

Self-Care for Abortion Activists and Providers: Lessons of Law and Risk from Argentina

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In 2022, the Argentinean organization Socorristas en Red celebrated its tenth anniversary. This celebration reaffirmed the group's commitment to safe abortion across Argentina, to providing information on safe abortions, and to supporting the termination of pregnancies for those who request it [1]. The Socorristas' activism and provision of abortion care therefore precedes Law 27.610, which in December 2020 legalized voluntary abortion up to 14 weeks of gestation, by a decade.

The arrest of four Socorristas from Villa Maria, Córdoba on 21st December 2022 was therefore a shock. Following an anonymous complaint and investigation (which remains classified) for the 'illegal practice of medicine', the Public Prosecutor's Office took action [2]. They ordered the raid of the homes of activists and people close to them, the immediate arrest of two activists and a doctor accused of 'concealment', and a request for the arrest of two other Socorristas who were abroad. The reaction of the feminist movement was immediate: numerous social organizations, public officials, academics and even the Ministries of Justice and of Women, Genders and Diversity expressed their concern and called for the activists' release. Ayelén Mazzini, Argentina's Minister for Women, Genders and Diversity declared the Socorristas' actions "could not be defined as criminal, since they are legal and socially valuable actions tied to the promotion of reproductive health and the accompaniment of legal abortions" [3]. After the legal filing and spending Christmas in jail, the activists were released on December 26th. They remain free while the case continues.

This event could be considered exceptional. However, if we consider the advance of neoconservative actors across Latin America and the Caribbean in the last decade it is anything but [4,5]. In this case, there are clear aims of intimidation and political persecution. First, two of the Socorristas were detained for six days for a crime that does not require detainment. Second, despite the fact that the two activists who were abroad at the time presented a written statement through their lawyer to state that they would return to Argentina to face justice, warrants for their arrest were still ordered and they were dramatically arrested at the airport. Third, the use of adjacent offenses, here the illegal practice of medicine, shows that even when abortion itself is legal, abortion access and provision can come under threat from a range of legal tools. These are excessive, unnecessary actions that serve to spectacularize the arrest of these Socorristas to fuel anti-abortion discourse and create an additional layer of disciplinary control against the activists. We argue that this is a case of 'abortion exceptionalism' whereby "abortion is treated as an issue requiring alternative or more intensive legal scrutiny and regulation than other issues because it is perceived as so controversial and politically sensitive" [6]. Anti-abortion ideology permeates global reproductive politics far beyond Argentina and so here we wish to call attention to the importance of legal and risk-based 'self-care' for abortion activists and providers.

The WHO guidelines on self-care interventions highlights the potential for self-care to realize universal health through increased coverage and access, greater equity, and improved health, and this explicitly includes the use of medications for abortion without the direct supervision of a health worker [7]. However, the arrests in Argentina highlight the need for alternative forms of care that provide support and protection in the face of legal persecution and harassment. As the example of Argentina shows, such protection is needed not just where abortion is heavily criminalized, but in settings where it is technically legal too. Legalization does not always result in full decriminalization if the possibility of persecution under adjacent laws exists. The conservatism within large swathes of the legal and biomedical spheres remains even if regressive laws do not. In this Personal View article we argue for a politicized, collective form of abortion self-care that aims to provide protection in the face of legal threats and attacks.

Abortion activists, providers, and 'accompaniers' tend to be highly aware of the individual strategies they can use to stay safe. From using burner phones, codewords for abortion pills, using 'filters' to assess who they can safely support, and destroying records, they are knowledgeable about the legal line they need to tread and where their comfort with risk lies. Abortion activists decide upon what risks to take and do this consciously, and often very vocally, in what Naomi Braine has argued can be considered 'ongoing civil disobedience' [8]. We see this

as a form of self-care against legal attacks, but not one that can be understood individualistically. Self-managed abortion “activism is rooted in practices of collective and self-care, and values of self-determination, compassion, and solidarity” [9], and this extends out to practices of risk and legal safety as part of a broader ‘infrastructure of care’ [10]. We therefore make three recommendations for implementing this model of self-care that can provide support and protection in the face of legal persecution and harassment.

1. Act collectively: the success of autonomous abortion collectives in Latin America shows the power of working as a whole. Both for those seeking an abortion and those providing abortions, the collective can provide a network of advice, security, and protection. The Socorristas are a united collective and have garnered solidarity across civil and political groups in Argentina and abroad. By being outspoken, visible, and public, abortion becomes a collective event that transcends the individual.
2. Fight conservatism: Regardless of abortion laws, anti-abortion sentiment exists in many parts of the legal and biomedical sectors. Challenging these views and preventing them from spreading is crucial to eliminate the harms caused by reporting and harassment. By showing the politicized and ideological attack on the Socorristas, they have highlighted the disproportionate response to abortion care.
3. Avoid self-incrimination: Abortion stigma and abortion apologism exist even in parts of the abortion movement. By vocally celebrating abortion and supporting all people’s reproductive choices we can reject the moralism that pervades abortion discourses. Mazzini’s declaration that the Socorristas actions “could not be counted as criminal” is an ideal example of refusing to accept legal incrimination.

The arrests in Argentina act as a powerful reminder to abortion activists around the world that vigilance, solidarity, and support are still vital to counter anti-abortion attacks. These attacks are not only occurring in the parts of the world that are seeing a backwards sliding of reproductive rights such as the US, Poland, and Central America but in progressive contexts that have been held up as the leading light of abortion rights too.

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