a change in the country.

In this context, the Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres began to support issues such as how insufficient the legal basis model was. But also the fact that most abortions in Colombia were still illegal, and unequal access to abortion deepened the gaps between groups of women. Leaving the most vulnerable women behind made them suffer the most complications, including persecution and lack of access to safe and legal services.

We exposed that in Colombia, abortion was not only not a symbolic crime, but since 2004 some 400 people per year have been criminalised in the country. The vast majority of these are women, particularly those under 18 and those living in rural areas. These and other evidence led us to formulate 90 arguments and create the Causa Justa initiative, which became a Movement two years ago.

In this journey of almost 25 years, we launched Causa Justa, a campaign made up of more than 100 organisations in more than 20 territories of the country, with hundreds of supporters from social and political public life. We created it to eliminate the crime of abortion from the Criminal Code because more than an offence, it is a structural barrier that underlies all others and generates stigma.

Understanding the social reality of abortion in Colombia

The movement also emerged to offer Colombia a democratic, argumentative and pedagogical public conversation. Firstly, that would allow understanding that abortion as a crime is counterproductive, unjust, ineffective and discriminatory. And secondly, it would contribute to legitimising women's reproductive decisions by creating an environment of social decriminalisation.

As we moved beyond the dilemma of being pro or anti-choice and while understanding the reality of abortion in women's lives and the disproportionality of using criminal law to regulate a health service, we filed a constitutional challenge in the Colombian Court in October 2020.

While the Court was debating our legal arguments, we intensified the pedagogical strategy with different audiences, took over the traditional media and social networks, and generated a substantial social and political mobilisation around the issue.

This work of more than 500 days since we filed the case resulted in a historic ruling. It puts Colombia at the forefront of Latin America and the world by eliminating the crime of abortion up to 24 weeks. During this period, any pregnant woman or person will be able to terminate their pregnancy voluntarily for their reasons and based on their conscience, while preserving the 2006 legal requirements after that period.

The ruling also urges Congress and the government to create a comprehensive policy that consolidates providing timely and quality abortion services while strengthening sex education, access to modern contraceptive methods, and eliminating violence against women. Thousands celebrate in the streets and seek to exercise their rights, while today, Colombia is a freer and fairer country for women.

Notes:

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