LA MAREA VERDE: FEMINIST ORGANIZING FOR ABORTION IN MEXICO

By

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(Under the Direction of Patricia Richards)

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the feminist movement for abortion, *La Marea Verde*, has gained strengthen throughout Latin America by framing abortion restrictions as a structural gender violence, resulting in significant legal victories for feminist groups across the region. While abortion is contested both culturally and legally, previous research on abortion politics rarely includes feminist activism aimed at cultural change, often focusing on feminist efforts to effect legal policy reform. Using digital ethnographic methods, this research explores abortion accompaniment, a nonlegal, grassroots strategy aimed at advancing abortion access and destigmatizing abortion. As abortion accompaniment can be a moment of connection and shared meaning, activists use emotional processes to transform negative emotions surrounding abortion such as shame into positive emotions like empathy and empowerment. This case of abortion activism represents one way that feminist social movements can move towards a politics of reproductive liberation unconstrained by volatile political climates, global pandemics, and legal uncertainty.

INDEX WORDS: social movements, abortion, Mexico, abortion activism, abortion stigma, emotions, emotional channeling

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> We're fed up (*Un Hartazgo*). I mean, we're already sick of everything that the patriarchy, *machismo,* and misogyny has been doing to us. We're tired and fed up with being treated like this. A little while ago I read a phrase that said 'to start a revolution you only need one friend' So, imagine if there were five friends who got together, and then twenty, and then thirty!…then obviously this would erupt (*estallar*). And it's amazing, because[pause]… we are in the midst of this pain, this grief, that has really been affecting us for a lot of years and has repressed us. I think it's fear, pain and sadness. But that's where we get the anger (*rabia*) to be able to fight—from being fed up that they have stolen so much from us, and we're going to fight for it. I don't care what we have to do, we're going to do it… also, there's been a lot of feminicides. I think that the feminicides have triggered a lot of aspects of all of this too. – Marta, northern Mexico

Introduction

Abortion is a highly contested political topic, and at its core, can be understood as a gendered power struggle over the meanings of motherhood and sexuality (Luker 1984; Petchesky 1990; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009). Across the Americas, the legal standing of abortion continues to change with recent developments in some countries liberalizing abortion laws (Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia) and others adopting more restrictive laws (United States, El Salvador). Regardless of the legal status of abortion, the topic continues to be controversial. When viewed as a site of cultural conflict, abortion politics are one type of gendered bodily politics in which power is symbolically and materially contested.

The social and legal restriction of abortion is one area of gender oppression around which feminist social movements organize to dismantle structural gender inequality. On the topic of abortion, feminist social movements aim to challenge material and symbolic manifestations of power. Feminist abortion activism seeks to impact the legal status of abortion along with how

people access abortion and think about abortion. On abortion politics in Latin America, there is a lot of research that focuses on the legal restrictions of abortion and less research on the role of feminist social movements (Kane 2008; Kulczycki 2011; Caivano and Delgado 2012; Lopreite 2014). The research that does include feminist social movements examines the relationships between feminist activism and legal change, largely neglecting the role of feminist activism on the cultural dimensions of abortion (Blofield and Ewig 2017). However, feminist abortion activism goes beyond challenges to formal political processes and uses abortion to challenge cultural hegemonic gender ideals.

La Marea Verde, or the feminist movement for legal, safe and free abortion has swept across Latin America in the last decade. Feminist social movements frame abortion restriction and criminalization as structural gender violence against women, in addition to holding the state responsible for the deaths of women due to clandestine abortions (Sutton 2018). By discursively framing the restriction of abortion as gender violence, feminists consolidate the abortion movement with the fight against gender violence (such as feminicide and sexual violence) to "turn abortion rights into the vanguard of social transformation" (Palmeiro 2018:564). In Mexico, the growing feminist abortion movement is comprised of a variety of actors that advance reproductive freedom in different ways. Some activists focus on institutional avenues of change, such as legal strategies, while others focus on organizing for abortion access outside of the legal system. Due to institutional violence, barriers to access abortion and "reproductive governance" some activists organize outside of formal institutions (Morgan and Roberts 2012).

In this project, I use the feminist abortion movement in Mexico to study the relationship between forms of domination and forms of challenge to understand the various strategies of feminist activism (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008: 810). I ask the following questions: How do

feminist groups organize for abortion in Mexico? How do transnational feminist discourses influence their activism? What alternative methods do feminist activists use to engage with abortion politics outside of formal institutions? I investigate how feminist activists see the restriction of abortion as structural gender violence and focus on how strategies they use to organize outside of formal institutions. Specifically, I concentrate on abortion accompaniment, a mutual aid strategy that feminist activists in Mexico use to advance abortion access and cultural change. The excerpt at the beginning of this chapter hints at two central themes that this project explores. First, how gender violence impacts the feminist abortion movement. Second, the role of networks of personal relationships in the abortion movement in Mexico. Specifically, I describe how activists construct "politically expressive" relationships to dismantle multiple facets of gender oppression.

In this chapter, I review previous research on the role of culture, body politics, and emotions in social movements. Next, I cover previous research on abortion in Mexico to situate how feminist abortion activism aims to eliminate barriers to accessing abortion. I outline my methods, paying particular attention to my positionality, and conclude with a brief overview of the thesis.

Social Movements, Culture, & Body Politics

Alongside the "cultural" turn in social sciences, the field of social movement studies began to pay attention to the role of ideas, ideology, and meaning-making in social movement processes (Kurzman 2008). While previous research had narrowly defined politics to mean formal political processes, cultural social movement research conceptualizes 'politics' as a broad system of power relations that centers culture as key to understanding how power manifests in different realms of social life. Rather than viewing culture as a less significant space of power

contestation, culture is understood “as a powerful constraining force” (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008:82).

Social movement scholars who make cultural arguments “assert that movements achieve significant effects as much by altering the cultural rules of the game, both within politics and outside of it, as by winning formal policy reform” (Polletta 2008:78). While some social movement efforts are centered on policy reform, feminist social movements are often comprised of a diverse collection of social actors with goals aimed at cultural and legal change. In addition to public mobilization, there are collective efforts to challenge power in the private realm of everyday life that seek to construct cultural alternatives (Edwards 2014: 213). Rather than needing to come from the state, this research emphasizes how social change “could be initiated in cultural values, the way people saw themselves and others, and the relationships that they had to each other” (Edwards 2014: 118).

By expanding the definition of politics to a broad system of power relations, the body can be understood as a political battlefield of power and resistance (Foucault 1975). Specifically, the gendering of bodies through different social and institutional practices creates categories that influence material realities. In this way, the key to understanding feminist social movements is seeing how “sites of power always begin with bodies” (Eisenstein 2001:39), and yet how “the body emerges as a site of contention, meaning and possibility” (Sutton 2021:26). In Latin America, feminist social movements use claims to bodily ownership and autonomy to discursively weave the struggle for reproductive freedom with the right to a life free from gender violence and the right to express gender and sexuality. In doing so, they fundamentally argue for “the right to not be subjected to patriarchal regulations of the body” (Sutton 2021:27).

Social Movements, Identity & Emotions

Social movement scholars have studied the relationship between social movements and identity formation, namely, how social movement processes can shape the individual sense of self and collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Understanding "the emotional life of social movements" reveals why people participate in social movement activity, and how social movements are sustained and dissolve (Ruiz-Junco 2013:52; Gould 2009). Some research examines the role of emotion work within social movements to understand how movements use emotional strategies to advance movement goals. Specifically, social movements use emotional channeling to reshape emotions into more useful emotions for the social movement activity (Ruíz-Junco 2013: 47).

Regar (2004:208) explains how social movement processes "facilitate emotion work," recognizing that emotional channeling can occur in affective, interactional encounters. Research describes "free spaces" as places that social movements create to remove people from hegemonic ideological control and develop an "enlightened" consciousness and collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001:288). As I will show in this thesis, abortion activists in Mexico expend emotional labor to provide people with social support during the process of abortion, offering a "free space" for people to challenge hegemonic ideas about gender and sexuality. Likewise, activists understand the abortion process as an opportunity to channel negative emotions into positive ones.

Abortion in Mexico

Research on abortion in Mexico has examined shifting abortion laws (Sanchez-Fuentes, Paine and Elliott- Buettner 2008; Vela 2010; Beckner and Díaz Olavarrieta 2013; Martínez Carmona

2018) and noted how Mexico's fractured landscape of abortion access creates different abortion seeking behaviors based on factors such as age, ethnicity, class and geographic location (Singer 2020; Juarez, Bankole and Palma 2019). Public opinion research on abortion reform finds that having higher levels of education and knowledge of legal reforms is positively associated with supporting legal abortion (Valencia Rodríguez et al. 2011).

Research has examined the role of religious ideology and its connection to abortion stigma and finds that some women negotiate their moral agency and "resist religious injunctions on their reproductive behavior" (Singer 2018:11). Other research describes how people see the abortion experience as an "indelible mark on a woman's identity" that will provoke "divine punishment" as a consequence (Sorhaindo et al. 2014:622). Before the legalization of abortion in Mexico City in 2007, research on abortion in Mexico showed that women use language such as "menstrual regulation" or "medication causing a miscarriage" (Lafaurie et al. 2005: 80) in efforts to make sense of their decision to terminate a pregnancy where the practice is illegal. Other research found that women who seek medical attention in public hospitals due to induced and spontaneous abortion strategically comply "within the margins of a seemingly normative discourse" that positions abortion as impermissible to "ensure their moral survival" (Erviti et al. 2004:1058). In efforts to shift cultural perceptions on abortion, feminist groups seek to normalize abortion as a regular life experience. Members of feminist groups express seek to help people "talk in a natural way about the experience" but note the difficulties in articulating "abortion politics without dramatizing the termination of pregnancy" (Krauss 2019:48-49).

Since the 2007 legalization of abortion in Mexico City, research on the experiences of women in the state-funded ILE (Interrupción Legal del Embarazo/ legal interruption of

pregnancy) clinics in Mexico City demonstrates the persisting nature of abortion stigma despite its legality (Lamas 2013; Singer 2016; Cedena Pena 2018). For abortion, "reproductive governance" can be understood as the ways that the state, the church, and social movements seek to control reproductive behavior through moral codes, laws, and coercion (Morgan and Roberts 2012). Institutions in Mexico are sites in which women's sexual and reproductive behavior is regulated. Research on public abortion clinics shows that the clinics are highly politized spaces where states continue to enact reproductive governance over their citizens, demonstrating the complications in exercising a legal right to obtain an abortion in a stigmatizing cultural climate (Singer 2016). I borrow from Liazos' (1972) conception of covert institutional violence to see the regulation and control of women's bodies as institutional violence that faces women in Mexico. Further, research expands on the importance of destigmatizing abortion and highlights the role of feminist activism in this process (Singer 2019; Belfrage, Didier and Vázquez-Quesada 2021).

Alternative Feminist Abortion Politics in Latin America

Given that research has demonstrated how women are subjected to "reproductive governance" control and institutional violence in state institutions, feminist groups organize to advocate for people inside of institutions, in addition to providing abortion access outside of formal systems. Defining politics in a broad sense allows us to see the less visible types of activism that challenge both symbolic and material systems of authority. Specifically, there are networks of activists that do abortion accompaniment, an activism strategy that aims to have material and symbolic impacts. Accompaniment activism intends to advance abortion access and reconstruct the way that people understand abortion. Abortion accompaniment is a model of abortion care in

which activists, either virtually or in-person, provide information, logistic or social support to a person who wants to terminate a pregnancy. Additionally, abortion accompaniment is a "fusion of ideology and practice" and a type of prefigurative political activism (Braine and Velarde 2022:16). Social movements engage in prefigurative politics when the actions they use to advance social change "embody or 'prefigure' the kind of society they want to bring about" (Leach 2013:1).

Research on *acompañantes* (abortion accompaniment activists) in Mexico highlights the efforts of activists to influence social and cultural elements of abortion. Scholars talk about accompaniment as a "reproductive labor of care" and highlight how networks can build "a web of supportive moral relationships… when women are threatened by social death incurred by the legal and moral stigma of abortion" (Krauss 2019:50). Other research highlights how abortion accompaniment in Mexico is a "symbolic intervention" to hegemonic discourses surrounding abortion, and how a holistic accompaniment approach can transform abortion into a positive experience. (Singer 2019; Veldhuis, Sanchéz-Ramíerez, and Darney 2022). Activists understand abortion accompaniment "as a safe and autonomous practice that should be available to all as an option for ending a pregnancy" without medical supervision or control (Braine and Velade 2022:16). These informal networks not only provide access to safe abortion but have created spaces of "innovation, hope, and joy" going beyond what they understand possible within state health institutions (Pizzarossa and Nandagiri 2021).

Using interviews with abortion activists in Mexico I ask, how does gender violence impact the abortion movement in Mexico? How does feminist accompaniment attempt to challenge hegemonic conceptions of abortion on a symbolic and material basis? How do their

practices relate to and challenge the authority of formal institutions such as the law and medicine? What can we learn about alternative social movement activism from accompaniment networks? Accompaniment can be viewed as a "politically expressive" alternative practice to abortion in medical institutions. In this way, accompaniment activists engage in prefigurative political activism in which they construct abortion alternatives to create a better world for reproductive freedom (Yates 2015). Additionally, their activism symbolically challenges the authority of the law by organizing for abortion despite legal restrictions. Next, I explain my unconventional digital ethnographic methods, reflexively engaging my positionality in conducting this project.

Methods

My digital ethnographic data collection process for this project can be divided into two parts: online data collection and zoom interviews with activists. First, I collected data from online sources such as organizational websites and social media to make organizational profiles and conducted preliminary data analysis. Secondly, I met with activists over zoom to get a more personal, in-depth perspective of movement leaders and organizers. During the time of data collection for this project (Fall 2020-Fall 2021), I kept a field journal that outlined my research process, steps, emotions, and notes while collecting data.

Although I originally had intentions to systematically 'map' the movement using data collected online via websites and social media, I came to realize that was not a good approach to this project for several reasons. First, the movement is rapidly expanding, with new people participating in abortion activism daily, making tracking it online difficult, as new organizations and groups frequently continue to emerge. Second, Facebook is the primary medium through which activist groups connect with each other and how people reach out to organizations when

they need help. After 2018, Facebook restricted the Application Programming Interface (API) such that independent researchers could no longer use data scrapers to extract data from the social media site in a systematic way, posing a serious methodological barrier (Mancosu and Vegetti 2020). Finally, I started this project unsure if abortion activism was concentrated or widespread, but the more I investigated, it was apparent that there has been explosive growth during this particular moment (Summer 2020-Winter 2022), and keeping up with it online felt impractical.

Digital ethnography

The meaning of the term "digital ethnography" has been contested across disciplines, with some finding the term ill-fitting and others arguing the term is too broad. Abidin and de Seta (2020:6) refer to "Ethnographic research on, through and about digital media as 'digital ethnography.'" For my study of pro-abortion feminist activism, I use the term digital ethnography to describe the ways I used the internet as both a means of communication with participants and a source of information about the feminist abortion movement. Much of the research for this project focuses on the digital, what information, images, organizing, and communication happens in the digital world. While I was (and still am) uncertain about what a digital ethnographic research process should be like, carrying out this project provided me with some insights for conducting remote ethnographic work.

When I was searching for information online regarding abortion activism, I was often left with more questions than answers. In my first attempts at making typologies, timelines, and maps, I used what data was available to me and had to make some inferences based on the information available. For organizations that had official websites, I systematically went about profiling information found on websites. The profiles outline organizational leaders' names,

mission statements, organizational history, areas of work, discourses, official reports, newsletters, blogs published by the organizations, and information from social media pages and mainstream news articles, that feature interviews with organizational leaders. After making the profiles, I began the process of open coding the information gathered from websites and social media as it pertains to organizations' goals, actions, and discourses surrounding abortion. I also revisited my methodological memos and field journal notes.

Challenges of Digital Ethnographic Methods

When I started talking with activists, I realized that many of the inferences I had made were inaccurate. For example, for the groups that do not have 'official' websites with information about their history and starting date of the organization, I made a timeline using the starting date of the Facebook page, which seemed reasonable at the time, because Facebook is the primary platform for the group to reach the public. However, in conversation with activists, they told me that there were times the page would get reported, flagged, and deleted by Facebook and they would have to restart a new page, sometimes years after they had initially started the Facebook page or group.

Another significant issue with using the year the Facebook page started as a proxy for the beginning of the organization was that in some cases, activists informed me that they had been participating in abortion activism for years before they decided to make a Facebook page. Other groups I spoke with did not have an online presence at all and completely relied on word of mouth for people to know about their work.

Advantages of Digital Ethnographic Methods

Although the online data collection portion of this project felt like a poor use of time, I gained several valuable lessons throughout the process. It was important to me to do extensive

research on organizations and the movement to better orient myself and inform my questions due to my outsider status. I found that conveying to participants that I knew small tidbits of information about abortion laws or politics in their state was helpful to convey a baseline understanding of their situation or context. Secondly, although the process of mapping online data was tedious and ultimately fruitless, my failed attempt emphasizes the irreplaceability of conversation and human connection for ethnographic work.

My inaccurate findings via social media data reveal the importance of considering what types of data can, or should be used for digital ethnographic research. There need to be better disciplinary guidelines about what it means to do a digital ethnography (i.e., what are the steps?), and what questions a digital/remote qualitative project can answer. While previous research on digital ethnographic methods argues for the combination of physical and digital data collection, this research also notes that there is still unequal access to technology, presenting a barrier to researching poor and rural communities (Murthy 2008). Likewise, being "forced" to convert my project into a digital ethnography caused me to reflect in new ways on how age, parental status, financial security, and physical ability (in addition to race and gender) act as barriers to conducting conventional ethnographic fieldwork for many scholars. In the era of global pandemics, social scientists are beginning to offer systematic methodological guides to digital qualitative methods, but this is new and has yet to trickle down into required sociology methodological training (Paulus and Lester 2021). Including "digital" ethnographic methods into sociology methods courses is key to clarifying a path and future for this type of work. By mainstreaming digital ethnographic methods, sociology can offer a more inclusive and flexible methodological option for qualitative work, while also recognizing its limits.

A crucial component of a conventional ethnography is participant observation, but due to the pandemic, I was unable to conduct in-person participant observation. In the place of traditional participant observation, I attended public meetings such as webinars, Facebook/YouTube lives, and private zoom meetings and talks, and took field notes of the content. While my research revealed issues with the accuracy of some types of social media data, live-streamed events proved to be an extremely useful resource for studying a social movement using digital methods. Because the pandemic shifted activists' meetings and events, I had access to more data than I otherwise would have. I gained key insights into the movement, history, main actors, the nature of relationships between organizations, and discourses from listening to live-streamed conversations between activists. Attending these events also critically informed my questions during interviews and improved the quality of my conversations with activists.

Given that my project is remote, I immersed myself in data by listening to podcasts, watching documentaries, and browsing relevant social media in addition to the webinars I attended and took notes on. Rather than striving for methodological normalcy, throughout the thesis, I practice methodological transparency to mitigate the confusion of what it means to conduct a remote ethnography (Abidin & de Seta 2020).

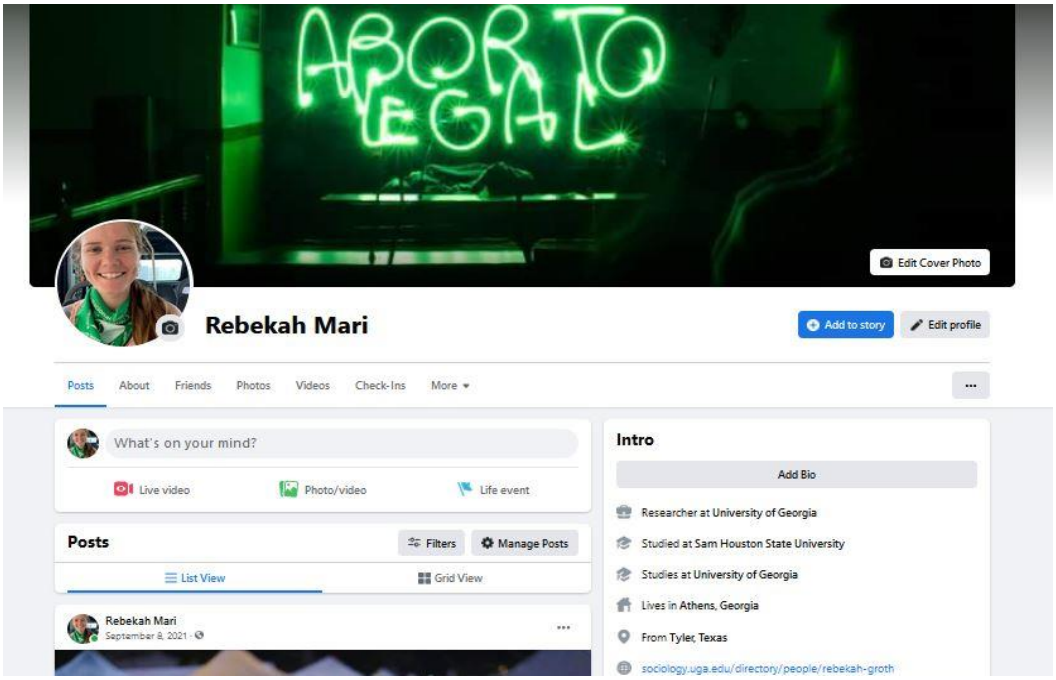
Finally, using digital ethnographic methods allowed me to interview activists across the country. While ethnographic approaches typically focus on a few geographic locations, I was able to interview activists in 14 different Mexican states. This project has demonstrated to me the value of a "mixed" digital and in person approach to ethnography. Figure 1 is a map of where my participants lived and participated in abortion organizing at the time of interview.

FIGURE 1

Interviews

My interview sample (15) is comprised of individuals that are involved in abortion activism. The majority of the interviews took place with activists who work with groups that accompany people through the process of abortion. For my interviews, I chose to focus on this type of activism as it has been largely absent from the literature on abortion activism until recently (Braine and Velarde 2022; Veldhuis et al. 2022). Additionally, because abortion accompaniment largely occurs in private spaces, I wanted to draw attention to grassroots organizing that may not be the most public or visible type of abortion activism. To recruit participants for interviews, I first contacted a group or organization page on Facebook. Because this is the primary channel that accompaniment groups use to communicate with people who are seeking abortions, it seemed like my best chance at getting a response. Following the advice of other digital

ethnographers, I fluidly moved between "lurking" and participating via an alternate Facebook and Whatsapp profile I made to conduct this research, shown below. (de Seta 2020).



I regularly interacted with content from groups in my sample, liking, sharing, commenting on posts, and attending live-streamed content. From first contact to interview, I had around 45% participation. More than half responded to my initial message but would either stop responding when we were scheduling the interview or would schedule an interview and not show up. My conversations with activists were in-depth, semi-structured interviews that typically lasted around one hour (Rubin and Rubin 2012). I followed a similar question guide for each interview but adjusted the questions according to the type of work the group does in addition to the geographic and legal context in which they live. Additionally, during the interviews, I took notes on our conversation and participants' nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, sighs, nodding, laughter, and pauses.

Once I had completed the interviews, I transferred the audio recordings to an automatic transcription software, Sonix.ai. I then reviewed the transcriptions in tandem with the recordings,

adjusting and correcting the transcription where needed. Next, I reviewed the transcripts and took extensive notes on the interviews. I compiled my notes from each interview, noticed emerging themes, and synthesized them in conjunction with my observations. Once I had reviewed each interview twice, I uploaded the transcripts into ATLAS.ti where I manually coded (and recoded) the transcripts according to themes I had identified, regularly going back to the video recording to reference voice inflection, facial expressions, pauses, and other responses to my questions.

Researcher Subjectivity: Emotions, Embodiment, and Digital Ethnography

> We always think, act, and know, as embodied beings- whether we are conscious of it or not.
>
> -Barbara Sutton (2010:14)

Conducting a remote ethnographic project in the middle of a pandemic affected my mind, body, and emotions in ways that influenced my outlook in both positive and negative ways. Navigating my own emotions regarding methodological uncertainty with digital ethnography presented barriers to progress throughout this project. However, having to adjust to the pandemic ultimately improved my project and allowed me to consider creative ways of studying social movements using the internet.

Although I found myself unfulfilled during the online data collection portion of this project, I realized that conducting a digital ethnography allowed me to consider ways to circumvent certain potential risks related to vulnerability, intimacy, and trust that are inherent in some ethnographic projects (Stacey 1988; Hanson and Richards 2019). Given the choice, I would still choose to conduct a classic ethnographic project, but I have learned the value of doing extensive preliminary research prior to entering the field, especially when the field site is in a different cultural and political context than my own.

Despite conducting a digital ethnography, it is pertinent to examine how my embodied experiences influenced my project. Following other feminist scholars that approach the writing process reflexively, I acknowledge that my embodied experiences and emotions influenced aspects of my research (Sutton 2010). As I wrote, collected data, formulated ideas in isolation, there were times I felt "pushed into being disembodiment, into becoming a floating mind…" (Sutton 2010:14). Carrying out the research in isolation often caused me to feel disconnected from the social reality I study, but practicing reflexive writing and thinking grounded in my physical reality, allowing me to remain present in my body and mind. To account for this unique approach to ethnography, I kept field journals while collecting, coding, and analyzing data to document my thoughts, emotions, and experiences to critically examine how my subjectivity influenced my data and ultimately my findings.

My personal history and identity shaped my project in significant ways. While feeling personal conviction and care for the situation of women's reproductive health in Mexico, in the early stages of this project I felt pressure to distance myself from the topic and find ways to 'objectively justify' why this topic is important, and why I chose it. As a developing scholar influenced by the discipline of sociology, I was trained to "ritualistically bury" any hint of bias and my own subjectivity (McCorkel and Myers 2003:200). Practicing feminist reflexivity allowed me to identify the specific ways that my biography, context, and position influence my work and ultimately improved the quality of my analysis throughout this project. My goal is to practice writing in a way that is reflexive throughout the written text in an effort to resist the tendency to present research from a point of feigned objectivity (Adjepong 2019).

Throughout the project, I became involved with local reproductive justice groups and abortion funds, which gave me a transnational point of reference for how people organize around

abortion in different contexts. As I explore more in chapter 2, I believe that the context of legal uncertainty for abortion rights in the United States impacted the direction of the project, as I chose to largely focus on nonlegal activist strategies.

Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I provide a historic synopsis of the feminist abortion movement in Mexico. I offer an overview of the movement, and give a typology of abortion activism, I situate the abortion movement in Mexico in a transnational perspective and explore how movement energy travels throughout the region of Latin America. Using interviews with activists, in chapter 3 I describe the ways that gender violence impacts the feminist abortion movement and argue that abortion is both legally and socially criminalized in state institutions in a way that perpetuates institutional gender violence. In chapter 4, I explore how the emotional labor that activists perform is rewarding and apply the concept of emotional channeling to explain how accompaniment activism transforms negative emotions like shame into positive emotions such as empathy and empowerment that propel the accompaniment movement. Finally, in the conclusion, I return to a discussion of prefigurative politics and situate accompaniment as an alternative feminist abortion access strategy.

CHAPTER 2

Situating Mexican Abortion Politics in a Transnational Perspective

Introduction

Although Mexico and the United States have both undergone major changes to abortion laws in the last few years, the politics surrounding abortion seem to be moving in opposite directions. Within the same week, the Mexican National Supreme Court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN) decriminalized abortion and an abortion ban was enacted in the state of Texas in the United States[1]. In fact, since I began this project, the only constant in the realm of abortion politics has been change. Since the 2019 decision to decriminalize abortion in the state of Oaxaca, the legal landscape for abortion rights has been continually negotiated throughout different states across Mexico. When I had my first interview with an organization in Hidalgo in the summer of 2021, it was a mere 24 hours after their state representatives voted to decriminalize abortion, becoming the third state in Mexico to do so. After that, activists began to successfully overturn criminal sanctions on abortion in countless states across the country. Within the feminist abortion movement in Mexico, the energy was high, and the excitement was tangible.

Although the changes in Mexico have been positive, as I write this, abortion activists in the United States are preparing for an all but certain reversal of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case that guarantees a person's constitutional right to an abortion. Currently situated in a particularly hostile context for abortion rights, I wanted to understand how activists in Mexico overcome

[1] Not to mention countless attempts in states across the United States to erode the right to abortion.

barriers to abortion access by organizing outside of the system. As a Texan, the abortion ban hit close to home—I thought of my loved ones across the state, I thought of my past abortions, which took place in my home state. This is to say, my lived experiences and position in the current political moment inform my understanding of the importance of both local and transnational feminist abortion activism.

Since the Texas abortion ban took effect in Texas, activists from Northern Mexico have been collaborating with feminist abortion groups in Texas to send medication abortion pills across the border, or in some cases, hand-delivering them to people who live in border cities (Kitroeff 2021; Wickenden 2021). A recent article published in *The New Yorker* featured interviews with abortion accompaniment activists (some of whom I also interviewed) about this transnational activism on the US-Mexico border. An interview with a Mexican activist reveals that some Mexican feminists are confident they can work around the Texas abortion ban by transporting abortion pills across the border (Wickenden 2021). When the interviewer asks if she is worried about legal prosecution in the United States she responds:

> Activist: "[laughs] no, not really… we already learned a lot of how to work, um, let's say 'on the side' of the legal context in Mexico, of course the United States has a different process, and we're aware of that. But we know there are ways [to work around the legal context]."
> Interviewer: "so, do you essentially feel like you found a way around the Texas law? Would it be fair to say that?"
> Activist: "there's a way, because we just did it. And we're going to continue to keep doing it and with more strength, and for more women, as well."

Similarly, after the abortion ban in Texas came into effect, feminist groups in northern Mexico brought this transnational activism (i.e., trafficking pills) to my attention during interviews. One activist from Northern Mexico told me that they have begun collaborating with groups in Texas to train, share resources, and strategize to work around the restrictions of SB8 in Texas. During

our conversation, she expressed pride in Mexican activists' ability to organize around restrictive abortion laws and told me they were ready and willing to help women in Texas access abortion.

The legal shifts of 2021 initiated transnational feminist abortion activism with monthly meetings between feminist activists across the Americas brainstorming on how to increase abortion access in the United States. These meetings are led by activists in Mexico but people from Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and the United States participate in exchanging information and abortion access strategies. The main strategies proposed by Mexican feminists are to develop organic networks for "*pasando las pastillas*" (transferring medical abortion pills) in addition to creating "banks" of abortion pills. Conversations in these meetings center around the barriers and possibilities presented at the U.S.-Mexico border for transnational abortion activism.

I bring up the example of activism on the U.S.-Mexico border to illustrate how neither abortion politics nor abortion activism transpires in a vacuum—this instance highlights the value of considering how politics in one place can influence and inspire activism elsewhere. This example of transnational grassroots activism in Mexico represents one way that feminist social movements can move towards a politics of reproductive liberation unconstrained by volatile political climates, global pandemics, and legal uncertainty.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I give a brief historical overview of the feminist abortion movement in Mexico and outline key moments for the movement. I describe different types of abortion activism and organizations and explain how groups adapted to the environment of shifting legal currents. I argue that Argentina's 2018 attempt to legalize abortion was a monumental moment for abortion activists across Mexico and Latin America. Mexican feminists understand the events

that transpired in the summer of 2018 as an explosive moment of growth for the abortion movement in Mexico, demonstrating the importance of the regional landscape for national activism. Additionally, this shows how a seemingly unsuccessful attempt to legalize abortion in one place can have a significant impact on the feminist abortion movements elsewhere. However, rather than see Argentina as leading the fight for abortion rights in the region, Mexican feminists emphasize their own rich history of organizing that ultimately culminated in the Mexican supreme court's decision to decriminalize abortion in 2021.

Abortion Politics in Mexico, 1970-now: Feminist Efforts and Legal Changes

During the colonial period in Mexico, the penalty for abortion was death (Viqueira 1984). Although abortion has been penalized since the Spanish colonized the region, scholars and movement organizers trace the emergence of the feminist movement for reproductive rights to the 1970s when groups began contesting the criminalization of abortion (Ortiz-Ortega 2005; Lamas 2011; GIRE 2012). Since the beginning of the movement, feminists have been advocating for 'voluntary motherhood' in conjunction with two other demands: to end sexual violence and have the right to sexual choice (Lamas 2011).

Despite general principles of gender equity slowly seeping into daily life during the late twentieth century, the feminist movement was largely politically rejected in Mexico due to its central goals of abortion and sexual diversity rights. As a country where the Catholic Church has had considerable power in politics and everyday life, feminism was less palatable to people. As told by feminist academics, the movement in Mexico during the 1970s was primarily comprised of middle and upper-class intellectuals as a result of 2nd wave feminist influences (Lamas 2011). By the 1990s, professionalized feminist NGOs and INGOs began to form in Mexico, and after 20 years of struggle with no results, the movement changed strategies. They brought their demands

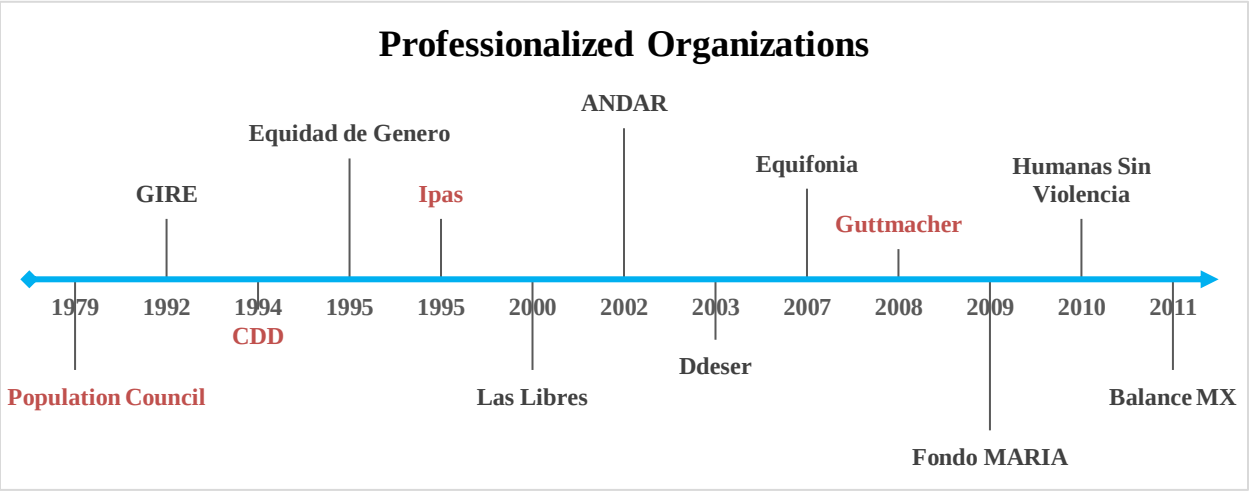
to an international stage in Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, five groups started working in Mexico that would eventually form a coalition that was instrumental in the legalization of abortion in Mexico City: The Population Council, Grupo de Información en Reprodución Elegida (GIRE), Equidad de Género, Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia (Equidad), Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD) and Ipas.

In 2000, Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), a right-wing political party closely aligned with the Catholic Church, won its first presidential election. Upon election, PAN's first president, Vicente Fox, vowed to care about 'women's issues', and under his administration, PAN institutionalized gender issues with the creation of the National Institute of Women (INMUJERES) (Tarrés 2010). Despite women's increased participation in public politics during this time, there was a diversity of ideas about how to achieve gender equity, with PAN stressing the importance of "family values" that were often in conflict with the aims of the feminist movement (Rodríguez 2003). Around the same time, the coalition Alianza Nacional Por el Derecho a Decidir (ANDAR) is formed in Mexico City with the goal of legalizing abortion. In 2007, feminist groups aligned themselves with PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), taking advantage of a "critical policy window" and achieved the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico City up until 12 weeks gestation (Sánchez Fuentes, Paine and Elliott-Buettner 2008).

Coinciding with the increasing public presence of women in Mexican political life, the institutionalization of 'women's issues' and the NGO boom, many of the professionalized organizations that work on the issue of abortion in Mexico were founded prior to 2004, with three of the first five being international organizations that have origins in the global north

(Alvarez 1998; Rodriguez 2003; Tarrés 2010). [2] Figure 2 offers a timeline of the professionalized organizations that work on abortion in Mexico with orange denoting international organizations.

FIGURE 2



While this movement was occurring in the Federal District, north of the capital in the conservative state of Guanajuato, Verónica Cruz started the organization Las Libres in 2000. Las Libres was formed because state legislators had attempted to quietly pass a bill that stripped a rape survivor's right to access abortion (Centro Las Libres 2011). With pressure from both international organizations and grassroots groups, the bill was eventually vetoed but Verónica continued to work for women's right to access abortion in Guanajuato. Las Libres is known for its work towards freeing incarcerated women who were in jail for the crime of abortion in addition to bringing abortion accompaniment work to Mexico.

Following the decriminalization of abortion in 2007 in Mexico City, around the country, conservative political actors passed state legislation to "protect life from conception" in an aggressive backlash to the decision in the capital (Vela 2010). In 2016, the SCJN declared that

[2] GIRE and Equidad started in Mexico while the others are international groups based in the United States. CDD started from Catholics for a Free Choice in the U.S. but have their own independently organized Mexican branch, in addition to other countries across Latin America.

states must allow abortion in cases of rape. However, in states governed by conservative leaders, there are significant institutional barriers in place that make exercising this right a challenge for survivors of sexual violence. In 2019, Oaxaca became the second state in Mexico to decriminalize abortion, followed by Hidalgo and Veracruz in 2021. In the same year, the SCJN made a historic ruling that would apply to the whole country and declared that criminalizing abortion is unconstitutional.

FIGURE 3

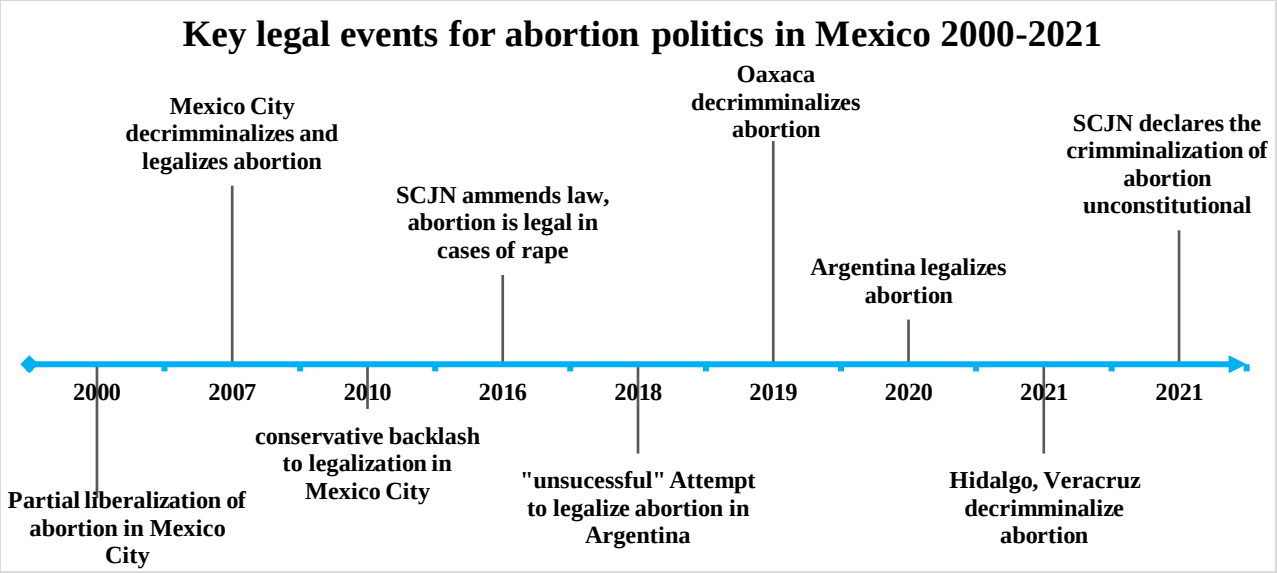


Figure 3 offers an overview of significant events from 2000 to 2021 for the feminist abortion movement and for abortion laws and politics in Mexico[3]. It outlines important dates according to prior research and the narrative that my participants identified in our conversations, including Argentina's unsuccessful attempt to legalize abortion in 2018. In the summer of 2018, there were unprecedented mass mobilizations in Argentina to support a bill that would legalize

[3] Although the 2007 Mexico City decision brought unprecedented attention to abortion debate in Mexico, scholars note important prior cases, starting in 2000, that preceded the eventual decriminalization and legalization up to 12 weeks (Vela 2010).

abortion up until 14 weeks. Despite the bill ultimately being rejected, recent narratives trace the feminist energy surrounding abortion in Latin America to Argentina, especially noting the importance of the mass mobilizations in 2018 for the movement's momentum (Palmeiro 2018; Nowell 2019; Sutton 2021).

> Although this was not the result that abortion rights activists had hoped for, the unprecedented debate energized the movement, with repercussions for and solidarity from other parts of Latin America and beyond. Activists in Argentina took the cause to the streets, universities, health institutions, artistic arenas, TV and radio shows, social media, and many other everyday spaces… This marea verde (green tide), … permeated society and promoted open discussion of abortion like never before (Sutton 2021:30).

My conversations with Mexican activists confirm that the summer of 2018 in Argentina had a significant influence on their own activism. They frequently pointed to the summer of 2018 as central to their own local organizing, calling this period a *parteaguas* (watershed) and a 'coming out' moment for many feminists in Mexico. Additionally, they emphasized that this juncture was crucial to the decentralization of the abortion movement in Mexico. Likewise, as noted by Sutton (2021), my interviews indicate that 'failed' attempts to liberalize abortion at the state level often resulted in the topic of abortion becoming more normalized through public discourses and street demonstrations. One activist from Northern Mexico described how 2018 felt to her telling me:

> A lot of people felt connected with a movement that transcended geography and they 'came out of the closet' to say they are feminists, to call themselves *aborteras*… and from there, it felt like it was a little safer, more supported to go out and say openly, to say I've had an abortion (*soy abortera*), I'm a feminist and from there I think that it has made it [easier to] connect… to other collectives.

Activists talked about the emotional impact they experienced from the events in Argentina, describing that the energy from Argentina woke them up and drew a wider audience of people to the movement in Mexico. During an interview with an older activist from central Mexico, I ask her to describe how legal decisions in one place could affect the movement in another place. To answer, she chose to describe how she experienced the legal decisions in Argentina:

> I think that one of the things about *La Marea Verde* in Mexico is that it has been advancing in a much more multitudinous way after 2018. But what happened in 2020 with Argentina, it was... [pause] it put us in a different mode, mentally and emotionally, you know? Like, yes, we can do it. After what happened in Ecuador[4] they came [to other activists] in Latin America, sending us messages that we can do it, right? We're able to break down barriers (*romper cosas),* changing the law. So, we already had the preceding event in Oaxaca, then comes Argentina and Ecuador and we said, yes we could do it, we already could in two states.

When participants talked about 2018, often, there was a (primarily) unspoken assumption that the contemporary regional abortion movement, or *La Marea Verde,* started in Argentina and has spread to other countries across the region. Despite mainstream discourses emphasizing Argentina, some Mexican feminists contest framing Argentina as the leader of the fight for abortion rights in Latin America. After the SCJN decision in 2021 in Mexico that declared the criminalization of abortion unconstitutional, in a conversation with other activists, Verónica Cruz urged them to remember the history of Mexican abortion activism:

> Sometimes we believe that it is from Argentina to here, and it wasn't like that. It was Mexico that made a much faster historic advance… that the court declared that the crime of abortion is unconstitutional, there isn't any country in the world that has done that (Live stream, October 2021).

[4] While Ecuador does not have legal abortion 'on-demand', in 2021, the constitutional court in Ecuador expanded the allowances for abortion to include cases of rape.

With this statement, Cruz leverages the legal ruling to counter mainstream narratives about the direction of influence surrounding abortion politics in Latin America. Later in the conversation, she urges other feminists to acknowledge the symbolic importance of the decision to legalize abortion even if the application of these laws has problems. She encourages grassroots activists to see the legal changes as a result of their labor and to celebrate the normalization of abortion narratives. With confidence, she asserts that the force of the movement cannot be ignored anymore declaring, "Everyone's joining *La Marea Verde*--- even the politicians" (Live Stream, October 2021).

The same global attention that seeks to put pressure on politicians can also have an affective influence on activists that contributes to movement growth. The direction of influence can be contested and is ultimately unimportant, but one thing is indisputable: the events in Argentina had a significant impact on the Mexican abortion movement, illustrating the importance of understanding feminist social movements from a transnational perspective and attuning to how both the legislative victories and seemingly 'unsuccessful' feminist efforts can have regional reverberations.

Regional legal changes to abortion throughout the Americas begs the question: what is it about this moment? While this project is not sufficient to make causal arguments about legal reform, it does seek to uncover how feminist activists understand their activism in response to and with consideration of legal abortion reform. Of course, not all feminists in Mexico understand their activism in the same light—on the contrary, there is a wide range of abortion activism with distinct goals. I suggest the type of activism they participate in can influence the importance they place on legal abortion reform. Next, I offer an overview of types of

organizations and complicate the necessity or utility of strictly categorizing "types" of organizations, especially when distinctive groups engage in similar types of activism.

What types of groups organize for abortion in Mexico?

There are many different types of organizations working on abortion in Mexico. They range from highly professionalized international organizations made up of doctors, lawyers, and researchers to groups of friends who informally engage in activism. This is not to say that the latter group is not sometimes comprised of lawyers and academics, too. On the contrary, the abortion movement (and organizations within it) are diverse in the type of work that they do, as are the people who do it. For example, I spoke with lawyers who are very active in a state-level abortion movement, but their participation is completely outside of their paid positions. Likewise, I spoke with academics who are employed by universities but choose to participate in local volunteer abortion activism.

Despite substantial overlap in the type of work the groups do, there is a somewhat tangible divide between professionalized organizations (those who are paid for their work, receive a salary) and grassroots groups. For example, Mexican-based NGO GIRE was founded for the specific purpose of creating an institution that would do work in favor of women (GIRE 2021). They are highly professionalized and have clear organizational hierarchies. For this reason, they are often the spokes group or 'expert' on the topic of abortion in the media, especially to international audiences. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some groups are intentionally completely volunteer-based and are morally opposed to professionalizing their activism. Additionally, these groups typically emphatically denied any type of hierarchies in their group when I would ask them about their role in the organization.

Previous research on feminist social movements in Latin America outlines how the 'NGOization' of the movement resulted in power imbalances and unequal access to resources among groups (Alvarez 1998). Alvarez later clarifies that not all professionalized NGOs acted as "legitimators of the politics of oppression" but that some chose to refocus their organizational goals to address cultural elements of gender issues (Galindo 1997; Alvarez 2009). Although studies in Mexico have documented the pattern of tension within the feminist movement between professionalized NGOs and grassroots groups, most of my participants had only joined the movement during the last decade, and intra-movement politics rarely came up in conversation (Wright 2006; Singer 2019). In my study, similar to Alvarez' later clarifications, I find that professionalized NGOs engage with movement work aimed at cultural change, but not always to the same extent and in the same ways that local, grassroots organizations do. Often, grassroots organizations focus on the social and cultural issues that surround abortion in addition to expanding abortion access.

What do they do?

There is wide variation in what the organizational goals and activities of groups are, even within the rough categories of professional/institutionalized feminist groups and grassroots groups. Most of the abortion work done by professionalized organizations is oriented towards legal reform, usually by conducting research or working with lawyers to draft bills, fighting the criminalization of abortion. However, even within professionalized organizations, there are groups whose work aims to change culture (not just the law or research).

For example, Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD), has been working in Mexico since the mid 1990's and was critical to the 2007 victory in Mexico City (Navarro and Consuelo Mejía 2010). Although CDD does not put forth legal initiatives to liberalize abortion, their role

in 2007 consisted of educating the public about pro-abortion Catholic arguments and thus widening the social base of support for legalization. CDD's central goals are to culturally deconstruct ideas about the role of women, sexuality, and family using a religious framework. As such, they have multiple initiatives aimed at cultural transformation such as workshops, public speaking events, entertainment media (TV shows, podcasts, etc.) With these efforts, they strive to show women that religion and feminist ideals can coexist.

In the same way, some grassroots organizations initiate sophisticated research campaigns on feminist issues related to abortion. All this to say, it would be inaccurate to categorize groups based on levels of professionalization, because the type of work that they do overlaps such that I found that a typology of activism was more useful to understand what kinds of feminist abortion activism is taking place in Mexico.

TABLE 1- TYPOLOGY OF ABORTION ACTIVISM IN MEXICO

Type of activism	**Characteristics, Description**	**Examples**
Legal/legislative Advocacy	Legal advocacy aimed at policy change; Relationship building with state-level politicians; *mostly* done by lawyers and academics	urging lawmakers for policy change; drafting state-level initiatives to liberalize abortion
Institutional Accompaniment	Support, advocacy, assistance, and defense for people incarcerated or charged with the crime of abortion; done by grassroots and professionalized groups	Walking alongside rape survivors throughout various state institutions to ensure access to legal abortion; Legal representation to prevent incarceration; accompaniment in ILE clinics
Abortion Accompaniment	Emotional support, information, and resources throughout the process of abortion; usually done by volunteers	Virtual and in-person accompaniment for self-managed medication abortion

Research	Investigation of specific issues related to abortion, *mostly* work done by paid employees in professional organizations	Estimating the prevalence of unsafe abortion, access to reproductive health care
Community training	Groups host meetings to educate members on sexual and reproductive health and consciousness-raising, typically private spaces for community members.	Virtual and in-person; *Promotora* training, workshops, abortion testimony sharing
Public events/education	Hosted by organizational leaders and frequently collaborative, featuring academics, lawyers, and grassroots feminist activists alike, keeping up with local politics, response to legal changes.	Informational webinars, press conferences social media live streams, podcasts with activists
Street demonstrations	In-person mobilizations in public spaces, Online/in-person *pañuelazos,* and protests both annually occurring and as a response to situational discontent. Protests are organized by professional and grassroots groups.	28S, 8M featuring art, music, chanting, marching, speeches, poetry, theatrical performance, dance, comedy
Entertainment Media	Fictionally portrayed short stories/ dramas that illustrate central concepts to sexual and reproductive freedom. Content is made by professionalized INGOs.	TV, radio shows, short films, feminist pop culture
Visual campaigns	Public artwork, informative videos/documentaries, advertisements in public spaces and on social media, usually done by artists paid by professional groups or on a volunteer basis.	Social media or ad campaign to advance knowledge of a cause

For this project, I focus on the two types of accompaniment: institutional and abortion accompaniment. I center accompaniment to elaborate how feminist activists contribute to social change using strategies of emotional solidarity and mutual aid. The activists I interviewed often perform both types of accompaniment which entails walking with women through institutions to diminish the effect of institutional barriers (i.e. ensuring that their legal rights are upheld) in state institutions and private abortion accompaniment. Institutional accompaniment requires a higher level of familiarity with state laws and institutional procedures, while activists are able to do

abortion accompaniment after completing short trainings or workshops. As noted earlier, my position impacted my decision to focus on activism "on the side" (as one activist put it) or outside the system. I chose to interview people who do abortion accompaniment to understand one way 'regular' (non-professionalized) people make themselves available to a broader public and use everyday interactions to advance social change.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a brief overview of abortion politics in Mexico and contextualized abortion activism in Mexico using a transnational perspective to highlight how the contestation of abortion laws in one context can inspire activism in another and provided a typology of abortion activism. In the following chapters, I use interviews with abortion accompaniment activists to think about the possibilities of feminist activism that operates at the margins of the system. I examine my conversations with activists to understand how ordinary women come to be activists, how they understand their activism, and how they use their particular contexts to highlight the importance of their work. Next, I look at gender violence to understand how it impacts individual women and the feminist abortion movement in Mexico.

CHAPTER 3

A Mosaic of Violence

> "*The beginning of my interviews are always so heavy. I'm like, hi, how are you feeling today? And they're like, oh, I'm a little stressed. We're trying to help an 11-year-old who got raped by her uncle access legal abortion, but it's getting closer and closer to the 90-day mark and we're still waiting on paperwork to go through. Or, 'oh I'm a little tired. I attended a vigil late last night for a girl who was murdered two years ago in my city by her boyfriend'… I never know how to respond or convey sympathy on zoom to someone I've never met."* (Field journal, 8/20/21)

Introduction

When I started this project, I underestimated the extent to which abortion activists have to account for and deal with the multiple layers of gender violence in their work as feminist activists and in their lives as Mexican women. I knew that Mexico is a country often characterized by extreme violence: organized crime, child trafficking, drug violence, gender violence, political violence, the list goes on. Because I was studying a social movement, I focused my research questions on movement dynamics, discourses, and strategies, completely ignoring the reality of what it meant to participate in a feminist movement in a country scarred by male violence.

Originally understanding the criminalization of abortion as a structural violence against women, as I listened to activists tell stories of their work and of their lives, I realized that gender violence is salient in various ways for women's lives-- abortion and reproductive health is just one among many ways that the violence manifests. Using activists' stories, this chapter explores two main realms in which gender violence impacts the abortion movement. First, I cover institutional violence briefly via legal criminalization and understanding the restriction of

abortion as a structural gender violence. Primarily, I focus on how health providers in public health institutions use stigma to perpetrate violence towards people who end unwanted pregnancies. In understanding *covert institutional violence*, Liazos (1972:112) argues:

> A person can be violated in many ways; physical force is only one of them… people's lives are violated by the very normal and everyday workings of institutions. We do not see such events and situations as violent because they are not dramatic and predatory; they do not make for fascinating reading on the lives of perverts; but they kill, maim and destroy many more lives than do violent individuals.

Although the definition of violence has been debated, I broadly conceptualize violence as a violation of rights, as harm being done to a person, whether that be physical or mental (Liazos 1972; Buffacchi 2005). Previous research has demonstrated that the 'abortion debate' is really a cultural power struggle over ideology on sexuality, family, and motherhood. Further, research highlights that "the fact that so many women do have abortions, despite powerful barriers, indicates that this is contested space where agency and resistance are dynamic" (Kumar et al. 2009:628; Luker 1983; Petchesky 1990).

Examining hegemonic discourses and institutional practices allows us to see the invisible ways that power operates on women's bodies, resulting in institutional violence and social control (Sutton 2010:130). How is hegemony reproduced in institutions? Foucault (1975) argues that institutions are sites in which power is enacted through classifying people. The resulting categorization determines resources, treatment, and mechanisms of regulation and social control. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008:83) explain how the power operates in institutions to influence culture, stating:

> When categories become concretized in bodies, reproduced through social practices, solidified in buildings, and embedded in systems for the allocation of rewards and punishments, culture becomes both formidably powerful and, ironically, "nearly invisible" (Swidler 2001:19)… Institutions have both material and social power. Thus, institutions are where distinctions made

> by individual social actors are translated into social boundaries, where classification systems are anchored and infused with material consequences.

In this way, we can see the relationship between symbolic meanings and institutional power to influence these meanings, which in turn impacts the corporeal. Through controlling women's sexuality and imposing a symbolic motherhood mandate, I argue that hegemonic gender ideas are embedded in public institutions in Mexico and have material consequences that undermine women's ability to exercise bodily autonomy. The law and public health institutions are sites that operate to regulate women's sexual and reproductive behavior and control their bodies in order to dominate them (Foucault 1975, 1976; Sutton 2010).

Because domination is organized around multiple sources of power, social movements aim to negotiate and challenge symbolic and material power (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Understanding the multiple ways that state institutions can reproduce hegemonic ideology, Mexican feminist activists contest gender conceptions that constrain women's agency. My goal with this chapter is to balance the necessity to contextualize the violent and hostile environments that face women in Mexico while emphasizing the power and potential of feminist resistance (Mohanty 2002).

In the second portion of the chapter, I describe how gender violence in Mexico affects abortion activists and the movement more broadly. Borrowing from Speed (2014) I conceptualize the violence that activists talk about as a 'dreadful mosaic.' Unlike earlier feminist conceptualizations of violence as a continuum which places structural, state violence on one end and personal violence on the other, seeing violence as a mosaic illustrates how "each individual shard, like each form of oppression or violence, with its own sharp-edged and jagged contours, is always part of a much larger social assemblage that defines its meaning" (Speed 2014: 88). Feminist abortion activists in Mexico navigate this mosaic of violence daily as they support

women through everything from criminalization and revictimization in state institutions to abuse in their personal lives. Speed's mosaic illuminates how structural and personal violence are deeply interwoven— for women's reproductive lives, violence is reproduced by an assemblage of forces that seek to control them.

Institutional Violence: Criminalization

Prior to the national supreme court decision to decriminalize abortion in 2021, the extent to which the criminalization of abortion was enforced varied depending on the state of residence.[5] Historically, some states have notoriously high rates of women incarcerated for the crime of abortion, while it is believed that other states have none (GIRE 2021; Las Libres 2018). In some states in central Mexico, feminists have successfully campaigned to get women released from jail. One activist from the north explained to me that in her state, they are unaware of how many (if any) women in their states are incarcerated for abortion. To get estimates on how many people are in jail for abortion, they work with government agencies and request case files but are met with delays and bureaucratic barriers.

How are women reported for the crime of abortion? What does the process look like?

Without accurate information regarding self-managed abortions (SMAs), complications like hemorrhaging and incomplete abortions can occur. If women choose to seek out post-abortion care public in hospitals, they risk being reported for terminating their pregnancies. Middle- and upper-class women can afford private clinics where they pay for the discretion of physicians, but poor women access health care in public hospitals. In public hospitals, doctors can report women suspected of abortion to the police, disproportionately affecting poor and indigenous women and increasing their risk of incarceration. Activists in Mexico address this inequity by having 'safe'

[5] According to my participants, there were still women in jail for the crime of abortion at the time of the interviews despite the supreme court ruling (November 2021).

doctors to refer other women to. If a woman needs abortion-related healthcare, the *acompañante* refers the woman to go to a certain clinic or hospital, where the doctor who is an ally of the feminist movement will provide health care without reporting or shaming the woman.

Ironically, criminalizing abortion rarely results in the incarceration of women who have abortions. In early pregnancies, the state is unable to prove the difference between induced and spontaneous abortions. Research demonstrates this unfortunate trend: women who experience unintended and often tragic late-term miscarriages are the most likely to be incarcerated for the crime of abortion because of the size of the fetus (Oberman 2018; Las Libres 2018). Unfortunately, in addition to material costs, this criminalization can cause women to be emotionally traumatized, as they simultaneously experience loss and are accused of committing a highly stigmatized crime.

Social criminalization

Activists described to me more than one type of criminalization in public institutions—of course, they told me stories of legal criminalization, in which someone (often a state employee in a public hospital) reports the woman to the authorities, but they also described a type of social criminalization in state institutions. Social criminalization occurs in public institutions because it is a common conception that abortion is a crime, and thus, people who have abortions deserve to be treated like criminals. Although social and legal criminalization are different, it is important to understand how the two work together. They are not separate from each other, rather legal criminalization justifies the social- even if there are no charges filed, the fact that someone *can* be reported implies a power dynamic between health care providers and the people who seek abortions and validates treating those suspected of abortion as criminals, regardless if they are formally prosecuted. The law has a complicated relationship to stigma— it can either reinforce it

or act as a protectant factor against stigma-based violence or discrimination (Burris 2006). As abortion has just been decriminalized in Mexico, the law has recently shifted from legitimizing abortion stigma to a means of contesting the validity of abortion stigma.

Although the denial of the right to an abortion (or legal criminalization) is more readily identifiable as structural gender violence, in this section, I argue that the social criminalization of abortion can be violent. While feminists in Mexico use 'social criminalization'[6], classic sociological work refers to this phenomenon as stigma and highlights the importance of examining how power is key to the enactment of stigma (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001). Stigma often manifests as socially punishing someone via shame, outcasting, and negatively affecting an individual's sense of self. Examining stigma and the role of power can be complex because the factors that legitimize it may be invisible. To examine the role of power in enacting stigma, Link and Phelan (2001) pose the following questions:

> Do the people who might stigmatize have the power to ensure that the human difference they recognize and label is broadly identified in the culture? Do the people who might confer stigma have the power to ensure that the culture recognizes and deeply accepts the stereotypes they connect to the labeled differences? … Do those who might confer stigma control access to major life domains like educational institutions, jobs, housing, and health care in order to put really consequential teeth into the distinctions they draw? To the extent that we can answer yes to these questions, we can expect stigma to result. (Link and Phelan 2001:376).

For public health institutions in Mexico, doctors can exert power over women who seek reproductive health care. They can enact stigma over women, and in some contexts, stigma is reinforced by both law and culture. However, scholars highlight the importance of examining local contexts note that "abortion stigma – rather than a universal truth – is a social phenomenon

[6] My participants used both social (de)criminalization and (de)stigmatization to describe the importance of normalizing abortion as a valid life experience. In my interpretation, these phrases were interchangeably depending on the organization's choice of rhetoric. I highlighted the use of social decriminalization because it conveys the severity of the phenomena as violent and places it in the same discursive arena as legal criminalization.

that is constructed and reproduced locally through various pathways" (Kumar, Hessini & Mitchell 2009:628). On an institutional level, I argue that this attempt to control women's bodies and behavior is another type of gender violence that women encounter in their reproductive lives.

Marta, who lives in Northern Mexico, tells me that her niece went to the hospital after experiencing a miscarriage, "they criminalized her a lot in the hospital, they treated her really bad, and I don't want women to suffer in this way." Another activist, Cecilia, expresses similar a sentiment: "sometimes, they criminalize you, they point at you (*te señalan*), they blame you, they make you feel bad." When activists talk about "criminalizing women in hospitals" it can mean actually reporting them, or it can mean the ways that medical staff treat women as criminals- for inducing abortions and for having miscarriages.

Research on reproductive care in public hospitals in Mexico confirms the institutional violence that activists describe (Smith-Oka 2012; 2015). The research reveals that the "discretionary moralizing and microaggressions" are racialized encounters that specifically target poor and indigenous women. These interactions act as a tool of reproductive governance by the doctors in efforts to control women's behavior and reproduction, "demonstrating the workings of power, gender dynamics, and hierarchies in the provision of health care" (Smith- Oka 2015:15). The social criminalization women experience in public hospitals reflects how gender violence is embedded in institutions and reproduced in interactions with hospital employees. This example shows how people in power use institutions to uphold inequalities via stigmatizing cultural discourses surrounding abortion (Husso et al. 2021).

Unfortunately, the pattern of stigmatizing health care is no different in ILE (Interrupción Legal de Embarazo/ legal abortion) clinics, as research has documented public abortion clinics in Mexico City as a complicated site of reproductive governance that ultimately reproduces

abortion stigma (Singer 2017; Cedena Pena 2018; Lamas 2013). As public health institutions, employees who work at ILE clinics go through training in which the Ministry of Health disseminates discourses about sexual and reproductive health, shaping how employees understand abortion (Singer 2016). The state's emphasis on “responsible” parenthood and sexuality via the 2007 abortion reform bill and the overemphasis of the danger of abortion procedures by the clinic staff contribute to the continued stigmatization of abortion.

Research demonstrates that ILE personnel understand the right to an abortion as “conditional, contingent, and contextual” (Singer 2016:453), thus employees reproduce abortion stigma by linking the right to an abortion on the promise of future sexual responsibility. Likewise, in her research in public abortion clinics, Singer notes how abortion stigma permeates ILE clinics via employees.

> [ILE personnel] Harbored personal doubt and angst around abortion and reflected this in their interactions with patients. ILE providers’ profound ambivalence and moral anxiety around abortion must be analyzed amid the ongoing social and legal criminalization of abortion in the rest of the country…. Entrenched anti-abortion stigma therefore pervades the broader cultural backdrop in which ILE personnel diligently carry out their jobs.” (Singer 2016:459).

Likewise, humiliation and shame are used as instruments of state violence to police women’s sexual and reproductive behavior in multiple kinds of public health institutions in Mexico including public hospitals and abortion clinics. As “humiliation aims to degrade the entire subjectivity of a person and cast them out as unworthy of being a member of that world” (Fattore and Mason 2020:114), I argue that the state uses public health institutions to weaponize stigma and perpetuate institutional gender violence to control their sexual and reproductive behavior via state rhetoric on ‘responsible sexuality’ (Singer 2016). In public health institutions in Mexico, this type of gender violence is invisible, naturalized as it manifests and is reproduced in social

interactions between individuals, effectively turning violence into a habit. Unrecognized as violence, it is important to understand that everyday interactions in institutions can be as destructive as overt violence (Liazos 1972). Using examples offered by feminist activists, I consider how abortion stigma is upheld in the perceived transgression of expectations for two main types of female behavior: 'responsible' female sexuality and obligatory/mandatory motherhood.

Mandatory Motherhood

In agreement with previous research, Mexican abortion activists recognize that one reason abortion stigma persists is due to the high value placed on motherhood (Luker 1984; Kumar, Hessini & Mitchell 2009). Likewise, research on abortion stigma in Mexico confirms that the high value of motherhood and catholic values contribute to the cultural stigma surrounding abortion (Sorhaindo et al. 2014; Belfrage, Didier & Vázquez-Quesada 2021). When women seek out abortion-related health care in public institutions, medical staff justify their assumption that the abortion is induced (rather than spontaneous) due to the gendered way that people understand women's bodies and sexuality in relation to motherhood.[7] The valorization of motherhood constrains women's agency and worth, asserting that women's primary value is in the domestic sphere. Further, it equates the categories of woman and mother and in doing so, naturalize women's bodies as maternal bodies. The cultural expectation that women should accept the "motherhood mandate" is not unique to Mexico, rather, it reflects broader patterns of hegemonic feminine embodiment (Sutton 2010:96).

[7] While the valorization of motherhood in Latin America has been coined *Marianismo* (Stevens 1973), the concept has been highly criticized as being essentialist and ahistorical (Navarro 2002). Additionally, the term has been used as a cultural explanation to explain why women in Latin America 'accept' abuse and condone violence against them an argument I find problematic as it ignores systemic sexism (Elhers 1991).

Activists highlight the *doble castigo* that confronts Mexican women and girls: there is not adequate comprehensive sex education widely available, yet they are expected to unequivocally identify when they are pregnant. Mariana, an activist from central Mexico, tells me a story of a girl (*una joven*, age unknown) who became pregnant as a result of sexual abuse but did not realize she was pregnant. She experienced heavy bleeding at a family reunion and eventually had a miscarriage in the bathroom at the party. She only realized she had been pregnant when she got to the hospital and the nurses asked her where her baby was. She responded, "What baby?!" and was met with disbelief by hospital staff. They reported her for an abortion, the police carried out an investigation, and eventually, there was a trial. Mariana tells me:

> In the investigation that they conducted, they said that being a mother, she had to know. Ugh! Sorry, I meant being a woman. Being a woman, she had to know and like, of course she had to know what reaction was happening and she knew that she was pregnant, I mean, in the imaginary of the attorney general, in the imaginary of the judge that penalized her…there exists this obligation. A specific role for women where because you're a woman, you have to know what a pregnancy is like.

This example demonstrates how confounding womanhood with motherhood justifies state authorities' expectation that the girl know herself and her body *as a maternal body.* As the above excerpt shows, Mariana unintentionally calls the girl a mother, drawing attention to the ways that society assumes that women have a natural maternal intuition to know when they are pregnant. In various state institutions, they justified her culpability on the assumption that as a woman she had to know she was pregnant. Contradictory, restrictive social norms for women demand that they possess this compulsory, gendered knowledge. These gendered expectations fuel people's assumptions that women and girls should intimately know their bodies as mothers--at the same time they demand that women confine their knowledge of their body and sexuality to the realm of maternal reproduction.

Liliana, an activist from the north, expresses her frustration with the lack of sexual education in Mexico paired with religious repression of female sexuality: "We put women in one level: exclusively to be a mother. Not that we are the owners of our own bodies… only to reproduce, right?" the example from Mariana allows us to understand the contradicting demands placed on girls and women's bodies as a *doble castigo*: they are forced to navigate their sexuality in a culture that simultaneously denies them comprehensive sexual health education yet criminalizes their ignorance of their reproductive capacities. Additionally, the highly religious culture that fosters sexual repression causes women and girls to be especially vulnerable to sexual abuse.

These problematic gendered expectations lead to a dichotomous understanding of women that is based on their sexual and reproductive choices: good (mothers) and bad (useless, hypersexual, non-mothers). When women transgress hegemonic gender norms in public health institutions, they are questioned, devalued, and policed. When I asked Marta the ways she sees how abortion is related to gender violence, she tells me that women face a multitude of gender violence in health institutions when they try to resist the motherhood mandate. She says:

> Well, I think it all comes. Even the limits of being able to inform yourself about this violence, right? I mean, total gender violence, towards women… you just go to a medical service… you want to do an operation to not have kids and they'll say to you, 'does your husband know? Or just that they can't do it because you have to have a kid and ugh! [lets out exasperated sigh]. 'I don't wanna have kids, and that's why I wanna do it!' and it's violence, right? For being a woman. You can't decide about those things, and its completely a structural violence and for many years, and many ancestors, all of this violence that they have done to us… to not believe us, it has, it has executed us, right? Completely, they put us women through a lot of different kinds of violence and in different contexts, but I think that gender violence stands out the most, totally.

The example from Marta highlights how the motherhood mandate constrains women's agency and reproduces gender violence. By denying women health services, medical staff contribute to

the historical "continuity in the policing of women's and girls' bodies" (Fattore and Mason 2020:9). By delegitimizing the gender violence that women experience, Marta points out that structural violence can cause generational trauma that symbolically executes women. As Marta points out, she feels that "all types of violence" come together when her ability to exercise bodily autonomy is (once again) denied. Her reference to generational trauma highlights how "the body carries both individual and collective histories of oppression and emancipation" (Sutton 2021:26) and can be understood as another part of the dreadful mosaic of violence (Speed 2014). Another activist tells me that some women use the experience of an abortion to heal generational wounds of sexual and gender violence by spiritually reclaiming the body:

> It's something spiritual. For example, for a lot of women it's [abortion] like healing your linage, you know? For the women in your family that couldn't decide, or were raped and you can do something to heal those wounds, right?

Feminist abortion activism is evidence of how the body emerges not only as a site of violence but can be a "site of contention, meaning, and possibility" (Sutton 2021:26).

Revictimization: Trying to access abortion as a result of rape

In all 32 states, people who are pregnant as a result of sexual violence have the right to access free abortion in public health institutions. Most states require you to file a report outlining the assault to be able to gain access to your legal right to an abortion. Feminist abortion activists walk through the institutional barriers with survivors of sexual violence to make the process more accessible. Unfortunately, various state institutions often revictimize people who have already survived sexual violence. Feminists accompany people who seek out state services to access legal abortion, advocating for survivors of sexual violence in hopes of mitigating the risk that the survivor is put in situations that trigger or traumatize them further.

The frequent revictimization women experience in state institutions serves as another context that women face structural violence. Both activists and women who are seeking abortion services feel that they cannot trust the state with this task. In some states, doctors can object to providing abortions on personal or moral grounds. In many places, there are no doctors who are willing to provide abortions to rape survivors. Vera, an activist who works in central Mexico explains that health institutions do not feel safe for women, even in situations where they have the legal right to an abortion: "When the health laws are supposed to back you up, it [the public health system] becomes violent, it revictimizes, it stigmatizes."

Elena, an activist who works in southern Mexico tells me even when people legally 'qualify' for the right to an abortion on the grounds of rape or a danger to their health, they choose to take abortion medications at home instead. She explains, "the majority, if not all, decide not to go to the public health services because they are scared, and rightly so, of being criminalized, of being processed into the system, or being revictimized in some way." As I discuss in the next section, this is also true for children who survive sexual abuse.

Fear itself can be controlling and the fear of revictimization has detrimental mental and physical outcomes (Ross 1973; Hille 1999; Riger and Gordon 2010; Pearson and Breetzke 2014). The psychological torment that women experience for fear of being criminalized can be physically dangerous, causing them to avoid lifesaving health care in public institutions. Because there is no official, publicly available national statistics for how many women are reported, charged, or incarcerated for the crime of abortion, many women have no way to know how serious or real the threat of criminalization is, and this uncertainty can cause fear and trauma.

Embarazos en la Infancia- Childhood Pregnancy

In 2020, nearly 10,000 girls aged 10-14 gave birth in Mexico (González Saavedra 2021). This number has been fairly stable over the last 30 years. In comparison, in the United States, the number is roughly 2,000 per year and rapidly declining, with triple the population. (Matthews and Hamilton 2018). In recent years, the issue of childhood pregnancy has become increasingly important to the feminist abortion movement. The activists I interviewed frequently talked about their work with *niñas embarazadas* and their families. As survivors of sexual abuse, girls are entitled to legal abortion services, however, in most states, this requires the consent of a parent/guardian and this process must be completed in the first 90 days of the pregnancy. Activists often assist families through the process of reporting the crime, filling out paperwork, and other institutional barriers to accessing legal abortion services.

The famous case of Paulina, a 13-year-old who was raped in the state of Baja California and became pregnant in 1999 illustrates this strenuous and traumatizing process (Poniatowska 2007). Paulina's family members were determined to access legal abortion services for her. After months of dealing with "paperwork issues" that were intentional delays by the attorney general's office, they gained state authorization for the procedure. When they showed up to the public hospital with their paperwork in hand, the staff of the hospital intimidated, guilted, and coerced Paulina and her family into signing a document that said they no longer wanted the abortion. This process of intimidation and coercion lasted on and off for a month, and at one point held Paulina for 3 days, 2 of which they neglected to give her food or water. In efforts to emotionally disturb her, they made her wait in the maternity ward while people gave birth; on another occasion, showed her graphic videos of parts of fetuses.

After expressing she would like to go through with the termination, a state prosecutor took Paulina to see a priest to guilt her into carrying the pregnancy to term. In the end, a doctor told her mom that the abortion would make Paulina sterile and that she could die from the procedure, and her mom signed a paper declining the legal abortion service. Paulina's extreme case highlights the maze families navigate to access legal abortion services for pregnant children and shows how public institutions revictimize survivors of sexual abuse.

While the international attention of Paulina's case forced the Mexican government to implement institutional mechanisms for accessing abortion after rape, activists contend that this process is still easily obstructed by state officials across the country. Feminist organizations have started to carry out campaigns to oppose childhood pregnancy with discourses like, "*son niñas, no madres!*" (they are girls, not mothers!) to counter hegemonic discourses that mandate all pregnancies be carried to term. They argue that forcing a child to carry a pregnancy to term is an added layer of violence against children who have already experienced sexual violence.

Incest and childhood pregnancy

As noted by previous research, the role of religious influence on sexuality is crucial for understanding the prevalence of incest in Mexico (González-López 2015). González-López' study demonstrates how religion influences gender norms for marriage and sexuality and how this allows for the proliferation of intra-familial sexual abuse to continue in secrecy and silence. The sexual abuse perpetrated by brothers, cousins, and other young, male family members is in part attributed to Mexican TV, films, and novels romanticizing and glorifying teenage boys who use their female family members to satisfy their first sexual curiosities (González López 2015).

In 2017, boys younger than 19 were responsible for 40% of pregnancies in children 10-14 (Ipas Mexico 2017). Abortion activists frequently point to incest and familial sexual abuse as the

reason for the high rates of childhood pregnancy in Mexico. Some 'radical' feminists problematize criminalizing these young men who sexually abuse their family members. Rather than incarcerating teenage boys who sexually abuse their family members, they suggest that education about sexuality, bodies, and consent is key to eradicating incestuous abuse between siblings and cousins (Jiménez 2021). However, incest perpetrated by teenage boys is only a fraction of the sexual abuse that accounts for childhood pregnancy.

Given the complicated situation surrounding a pregnancy that results from incest, feminist activists are often frustrated at the institutional barriers that make it hard for girls to get access to abortion. In the rare cases that girls recognize they are pregnant before 90 days, there is the issue of who the girl tells. In cases of incest, it can be extremely difficult to have a safe person to share what has occurred. Once the pregnancy is discovered, a parent or guardian must accompany the girl to file a legal report outlining the sexual abuse that was likely perpetrated by a close friend or family member. This process can create tension within the family and expose the child to the possibility of retaliatory violence.

Activists in the northern region emphasize the role of conservative ideology as a factor that enables the normalization of the sexual abuse of children in rural areas. Liliana describes how there are places where sexual abuse towards children and child marriage (which she loosely defines as children younger than 15) are common practices. She explains how children are often blamed for their own abuse:

> Here (state of residence) women keep being criminalized. For example, they tell 14-year-old girls that they are horny and things like that… girls are then revictimized instead of attacking the root cause, I mean. It's not that she's pregnant, it's *why* she's pregnant. And who got her pregnant?

Although some feminists advocate for education instead of incarceration in certain instances of incest, not all abortion activists feel this way. Even when there is physical evidence (i.e., the

pregnancy) of violence, the example above draws attention to Liliana's frustration at the legal impunity for the family members who perpetrate the sexual abuse. It also insinuates the criminalization of female sexuality, even in cases in which the person is a minor, and/or the survivor of abuse.

Teenage Sexuality and Agency

I had a conversation with Andrea, an activist who lives in northern Mexico, and she expressed concern that some of the feminist discourses can infantilize teenage girls and could potentially be stigmatizing for teenagers who are exploring their sexuality. She emphasized the need to balance the desire to protect children from violence with the importance of acknowledging the agency of young women in instances in which sexual desire is mutual.

> She's a teenager and has agency and has the right to live out her sexuality… I don't know how we're going to say "a 15-year-old can have an abortion", but they can't decide who to sleep with, or be in a relationship with… of course there are power dynamics, and men that 'groom' and everything… in showing situations where they are subjugated, we are going take away their agency and infantilize them.

This comment by Andrea speaks to the grey area that movements often shy away from – cases in which the situation can be complicated. With her comment, she challenges feminist movements to emphasize the sexual agency of young women and teens so that they can understand themselves and their sexuality as a part of their humanity. She points out that misrepresenting young women as *always* victims of sexual violence is not the best course of action in working towards gender equality or sexual autonomy for women.

Additionally, during our conversation Andrea cautions that the movement not be too caught up in cases that are sensational and drama-filled, worrying that people will think that trauma is a prerequisite for the right to an abortion. She explains that the media and some feminist groups tend to sensationalize certain cases, overemphasizing trauma and violence in

order to draw the most attention possible. Andrea disagrees with this strategy as it tends to assume that all pregnant teens are sexually assaulted and effectively strips them of their agency. Alongside previous research, she instead advocates for circulating all kinds of abortion stories, not only cases in which a pregnancy results from sexual violence (Belfrage, Didier & Vázquez-Quesada 2021). Relying on instances of violence to establish the right to abortion leads to an image of the 'right' kind of subject worthy of abortion as someone who has been raped, which constrains the range of experiences of women who seek, want, and need abortions. For young teens exploring their sexuality, Andrea argues that it is important for them to understand that they deserve the right to access abortion regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy.

In this section, I have argued that the abortion stigma that is reproduced in public institutions in Mexico persists primarily due to 1) the high value of motherhood and 2) the criminalization of female sexuality. Attempting to control women's reproductive and sexual behaviors is one type of institutional gender violence. Previous theories of abortion stigma focus on how stigma negatively impacts women's health, effectively making abortion more dangerous. Rather than focus solely on the effects of stigma, I explained the logical basis of the stigma, and how it is reproduced in public institutions in Mexico.

Because of the gender inequality and institutional violence that women in Mexico encounter, one abortion activist told me, "*Por eso hablamos de un aborto libre"* (this is why we talk about a free abortion). When abortion activists talk about *aborto libre*, it signifies an abortion in which you feel free of sexist discourses that confine the validity of your womanhood to your obligation to motherhood. When they say *aborto libre*, they mean an abortion free from any physical, logistic, mental, emotional barriers that inhibit your ability to make a choice about your body. The vision of *aborto libre* is free from the stigmatizing influence of the state, medical

professionals, or religious doctrine. *Aborto libre* is a vision for the future where women can make decisions about their bodies in an informed way, free from the multitude of forces that seek to control their bodies, decisions, emotions, and behaviors.

Gender Violence in Mexico

"At least 10 women were killed every day in Mexico throughout 2020 and of that around a third of them were killed for gender-based reasons" (Amnesty International 2021:12). While this project is not about feminicide, the extreme level of gender-based violence that exists in Mexico affects the feminist social movement for abortion, and women more broadly. The intensity of violence in Mexico (and the gruesome media coverage that surrounds it) can create a hostile environment for women to go about their lives and in some cases, instill an inescapable sense of fear.

Activists explain to me that living through high levels of gender-based violence can take a toll on the mental health of people who openly challenge sexist oppression. Feminist scholarship theorizes on "geographies of fear" and notes how global and everyday terrorism are inter-reliant and complementary, both working to construct an "assemblage of fear" (Pain and Smith 2008; Pain 2014). Likewise, other feminist work argues that prohibiting abortion is just a symptom of the extreme violence that plagues women's lives through "a broader trend of *machista* social relations" (Lagos and Antezana 2018).

Some of this psychological exhaustion due to extreme levels of violence that activists experience applies to all women in Mexico. However, as social workers, activists hear about abuse and trauma frequently, as some activists engage in emotional accompaniment for people who have experienced interpersonal violence. For some activists, they expressed that hearing

about interpersonal violence is one of their least favorite parts of their work, as it takes a toll on their mental health.

Violence against Activists

When I asked abortion activists if they felt like they were taking risks for their work, or if they ever received threats for their work, I was surprised to discover that physical violence against activists was rare. For the most part, the violence and threats they are subject to is digital violence. Sometimes, people send them nasty messages, harass them online, calling them murders and baby killers. One activist told me that a public figure released her full name online, and she received dozens of death threats on her personal social media account. When the harassment happens in person, it's generally at rallies and protests: nasty remarks in passing or sometimes *antiderechos* (anti-abortion rights/ "pro-life" activists) pushing them, trying to intimidate them.

For the most part, when I asked activists about the risk they take for being involved in the abortion movement, they emphasized the danger that they face not as an abortion activist, but as a woman in Mexico. When I asked Eva, an activist from central Mexico, if she worries about the potential risks of participating in abortion activism, she told me, "well, kinda, I mean I accept it as something normal, because living in Mexico is already a risk in every sense [laughs]." Another activist gave me an example of being worried about how to move around in the city at night and came to a realization during our conversation: "well, Uhm, well… I don't know, now like, with this you've made me think. I'm thinking for the first time that, for the issue of safety, in general, it's only for being a woman [not an abortion activist]."

When I asked Cecilia, who lives in the Yucatan Peninsula, she told me, "Women who are in activism suffer a lot, yeah. I mean, outside of that, the situation in [her state] for women who

arrive [here] or are already here is a high level of gender violence against women" The pervasive gender violence in Mexico means that for feminist activists, their visible status as a woman is more likely to endanger them than their invisible status as a feminist activist. Of course, the invisibility no longer applies when feminist activists wear identifying symbols of the abortion movement such as the green bandana, when they participate in street protests, or when they post pro-abortion content online.

While my original research questions did not inquire specifically about violence, early on, violence emerged as an obvious theme. However, in recruitment, I explicitly told them that my questions were only about their work as activists, so in my interviews, I only asked about threats, risks, or violence they had experienced *as abortion activists.* I refrained from asking about any personal violence they had experienced, not because it is irrelevant. On the contrary, I believe it is extremely relevant. While I do not have data on their personal experiences with violence, I believe that prior life experience influences the motivation for their feminist consciousness and informs their activism in general, which proved to be the case for prior experience with abortion. I decided not to ask them about anything regarding their personal relationships or violence because it felt inconsiderate to ask about things (without proper warning beforehand) that could elicit a negative emotional response.

Drug Violence, Ideology, and Feminist Social Movements

When it comes to activists that live in states that have a strong presence of narcotraffickers, activists explain that they have to be extremely careful taking up space in public. This heightened violence has a repressive effect on local feminist mobilizations. Diana, who lives in northern Mexico, told me that in more dangerous parts of the state, feminists live in deserts that are controlled completely by narcotrafficking and that the groups there struggle to organize: "*se*

tienen que andar como con doble cuidado" When she refers to 'double cuidado' she's referring to the extremely conservative ideology that opposes feminist ideas (such as abortion) in addition to the threat of drug violence. In this way, feminist social movements are constrained in how they can safely mobilize by both conservative opponents that seek to repress them from an ideological standpoint and by the threat of violence from organized crime. Groups worry that danger from organized crime can either be targeted violence against them, or they may just get caught in the crosshairs. Either way, both ideology, and organized crime violence weaken feminists' ability to organize.

A lawyer from northern Mexico, Liliana, tells me about the threats that the feminist movement receives from the conservative political figures in her state. In her first public act, the governor wore a *Pañuelo* Azul, which is the color of the pro-life movement in Mexico. Liliana told me that this sent "a very clear message" to the abortion movement in her state. She expressed that the strong position of the government causes uncertainty and fear of police repression in the street protests and mobilizations. With the power of the police on the conservative governor's side, Liliana tells me about their most recent street mobilization, "on September 28 [international abortion holiday], we didn't know what was going to happen, we didn't know how much repression there would be. So yeah, now, we are careful, yeah. We have to be careful" because of the reactions [of conservative politicians]"

Andrea, another activist in the northern region, tells me there is not a strong feminist movement in her state because of the drug violence. She describes her state as the military arm of organized crime, that it provides guns and soldiers to the drug trade. For a long time, they didn't take to the streets or organize in public because of drug violence: "it wasn't safe. There was blood, in the streets… there is a lot of violence, a lot of fear. And bloodshed." She goes on to

describe to me how another reason her state has a notoriously quiet feminist social presence is because many people in her city work for the state government in some capacity and will not participate in social movements that can be construed as being antigovernment for fear of losing their job. Andrea explains that in general, people are much less inclined to organize in public due to drug violence and fear of losing their job. She knows that to have a strong movement, they would need to mingle, but they are all more comfortable being separate, staying in their houses, and not going to other neighborhoods.

Despite real threats and fear of violence, feminist activists in northern Mexico are beginning to organize publicly for abortion rights. Scholars that are focused solely on policy changes render nonlegal activist strategies invisible. Noting that mobilization is "primarily in Mexico City" advances a narrative about centralization and erases the activism of feminists in the North (Reutersward 2021). The activists I interviewed pushed back on the common misconception that feminist movements are only active in central Mexico and are filled with hope at the possibilities of expanding their networks. When compared to feminist mobilizations in central Mexico, abortion activists in the north face various challenges that shape the ways they organize. Despite these specific barriers, they do organize and mobilize publicly. The abortion movement in the north of the country has seen enormous growth since 2018, and activists express joy and pride in the regional networks and movement they are building. Liliana tells me:

> Before, everything was over there, in the south, in Mexico City. They got together, they met each other, and none of that came to us here. We just longed to have that, I don't know, the power to convene people *(poder de convocatoria*) and things like that. It was a dream, and now we have it.

Conclusion

While the mosaic of violence that marks the lives of women in Mexico continues the cycle of inequality and sexism, the increased violence has also strengthened the abortion movement.

Some activists point towards the unprecedented violence against women in Mexico as a force that propelled a growing feminist consciousness within Mexican women. One activist, Eva, tells me, "the violence we're living in is extremely high. So, whether you're in agreement with feminism or not, *creo que a todas nos ha tocado vivir violencia* (we've all had to experience violence)." Activists perceive that whether or not people identify as feminists, they are forced to make sense of, and understand the inevitability of the violence that all women experience.

At the end of each interview, I asked activists to speculate on why the abortion movement has been able to gain so much traction lately in Mexico. Often, the immediate response was "un hartazgo" or "ya estamos hartas" o "estan hartos de esta opresión" meaning that women in Mexico are fed up with inequality and violence. Elena tells me, "[state of residence] has the 5th place for feminicides. So, every day *una compañera está desaparecida* or she has been found dead. So, they've [general population of women] gotten more aware in topics like the crime of feminicide or the topic of abortion." Elena points to the pervasive gender violence as a factor that propels the abortion movement and explains that the growing feminist consciousness is tied to growth within the abortion movement.

Massive protests against impunity for feminicide and the popularity of the Ni Una Menos/ Ni Una Mas movement have advanced the abortion movement. From street protests to online activism, feminists discursively connect how structural gender inequality informs gender violence, explaining the ways that all of the issues facing women are related to each other (Palmeiro 2018; Lagos and Antezana 2018). Abortion activists have used the support behind the anti-gender violence movement and placed abortion into the conversation with feminicide. In doing so, they have successfully advanced the abortion movement by framing abortion rights as a part of a larger mosaic of violence comprised of different types of gender oppression.

Although this chapter centered on violence, my conversations with activists concentrated on how their activism aims to offer people who face an unwanted pregnancy a safe place to experience an abortion. In the next chapter, I move from how feminist activists understand the legal and social prohibition of abortion as a gender violence towards their efforts to transform the collective understanding of abortion through individuals' abortion experiences.

CHAPTER 4

Abortion Accompaniment

"Personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."

-Carol Hanisch (1969), "The Personal is Political"

I had an illuminating conversation with Vera, a 42-year-old activist, and academic who was raised in a rural area in central Mexico. She grew up with a mother who helped women eliminate unwanted pregnancies and has been directly involved with the feminist movement for a decade. When she experienced her own unwanted pregnancy, having grown up knowing about abortion allowed her to process her experience with a sense of peace and normalcy.

> Rebekah: How and when did you hear about abortion accompaniment for the first time?
> Vera: Well. The first time, I think I was... I don't know, like 9 or 10 years old. My mom helped women that lived in houses nearby, and family close by. They didn't talk about abortion. In this time, women said, and they still say this in rural areas…Well, my mom was the granddaughter of a midwife. So, she knew about the sexual and reproductive health of women. So, she knew herbs that made your period come (*bajar la regla*). And this is how they call it certain spaces. They don't talk about abortion, they say *bajar la regla.* And so, women would come to her, and she gave them tea so that their periods would come. And that's it, right? Problem solved! There wasn't all this fighting and fussing. It wasn't a crime. Because in the public health sector, there wasn't [certain] legal allowances [of abortion]. It was just that you wanted your period to come, and it happened. So I was like 9 or 10 and I already had a lot of awareness seeing my mom giving teas, and so, then for me it was, like, a really normal thing that women didn't want unplanned pregnancies… when it was my turn in 2011, when I got pregnant for the first time, it wasn't a planned or wanted pregnancy or anything. And so I decided to terminate it… I already knew it was like the most normal thing in life. And finally, in 2015, I had a daughter. In 2014, I decided to work with [abortion accompaniment organization] and become *una acompañante."*

Vera's description of her history with abortion captures the essence of what abortion *acompañante*s aim to accomplish with their activism: for people to see abortion as a regular and valid life experience. With her story, she explains how making abortion a politically contentious topic makes it more complicated. In her view, women helped each other to privately manage abortions without the political, legal, and moral weight that the term abortion has now. She does not mean that abortion was legal, rather it was simpler (*no había broncas*) before it was regulated by formal institutions.

Additionally, her story typifies how abortion accompaniment has long been a practice of mutual aid between women, even if the term has been recently adopted. She explains that people are now using the word "accompaniment" to publicly name this act of mutual aid that has been going on in the private sphere "since forever." Although accompaniment has been more recently constructed by activists as a radical, liberatory alternative to institutions, the practice is grounded in relationships and politics of mutual care. As I argued in chapter 3, public health institutions in Mexico are inclined to reproduce abortion stigma and institutional gender violence. By taking the abortion experience outside of institutions, abortion accompaniment activists seek to offer an emotionally and physically safe space in which to experience abortion away from the "mosaic of violence" (Speed 2014). For many of the activists, the journey to becoming *acompañantes* was influenced by their own experience or the experiences of those close to them. For example, when I ask Dolores, an activist from central Mexico, how she heard of abortion accompaniment, she responds:

> Well, I didn't know it was called accompaniment, you know? I mean, it was just like, well I helped a good friend that had her first [abortion] procedure… She approached me, and I was like thinking, 'why are you asking *me*?' But then we looked for information and she did it and now I

> know it's called accompaniment. After that, when we started to get into learning about sexuality and gender, and I saw a call for a training from [an abortion accompaniment group] and that's when I learned the term *acompañantes*. I started to read about it before the conference, and that's when I really became aware of the term.

Often, accompaniment groups are formed because activists themselves or someone they knew needed help obtaining an abortion. Rather than setting out to do something explicitly political, *acompañantes* start accompaniment groups because they are trying to meet their personal needs or the needs of someone in their community. With abortion accompaniment, activists use affective, relational encounters to transform individual experiences into collective political actions. Additionally, I will argue that the emotion work that *acompañantes* perform not only drives the accompaniment model but ultimately provides meaningful relationships that sustain the collective.

Previous research on the emotion work of social movements demonstrates that organizational processes play a crucial role in transforming individual emotion into collective action (Reger 2004). Individual emotion may be transformed through a process called *emotional channeling* which is defined as "the activity of reshaping certain emotions into other emotions that are more adequate for the social movement activity at hand" (Ruiz-Junco 2013: 47). In the case of abortion accompaniment activism, common emotions that can come with the decision to have an abortion, such as shame and self-judgment, are reshaped (relationally and discursively through the accompaniment process) into self-love, and empathy towards oneself and others. Emotional channeling through the accompaniment process is an important factor to understand how accompaniment activism contributes to the overall growth and energy feminist abortion movement in Mexico.

Accompaniment encounters can be understood as "free spaces" to "explore and challenge psychological forms of oppression" (Buechler 1990:72) for both *acompañantes* and the women experiencing an unwanted pregnancy. On these spaces, Reger (2004:207) writes, "By focusing on the psychological and the structural, free spaces offer places for cognitive dynamics (i.e., educational programs, sharing of information). Within these free spaces, social movement contexts may also provide emotional structures that shape participants' feelings and beliefs." I suggest the accompaniment model offers people a meaningful opportunity to make sense of their individual situation in the context of broader social inequalities. In this way, an accompanied abortion can become a moment of feminist consciousness-raising.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I analyze two central aspects of abortion accompaniment activism and examine how this frequently overlooked strategy contributes to the feminist abortion movement in Mexico. First, activists explain how abortion accompaniment works to destigmatize and normalize abortion by turning abortion into a positive experience. Further, they note how terminating a pregnancy via accompaniment has the potential to be a turning point in people's lives—and can act as a feminist awakening by reframing how people understand abortion. With this, I apply the concept of emotional channeling to demonstrate how accompaniment activism sustains itself through positive emotional interactions as it offers everyday people a meaningful option for participating in the movement.

Second, activists frame accompaniment as an alternative to failing state institutions and understand this type of activism on 'the side' of legal abortion strategies. *Acompañantes* highlight the insufficiency of public health institution services and the unreliability of the law as central to why abortion accompaniment strategies are essential for abortion access. While

acompañantes agree that legalizing abortion alleviates barriers to access, along with critical feminist scholarship, they are hesitant to understand the law as a vehicle for real social change, justice, or emancipation (Smart 1989; Smart 1995; Davis 2003). Accompaniment activism demonstrates one feminist strategy towards reproductive liberation that uses private, relational encounters in efforts to change the landscape of abortion access and influence cultural change.

As the accompaniment model entails the use of abortion pills, I first turn to a short history of the use of abortion pills for self-managed abortions (SMAs) in Latin America, situating abortion accompaniment in Mexico as an embodied health social movement (HSM) (Brown et al. 2011; Braine and Velarde 2022).

Medication Abortion in Latin America

Medical abortion is the combination of misoprostol and mifepristone taken together to terminate a pregnancy. Although the rate of successful termination of pregnancy is higher if both medications are used, misoprostol is more widely available and often used by itself to induce abortion. If taken in the first trimester, the efficacy of the misoprostol-only regime can range from 92-94% with the efficacy generally decreasing as the pregnancy advances (Tebbets et al. 2017; Moneson et al. 2020; Moneson et al. 2020). Misoprostol was first widely used in Latin America to self-induce abortion in the late 1980s in Brazil, resulting in a substantial decrease in maternal mortality due to unsafe abortion (Barbosa and Arilha 1993; Singh, Monteiro and Levin 2012; Gomperts et al. 2014).

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Mexican activist Verónica Cruz collaborated with gynecologists to help women safely self-induce abortion in their own homes using misoprostol, calling this strategy abortion accompaniment (Kitroeff 2021; interviews with activists). Eventually, as misoprostol became more accessible throughout Mexico, Cruz and

other groups worked to build networks of activists who accompany women by providing accurate information[8], emotional support, and monitoring throughout the process of abortion in order to reduce the risk of complications. Despite misoprostol being relatively available in pharmacies throughout the country, the vendors seldom provide accurate and complete information about how to safely use the medication to terminate a pregnancy (Lara 2011 et al). Although accurate information is available online, the internet is littered with false information about the safety and efficacy of using misoprostol (in addition to nonmedical anecdotal suggestions on dosage, how to manage side effects, when to seek out medical care, etc.)

While originally a method to work around the legal abortion restrictions, abortion accompaniment activists also understand their work as a meaningful way to emotionally support other women as they decide to terminate a pregnancy. They frame their activism as one strategy among others within the feminist movement to advance abortion access in Mexico. Regionally, abortion accompaniment is conceptualized as a strategy of an embodied HSM (Braine and Velarde 2022). With the use of misoprostol, abortion activists across Latin America seek to counter narratives of SMAs as inherently unsafe or illegal, even within the feminist movement. For example, a common slogan that feminists use to argue for legalizing abortion is "*aborto legal para no morir*." *Acompañantes* are critical of this discourse because it insinuates that abortion must be legal to be safe.

Rather than talk about SMAs as dangerous, abortion accompaniment activists assert that they do not need permission from the state to safely terminate pregnancies. *Acompañantes* use the abortion accompaniment model to discursively reject the authority of the law to restrict or

[8] Accompaniment activists in Mexico use the World Health Organization's guidelines for using misoprostol to self-induce abortion, which can be found here: Medical Management of Abortion Handbook

authorize the practice of abortion, rather emphasizing that accompanied SMAs allow women to safely exercise their right to an abortion regardless of the legal status.[9] Through strategies of mutual aid, abortion accompaniment activists imagine alternatives for women seeking to end a pregnancy without the possibility of state intervention via social/legal criminalization, medical control, or supervision.

I refer to the activists I interviewed as *acompañantes* because this is what they called themselves. However, other names for activists who perform this de-medicalized form of abortion activism are Abortion Doulas, Community Health Workers (CHW), and *Socorristas* depending on the context. Recent research situates this wave of accompanied SMAs in Latin America as an embodied HSM that uses harm reduction and social support strategies to reframe abortion and contribute to positive social change (Erdman, Jelinska, and Yanow 2018; Braine 2020; Singer 2019; Zurbriggen, Keefe-Oates, and Gerdts 2018). As an HSM, accompaniment strategies "straddle the worlds of medicine, public health, democratic governance, and feminism, demonstrating a comprehensive strategy to ensure abortion access" (Keefe-Oates 2021:190) and can be understood as "health-oriented social justice activism" that addresses health inequities (Braine and Velarde 2022:7).

Abortion Accompaniment in Mexico

Not all accompaniment organizations in Mexico look the same. Some are more institutionalized and professionalized, while others are volunteer-based. For example, Fondo MARIA is an abortion fund and accompaniment organization that is a member of the US-based National Network of Abortion Funds (NNAF) and its operations closely resemble an abortion

[9] *Acompañantes* simultaneously counter the equation of clandestine= unsafe while demanding for legal abortion on the grounds that the denial of their rights and criminalization of women for abortion is a structural gender violence imposed on people by the state.

fund in the United States. They assist people with barriers to access associated with having to travel to Mexico City to obtain an abortion, such as lodging, food, and transportation in addition to performing institutional accompaniment in the public abortion clinics. [10]

The other model of abortion accompaniment, referred to as "*aborto con pastillas en casa*" (at home abortion with pills) instead emphasizes that institutional involvement is unnecessary to safely terminate a pregnancy. [11] Activists who accompany people in their homes emphasize not needing the state to exercise a right to bodily autonomy. Over two-thirds of my interviews were with activists who performed abortion accompaniment in an unpaid capacity, participating in noninstitutionalized groups, small networks, and collectives. For the most part, the accompaniment process starts when women reach out to individual activists or groups on Facebook or Whatsapp and sometimes includes in-person contact but not always. Some activists do accompaniment in their own homes. On several occasions, the interview would come to an abrupt halt and have to be rescheduled because women showed up at the interviewee's home needing support, pills, and information.

The Emotional Life of Social Movements: Support between Acompañantes

For the activists who did abortion accompaniment in a nonformalized setting, their decision to be embedded in networks of other volunteers was a source of meaning and positive emotion for them. Although some had started out working with institutionalized groups, they had left the formalized groups to start their own to retain some autonomy over how they chose to accompany people. For example, Diana first started doing abortion accompaniments with an institution she

[10] Fondo MARIA also accompanies people with at-home abortion, but it is not the organization's primary function or activity.

[11] When complications arise, accompaniment organizations have protocols for entering the public hospitals. Prior to the decriminalization, they would counsel women on how to interact with medical professionals in hospitals to avoid being reported for their SMA and other groups have specific trusted doctors to send women to.

described as having a lot of rules and barriers for how to accompany women. She said they did not publicly disclose that they did abortion accompaniment, put gestational limits on their accompaniment, did not allow their volunteers to meet people in person, and, she felt, instilled a sense of fear for the personal safety of the *acompañantes.* She decided to leave the organization after seeing other groups modeling what she calls a much more "radical" type of accompaniment "without any conditions" that allowed them to speak openly about abortion and engage in their work in a more flexible and public way. Diana describes how being personally mentored by more experienced groups reoriented how she thought about her activism and sustained the energy and work of her group.

Like Diana, other activists mentioned how they benefited from the training and resources from institutionalized, national-level groups at the beginning of their journey as activists, but they did not stay in close contact, or have regular guidance and support from these groups. Rather, they expressed relying on continuous mentorship and support from other volunteer-operated, non-professionalized groups. Newer activists conveyed a level of friendship and fondness through positive emotional responses such as smiling and laughing when they told me about a more personal type of mentorship they received from more experienced groups. Likewise, those who were more experienced and mentored other women expressed affection, joy, and pride in participating in this type of network building. I especially noticed this pattern of informal, personable mentorship being connected to new collectives in northern Mexico, organized by young activists. One activist said these young networks are "the granddaughters" of the established organizing of Las Libres.

Less institutionalized accompaniments allow activists the autonomy and flexibility to engage in activism in ways that are simultaneously sustainable for their everyday lives and

provide opportunities for meaningful interactions. While a considerable amount of abortion accompaniment work is emotional labor, research shows that tapping into the "bright side" of emotional labor entails allowing more autonomy in how to engage in it (Humphrey, Ashforth, and Diefendorff 2015). Performing emotional labor in a way that "fits" the individual's personalities and contexts facilitates a level of authenticity, allowing the interaction to be meaningful rather than emotionally draining (Johnson and Spector 2007). *Acompañantes* are able to sustain their work through meaningful, personal interactions with other movement actors along with people who need help obtaining abortions.

For the first year of the pandemic, the vast majority of accompaniment processes were conducted virtually, and activists found virtual accompaniment to be less emotionally fulfilling. Although virtual accompaniments have some benefits such as the convenience to conduct them remotely and ensuring the health and safety of the two parties involved, activists expressed drawbacks as well. *Acompañante*s found virtual accompaniment to be less comprehensive for the person experiencing the abortion as they were unable to provide the type of embodied forms of support that some people need in order to feel taken care of. Additionally, the *acompañantes* reported feeling like the process was less emotionally fulfilling for them personally. Emotional labor can be taxing on activists, and virtual accompaniment can add to this emotional stress for activists as they navigate the complications of communicating virtually.

In this section, I offered a history of abortion accompaniment in Mexico, noting the different models of accompaniment in Mexico. While emotional labor is a key component of abortion accompaniment, activists enjoy less institutionalized models of abortion accompaniment because it allows them to flexibility to engage in the activism in a way that best suits them. Additionally, more experienced groups offer informal, personal, and continuous mentoring to

newer collectives, allowing younger activists to feel supported and autonomous. While virtual accompaniment is necessary to help some people access abortion, *acompañantes* are unsure that this strategy achieves the same level of connection and social support, demonstrating the importance of physical encounters for abortion accompaniment.

"You only need one friend to start a revolution": Abortion accompaniment as a relational and transformative experience

For *acompañante*s, offering people emotional support is just as important as providing them information about how to safely terminate their pregnancies. As one activist put it, "a lot of the time accompaniment, more than informing, is listening." When I asked participants what their favorite aspect of their work was, they told me about the positive emotional interactions throughout the process of supporting women. They described to me the look of relief on people's faces after their abortion was complete, how people would come back and thank them for offering them reassurance at an emotionally vulnerable point in life. For activists, performing this emotional labor is rewarding and meaningful.

A central goal of accompaniment is to destigmatize abortion. In order to normalize abortion, they are straightforward about the process, reassuring the person that what they are going through is normal and that nothing will go wrong if they take the prescribed medication regime. To destigmatize, they offer a safe space, speak about abortion confidently, openly, and without shame. Savannah tells me how the combination of active listening, speaking openly and empathy all work together to destigmatize abortion:

> Our model of accompaniment, how could I explain it to you… It's to speak to the women openly about what is going to happen: talking about their bodies, how you're going to feel, etcetera. Give them clear, scientific, and trusted information… so I think that this is the main way that we accompany, to remove all the stigma and all their doubts. like, I can tell you even though we're a

> small group, what we definitely have within our accompaniments is complete empathy towards them. We are committed.

Additionally, their activism requires a substantial amount of emotional labor. Andrea, an activist from Northern Mexico tells me,

> I realized that accompanying women, more than being about information, a lot of times its to listen to them. To listen to their fears, their worries, because also you can find the information online. I mean, we put the protocols online. Yeah, but…well accompaniment goes way beyond giving the medicine. You know?

While this emotional labor is time-consuming and can be arduous, activists often expressed that the emotional aspects are the most rewarding for them. When I asked Elena, a young activist from southern Mexico, what her favorite aspect of accompaniment is, she tells me:

> The satisfaction that it gives us to know that *una compañera* had a more comprehensive accompaniment, with a lot of empathy. And also it's good to see the messages [after], it's like a network. They had an accompaniment, after they meet someone, they recommend us, and this is how we become more visible.

With this Elena shows how having a positive impact on people's lives signals to her that her hard work is both resulting in a real change and expanding the accompaniment networks. Activists also explained how rewarding it is to see the personal transformation that women experience when they go through the process of abortion with accompaniment. Through destigmatizing and normalizing abortion, activists have witnessed personal transformations in people's perspectives on life. Eva, an activist from central Mexico, explains how being faced with an unwanted pregnancy can provide an opportunity for people to reroute the course of their life.

> Many women, for example, share their stories about how they have been experiencing abusive relationships and they realize that they can't have kid with a person that treats them so badly. So like this, it was like a turning point in their life for them to change completely how they had been living and realize that well, they haven't been happy, and it [the decision to terminate pregnancy] helped to make them change their reality. The importance is because it's seen as something private and intimate and when you share it with more people, I mean, when it's done collectively,

> you realize that you're not the only women that has done this… right? And this is something so important, that they don't feel guilty.

Sharing the abortion experience with another person is another strategy that *acompañantes* use to destigmatize abortion. As discussed in chapter 3, the decision to have an abortion transgresses hegemonic gender expectations for women. As activists explain to me, the decision positions women to either internalize the stigma associated with the transgression or challenge their perspective on mainstream gender expectations. Abortion activists use the accompaniment process to allow people to share their feelings rather than internalizing negative emotions like shame and by instilling positive messages and affirming their right to make their decision. For example, the leader of Fondo MARIA, Oriana López Uribe constructs the decision to have an abortion as women prioritizing what is best for them:

> We believe that through this support, we're empowering women, not only for these decisions but for all decisions. because we have realized that this is the first time that women are making a choice based on their own needs, because we make the decisions based on our family needs, our partner's needs, and everyone else's needs but ourselves.

Activists use the accompaniment model to channel negative emotions that could ordinarily accompany an abortion such as shame into the positive emotion of feeling empowered which causes women to be more likely to mirror this process for someone else. In doing so, the accompaniment experience can be understood as an emotional channeling process that reframes abortion as "an act of love" and self-care in order to reconstruct the way people view abortion and themselves. When women have a positive abortion experience, sometimes the transformation results in her too becoming an *acompañante*. Andrea tells me, "The moment that you start, like when you accompany women, then it completely changes your perspective". She goes on to explain how fulfilling it is to accompany women and realize that you made a difference and that the network is growing. She tells me:

> The most satisfying thing for me is when women return, and they tell me that they are accompanying someone else and they want me to help her be able to accompany that person. I think that's what I like the most. They feel empowered enough now to say okay, I am going to do it, but I need your help. Help me to accompany this person. [Acompáñame a acompañar]. I mean, to see the network grow and see women empower themselves, get educated to be able to keep accompanying. Because for us, our goal isn't to be the only ones. I mean, for us it's to grow.

In this way, the emotional channeling that takes place during abortion accompaniment serves to exponentially grow the accompaniment networks. The emotionally fulfilling process has a chain reaction because it acts as a way for people to be make meaning of their own abortion experience by helping others. Positive emotional labor is key to understanding how accompaniment activism is sustainable. Marta expresses how the positive emotional rewards of helping other women allow her to sustain her activism, "the truth is that it fills me up with meaning, with a lot of pride and love to keep doing it."

For many of the activists, their own accompanied abortion was a turning point for them to become *acompañante*s, and seeing this journey to activism in others is a source of joy for them. With a wide smile, Savannah expressed how it feels when people are confident enough to accompany others after they go through their own process. She told me the story of a woman who had previously been accompanied and reached out to her, volunteering to take abortion pills across the border to Texas. This transformation completely took Savannah by surprise and she said:

> This is wonderful, this is a radical change in her. Because a lot of times they come[pregnant] scared, crying, not knowing what to do and after I see them like this and I say to myself, 'now you wanna traffic pills?' [acts shocked and laughs]. It's beautiful, really. When she goes to travel, I'm always like wow. You know what I mean? I think its amazing that she has decided to do it.

This example demonstrates how for acompañantes, sometimes the most fulfilling aspect of their work is the transformation they see in others. Not only when they are able to successfully accompany someone, but when they see how their activism positively influences others, leading

them to a personal transformation. When people they accompanied are emboldened by their own process to join in and help someone else, activists are able to see directly how their work contributes to social change.

In this section, I have demonstrated how abortion accompaniment is a process of emotional channeling, resulting in personal transformations. Individual 'awakening' causes people to want to help others have the same support that they experienced which in turn serves to grow the movement. For *acompañantes*, seeing this transformation provides energy and meaning to sustain their activism as they understand the transformation as evidence that accompaniment is a successful strategy for safe abortion and movement building.

Insufficiency of Institutions: Lack of Social Support and Infrastructure

As previously mentioned, activists argue that abortion accompaniment is necessary due to the barriers to accessing legal abortion and the lack of social support in public health institutions. *Acompañantes* use the emotional labor they perform to highlight the differences between abortion accompaniment and clinical/legal abortion in institutions. They emphasize the emotional labor to point out that abortion accompaniment goes beyond giving someone information, pills, and checking their symptoms. As Marta puts it:

> It's not just giving the monitoring the medicine… it's a process of destigmatization. It's consoling (*apapachar*) women, understanding their contexts, saying 'look, I'm going to be with you and I'm not going to judge you and I'm going to make you a little tea so that you're calm.' There are women who go experience this process in secret. So, if even one person knows what you're doing it, having someone accompany you makes it more bearable. I think that the support networks for abortion processes are super important because you have to have this direct [contact] and support, you know?

Acompañantes understand their activism as a level of personal support that is not available in public health institutions. As Marta points out, empathy and care are central to how she practices abortion accompaniment. Carla, who lives in a border city in northern Mexico, told me that she

traveled to Planned Parenthood in the U.S. for her abortion. Her procedure in a medical institution is what led her to realize that there was a necessary element of support missing from medical abortion procedures. She describes her experience in the abortion clinic, saying:

> The treatment was really cold, you know? …. In that moment, I didn't just need a safe process, medically. I needed someone to accompany me, you know, emotionally. This was my dilemma. No one talked to me, no one squeezed my hand and told me everything would be okay. No one said "Carla, you have the right to decide this, you have that freedom (*tú eres libre*)." Inside, I wanted to die or something… this made me think. I was experiencing this myself, but obviously reflecting a lot that it can be a safe process in one regard, but in reality, they aren't taking care of you in this other way that's really important. And that's what we try to do as *acompañante*s.

As prior research demonstrates, people see abortion as a moral decision that is intimately tied to their values and beliefs on important topics such as family and sexuality (Luker 1984). Unlike other routine medical procedures, abortion carries the moral dimension as well as the weight of being a politically contentious topic. In this instance, Carla's desire to accompany people derived from reflections on her own lived experience in a health institution that denied her the social support she needed to feel safe.

Situating Accompaniment Towards Reproductive Liberation

There is a feminist debate surrounding the limits and power of law for achieving social change, justice, and emancipation. Some feminist scholars insist that formal legal change is the path to equality, while others declare it has no liberatory potential due to power inequalities in who the law is designed by and for (Davies 2003). In the middle, feminists advocate for a more pragmatic approach that critically engages with the law without expecting meaningful social change as a result of legal reform (Smart 1989; Smart 1995). Acknowledging the law as a site of significant power relations, *acompañantes* argue that just legalizing abortion is an inadequate solution for abortion access, while simultaneously demanding the state devote resources to the developing infrastructure for legal abortion services in the public health sector. They highlight how sectors

of society run by the government such as the law and institutions have been historically unreliable and unwilling to adequately provide for the reproductive health needs of women and locate the necessity of abortion activism in these institutional insufficiencies.

While all the activists I spoke to agreed that abortion decriminalization and legalization have material and symbolical significance, how they framed their activism in relation to state institutions and the law varied. When the decriminalization of abortion happened in 2021, I asked a lawyer in Mexico how she felt about the decision made by the national Supreme Court. She explained to me that it is a massive symbolic step that allows the public to recognize abortion as a right. While *acompañante*s had been telling women that choosing abortion is their right, women were hesitant to embrace that for fear of criminalization. She explains that the decriminalization legitimized the message that *acompañante*s put forth, "So when we tell women it's not a crime, women believe that because the national Supreme Court said so." She said the decriminalization, far from materializing into universal abortion access is more "like a little window opened" to be able to push for and demand infrastructure from the public health system.

Other activists I spoke with were ambivalent to the decision. They admitted that it is important, but emphasized that either way it was not the point of what they did. Rather, they felt that the priority of accompaniment is to ensure the safety of abortion and they felt their work realized this goal. When seen this way, the legal standing of abortion faded into the background. For example, Dolores explained that for her group, they focus on the social aspect and try to eliminate abortion stigma. She says:

> Well, we've always been super solid in the agenda of socially decriminalizing [abortion] more than legal decriminalization, you know? Because we've always said, in the end, with or without the law, women have abortions and we're here to accompany them. Regardless of the legal context that exists, right? So, this is like "the law" of [our group]. what we promoted the most

> was social decriminalization and removing stigma. There were already other *compañeras* who worked more in legal decriminalization, and we said, cool, I mean, until they achieve that agenda.

For the most part, *acompañantes* agree that simply decriminalizing abortion up to 12 weeks is not sufficient.[12] Overall, they see the necessity of accompaniment as filling cracks in the legal and health systems. When I asked Vera how she understands the necessity of abortion accompaniment if legal abortion becomes available and she replied:

> To be an *acompañante*, I don't think that it's something good you know? because if we are doing accompaniment, it's because legal loopholes exist, because social stigma exists, because there are social problems… In reality, it is a necessity to be accompanied. But on the positive side, at least there is accompaniment... So, among the good things is that knowing that women can feel accompanied in the process of their decision and well. Among the bad is knowing that the state doesn't respond to the demand. The health system should respond to the demand, but it doesn't respond either.

The ambivalence in how Vera understands her role as an *acompañante* is evident in her response to my question. She expresses the positive elements of accompaniment such as offering women emotional support and reassurance in their decision that have been previously discussed in this chapter. But she struggles to see the necessity of accompaniment as a good thing perse because it reveals considerable social, political, and cultural issues.

Likewise, there is a variety of opinions among *acompañantes* for how to understand the relationship between the law and their activism, reflecting debates on the extent to which feminists should discursively submit to the authority of the law. Some abortion activists emphasized that in their view, the state is incapable of granting or guaranteeing their right to abortion because they see bodily autonomy as something innate emphasizing "it's *our* right" but this viewpoint is seen as radical, extreme, and problematic by others. These others see the law in

[12] Some participants expressed to me how 'other' groups would not accompany past the first trimester and contributed to the stigma associated with later term abortions. I did not ask any participants what their protocols were for gestational weeks, but just like in the United States, it is a disputed topic even within the feminist movement.

the more traditional sense, reinforcing the powerful position it holds in society to advance social change. They feel that the social stigma will slowly fall away because the state has deemed abortion permissible and instead feel that the abortion restrictions and barriers to accessing abortion left them feeling like "an orphan of the state" implying a paternalistic relationship between citizens and government.

As the founder of Las Libres, Verónica Cruz, is a prominent figure in the broader feminist movement in Mexico but is an especially significant leader to accompaniment groups and influences how they discursively frame abortion. Commenting on the decision by the national Supreme Court to decriminalize abortion she asserts, "The state is not our protector nor our benefactor… For two decades we socially decriminalized it…We've understood it as a right, experienced it, lived it as a right, and the court finally said it: We're right" (Livestream, 2021).

With this comment, Cruz continues to reject the authority of the law to give women the right to abortion. She answers the question of 'does the law have the power to create social change?' by flipping the direction of influence and claiming the law reflects feminist activism because it provided the discursive justification under which the judges made their decision. In agreement with the influential statement by Carol Smart (1989:5) "In accepting law's terms in order to challenge law, feminism always concedes too much," even after the legal courts decriminalized abortion, Cruz continues to encourage activists to understand see how their activism realized the right to an abortion preceding the legal ruling. In this meeting, Verónica urges fellow feminists to celebrate the discourse the judges used to decriminalize as evidence that their perspective is infiltrating the public imaginary and becoming mainstream. Even if the application is poor or nonexistent, she encourages them to see the symbolic importance of the law changing.

With decriminalization, activists assert that the necessity of their activism continues due to gaps in the system for some cases such as: pregnancies past 12 weeks and people younger than 18. Additionally, *acompañantes* note that there will always be people who prefer to do their procedure in their own home rather than an institution. One activist I interviewed highlighted the insufficiency of state institutions to handle the demand, both logistically and in handling abortions with care. As discussed in chapter 3, she points to the negative social consequences of stigma, stating "There isn't a medical procedure that's as well attended to as what we do… because the stigma [in institutions] hurts" (Livestream, 2021). She expressed hesitancy to embrace legal abortion because she feared that medicalizing abortion might lead to overregulation such as in the United States and the possible criminalization of abortion accompaniment because it operates outside of medical supervision.

After the national decriminalization, individual states in Mexico began legalizing abortion up until 12 weeks. However, as witnessed after the 2019 legalization of abortion in Oaxaca, the health system still does not have the infrastructure or personnel in the public hospitals to handle the demand, prompting feminist groups to lead campaigns (such as "*acceso real al aborto legal*" in Oaxaca) designed to hold the state and public health institutions accountable to provide reproductive health care services. After Baja California legalized abortion in 2021, Verónica Cruz offered *acompañante*s a reason to demand health services from the state while also reemphasizing the necessity of abortion accompaniment:

> I think that now, beyond the legislation, we should demand from the federal and state executives that they actually guarantee the services. Because *las acompañantes*, we are always going to exist. I don't think we'll ever disappear. We will always be necessary. But we can't, and we don't have the capacity to guarantee the rights of everyone. That's why have the state, that's what public funds are for and why we have institutions. They have to function. The public health services have to guarantee the rights, the right to abortion, free and legal services to everyone

> who decides it and *las acompañantes* we're always going to keep doing it [accompaniment], right? Because there are always going to be people who prefer our accompaniment to the public health services. But we have to understand that we don't have the capacity to guarantee the rights of the entire population, that's what the state is for. (Livestream, 2021).

With this speech, she tries to balance recognizing the indispensability of *acompañantes* with the essential need for legal abortion services and points out that state institutions have more resources at their disposal. She acknowledges the necessity of state resources to ensure abortion access in public health institutions. Some activists are hesitant to embrace the complete medicalization of abortion because they want to shift away from a medicalized model of abortion care that positions medical professionals or the state in positions of authority to give or take reproductive rights away. However, in addition to being a necessary resource, others perceive that the availability of abortion in public health institutions is a signal the state is finally recognizing their rights.

This spectrum of reactions to legalizing abortion within the feminist movement in Mexico reflects a broader collection of unresolved questions about the power of the law to generate significant social change (Smart 1989; Smart 1995; Davies 2003). Influential scholars on abortion politics and reproductive justice, Zakiya *Luna* and Kristin *Luker* urge feminists to consider alternatives to legal avenues and write, "What are the limits of the law for achieving justice? What nonlegal strategies do people use to overcome those limits? Can justice exist outside of the law?" (Luna and Luker, 2013: 343). In part, Mexican abortion activists answer these questions with their model of abortion accompaniment while acknowledging their resources are too limited to apply this model on a scale necessary to support everyone. Discursively and through political actions, *acompañantes* aim to decenter the law from the abortion debate whenever possible, and instead emphasize that abortion is a right that can be exercised outside of any regulated state institution.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights abortion accompaniment activism in Mexico. First, while formal training from professional feminist groups is especially helpful at the outset, *acompañantes* described how informal relationships and mentoring amongst each other sustains their activism. Next, I interpreted the role of emotion in the abortion accompaniment process both for activists and people they accompany. Specifically, I used the concept of emotional channeling to explain how accompaniment activism transforms negative emotions like shame into positive emotions such as empathy and empowerment that ultimately propel the accompaniment movement. Finally, I analyzed *acompañantes* discourses of state institutions and described how *acompañantes* understand the necessity of abortion accompaniment. *Acompañantes* demand ILE services from the state but discursively reject the authority of the state to offer or withhold abortion rights by situating the right to abortion as an innate right to practice bodily autonomy. As they position their activism outside of institutions, accompaniment activists engage in prefigurative political activism in which they construct abortion alternatives to work towards a liberatory future for reproductive rights (Yates 2015; Brain and Verlarde 2022). I explore prefigurative political activism further in the conclusion and discuss the implications for abortion accompaniment activism in Mexico.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter, I briefly summarize the main arguments of this thesis, highlighting the practical and sociological significance of this work. I use the example of abortion accompaniment in Mexico to discuss the importance of 'alternative' feminist abortion activism for advancing abortion access. I consider how abortion accompaniment in Mexico can be understood through the lens of prefigurative politics and suggest possible future research in the area of feminist alternative activism.

Summary of Main Arguments

Research on abortion politics rarely includes feminist activism aimed at cultural change, but focuses on feminist efforts to effect legal policy reform, often ignoring the role of emotions in feminist abortion activism. Additionally, research on feminist abortion activism seldom captures the cultural context in which groups organize. Following the advice of social movement scholars, with this project, I attempted to capture the relationship between forms of domination and forms of challenge to understand the feminist social movement for abortion in Mexico (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008).

In chapter two, I described how abortion politics in one area can influence abortion activism elsewhere using two examples. First, I used the example of transnational activism on the U.S.-Mexico border, noting how groups in the United States are looking to Mexican abortion activists for support. Mexican activists have experience organizing around legal barriers to abortion access and can provide valuable insights to U.S.-based groups. Second, I argued that the

seemingly unsuccessful attempt to legalize abortion in the summer of 2018 in Argentina had reverberations across Latin America. Specifically, Mexican abortion activists described a 'boom' of abortion activism in Mexico as a result of the energy surrounding the summer of 2018 in Argentina. This chapter demonstrates how examining abortion politics and subsequent movements from a transnational perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of how movement energy is not contained by national borders. Rather, through shared goals of abortion rights, feminist social movements spread excitement across Latin America.

In chapter three, I explained how gender violence impacts the social movement for abortion in Mexico. First, the legal and social criminalization of abortion structurally disadvantages women who choose to terminate a pregnancy. By transgressing the motherhood mandate and notions of hegemonic feminine sexuality, women are criminalized in state institutions such as legal courtrooms and public health institutions. Second, while the context of gender violence in Mexico creates a hostile environment for feminist social movements in general, abortion activists describe how framing abortion restrictions as a gender violence allows them to align their goals with the anti-gender violence movement, garnering more support for the abortion movement. In chapter three, I argued that the social and legal prohibition of abortion is a form of gender violence that has symbolic and material consequences for women in Mexico.

In chapter four, I provided a history of abortion accompaniment in Mexico, situating it as a strategy to advance abortion access. More than just offering people a safe way to terminate a pregnancy, activists understand the accompaniment model as entailing emotional labor. However, the majority of activists find this aspect of accompaniment fulfilling as it provides a moment of connection and shared meaning between activists and the people they support. I applied the concept of emotional channeling to explain how accompaniment transforms negative

emotions like shame into positive emotions such as empathy and empowerment that propel the accompaniment movement. Finally, I examined how *acompañantes* consider abortion accompaniment a necessity due to a variety of institutional insufficiencies such as the lack of infrastructure in public hospitals to support the demand for abortion. Additionally, they see the mutual aid and social support they provide other women as going beyond what is possible in state institutions. Their activism highlights one way that feminist activism aims to advance social change through informal mutual aid.

Implications of Mexican Feminist Abortion Activism

Abortion accompaniment is an important strategy for advancing abortion access outside of formal institutional channels. This type of activism provides an opportunity to examine how feminist social movements can (re)organize in the context of unstable abortion laws. Despite barriers such as social and legal criminalization of abortion, accompaniment activists demonstrate a viable option for women to safely terminate a pregnancy, regardless of legal status. Additionally, by offering social and emotional support to people during the process of abortion, their activism seeks to provide comprehensive abortion care. For people who experience unwanted pregnancies in socially or legally restrictive contexts for abortion rights, this grassroots activism can be a resistance to and a respite from a mosaic of gender violence, across a range of national and cultural contexts.

By operating outside of formal institutions, accompaniment activists aim to offer a reliable way for people to access abortion regardless of the legal context. For contexts in which the legal right to an abortion may be uncertain, the importance of this strategy of abortion activism cannot be overstated. This case of abortion activism represents one way that feminist

social movements can move towards a politics of reproductive liberation unconstrained by volatile political climates, global pandemics, and legal uncertainty.

Sociological Significance

This study contributes to the literature on the importance of emotions in social movements, expanding the discussion to explain emotional labor in prefigurative political activism. My study of abortion activism builds on previous understandings of prefigurative politics and the role of emotions in social movements. Specifically, it highlights the importance of personal relationships and affective encounters to building prefigurative social movement cultures.

While the study of social movements often involves analyzing strategies of public mobilization, my study of abortion accompaniment highlights the importance of considering "private" or less visible forms of collective action to understand social movements. Acknowledging the importance of emotional labor, this project provides insights into how the opportunity to participate in everyday politics of mutual aid can be emotionally fulfilling also a radical form of politics. This study of abortion activism in Mexico contributes to knowledge on the role of emotional processes in social movements by explaining how activists can use emotional labor to engage in political activism.

Secondly, my research contributes to understanding prefigurative political activism. For the study of social movements, prefigurative politics can be described as: "scenarios where protesters express the political 'ends' of their actions through their 'means', or where they create experimental or 'alternative' social arrangements or institutions" (Yates 2015:1). Prefigurative politics are motivated by moral action and posit an alternative to structural strategies of social change. On strategies of prefiguration, Leach (2013:1) writes:

> Rather than looking to a revolutionary vanguard to seize existing power structures and implement revolutionary change on behalf of the masses or to trade unions or political parties to leverage

> reforms within the existing system, a prefigurative approach seeks to create the new society "in the shell of the old" by developing counterhegemonic institutions and modes of interaction that embody the desired transformation. In this sense, a prefigurative strategy is based on the principle of direct action, of directly implementing the changes one seeks, rather than asking others to make the changes on one's behalf.

As an autonomous form of social activism, abortion accompaniment can be understood as a fusion of feminist ideology and practice, a prefigurative politics that feminist movements "enact the world the struggle to build" (Braine and Velarde 2022:16). By offering a model of reproductive care alternative to state institutions, *acompañantes* engage in prefigurative political activism. In developing counter hegemonic "modes of interaction" during the abortion process, accompaniment is a practice that offers "free spaces" or moments of personal contact in which to negotiate political ideas and develop a collective feminist identity (Buechler 1990; Leach 2013; Yates 2015). How do the affective aspects of abortion accompaniment in Mexico deepen our understanding of prefigurative politics? In the next section, I explain how understanding the emotional life of social movements is key to grasping how they imagine and enact liberatory politics.

"Aeffective" Resistance

The case of abortion accompaniment reveals important lessons about how prefigurative politics relate to emotional processes within social movements. Abolitionist movements have centered collective care, mutual aid, or 'alternative care practices' as strategies of political resistance to address state violence and inadequate state support. As Premilla Nadasen (2021:180) argues, "alternative caring practices… have become a means for surviving… and providing alternatives to systemic inequality." Prior research on social movements highlights that creating and sustaining transformative movements requires constant emotional and reproductive labor to build

prefigurative movement cultures (Porter 2017:6). Abortion accompaniment activism demonstrates an example in which feminist social movements can use emotional labor and collective care practices to counter structural gender violence. Shukaitis (2008:3) argues that conceptions of prefigurative politics must focus on affective dimensions of social movements. He proposes the term *aeffective resistance* and asserts that emotional processes are central to understanding and successfully practicing prefigurative or revolutionary politics. He writes:

> Aeffective resistance, as one might gather from the name, starts from realization that one can ultimately never separate questions of the *effectiveness* of political organizing from concerns about its *affectiveness*. They are inherently and inevitably intertwined. The social relations we create every day prefigure the world to come, not just in a metaphorical sense, but also quite literally: they truly are the emergence of that other world embodied in the constant motion and interaction of bodies.

Rather than understanding radical activism as something that occurs in "moments of excess" he argues that politics grow out of the relations and interactions that make up the fabric of everyday life. He contends that building *aeffective* encounters and "vibrating locations" in which communities can sustain energy is a better strategy. *Aeffective* resistance deepens intra-movement connections in addition to building ways of politicizing everyday life. He writes, "Aeffective resistance is about working from these intensities of care and connection, of constantly rebuilding the imaginal machines of from them, rather than considering interpersonal and ethical concerns as an adjunct and supplement of radical politics" (Shukaitis 2008:14). Abortion accompaniment activism is an example of *aeffective* resistance in which *acompañantes* use alternative care strategies that harness emotions to prefigure a future of reproductive liberation. In this way, this research reveals important insights regarding prefigurative politics and the role of emotions in social movements. Specifically, how feminist social movements can

effectively organize for abortion outside of formal institutions using strategies of mutual aid and social support to advance abortion access and social change.

Future Directions

Although my research identified how social movements use personally transformative processes to spark subsequent activism, it is still unknown what makes some individuals more likely to engage in abortion accompaniment activism. Like Auyero (2003), I am inclined to believe that how people construct meaning around their personal biographies influences their participation in political protest, but my interview sample was exclusive to people who chose to engage in feminist activism. Future research should investigate what factors make some people more inclined than others to engage in alternative feminist abortion activism.

Additionally, future research should examine the extent to which the accompaniment model can be applied in different national contexts. For example, following increasingly restrictive abortion laws and a global pandemic, feminist groups have attempted to increase the availability of telehealth medication abortion in the United States. While research has examined different models of accompaniment in Latin America, how this model could map onto the United States has yet to be investigated.

Finally, my research argues for understanding abortion politics and subsequent activism in a transnational perspective. Mexican activists encourage U.S. groups to develop 'organic networks' of activists to pass abortion pills, but some U.S. groups have chosen to focus on developing automated websites, hotlines, virtual abortion clinics and phone applications to improve abortion access in the United States. Although my research hints at the possibilities of abortion access on the U.S.-Mexico border, future research should study how feminist groups on each side of border organize for abortion access in different legal contexts. Another avenue of

potential future research is to examine how national debates on the legality of abortion in one country influence social movements and politics in another. As a particularly contentious topic, abortion politics can provide a useful opportunity for social scientists to explore relationships between formal politics (i.e. the law), social movements, and social change in a transnational perspective.

Conclusion

Abortion accompaniment in Mexico shows how networks of women choose, daily, to work towards a future of reproductive liberation by participating in "private" collective action. Despite barriers, they organize to ensure the safety of people who choose to have an abortion, demonstrating that collective care can be an effective strategy to advancing abortion access. A vision of gender equality requires moving closer to reproductive justice—ensuring that people are able to maintain bodily autonomy, including the right to decide if, when, and how to start a family (SisterSong 2022). While inequality and domination can manifest in a multitude of institutions—feminist accompaniment activism exhibits a way to circumvent some of the institutional power that reproduces gender violence by offering people an alternative path to terminating a pregnancy.

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