

# The Death of Ana María Acevedo: Rallying Cry for the Women's Movement

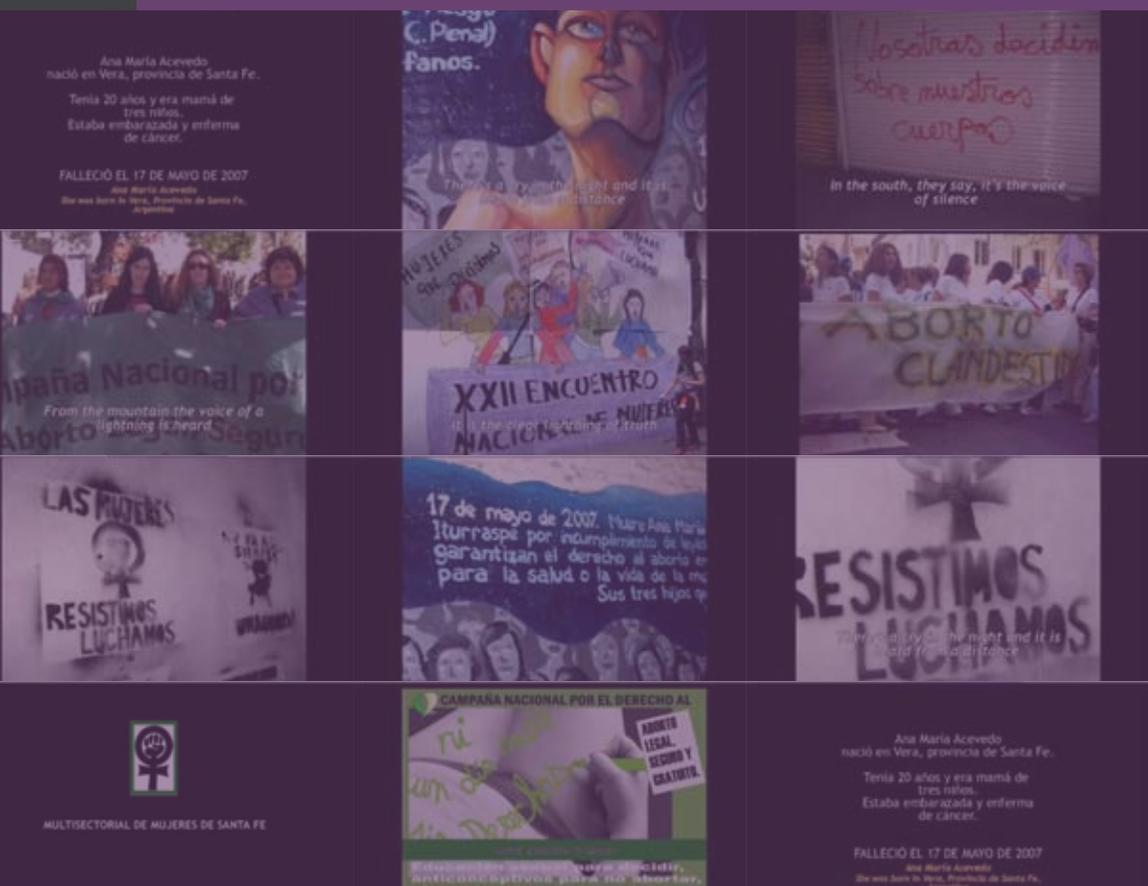
## The Death of Ana María Acevedo: Rallying Cry for the Women's Movement

Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe, Argentina (member of the [Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito](#))  
Lucila Puyol and Paula Condrac, with Mirtha Manzur

*In memory of Ana María Acevedo (1987-2007) and all women who have died at the hands of the fundamentalisms that oppress and punish women*

The Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe (Multisectoral Women's Group of Santa Fe, hereinafter "Multisectorial") is a women's organization and member of the [Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito](#) (National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion)—a coalition of nearly 250 organizations and groups throughout the country. In this case study, three members of the Multisectorial define religious fundamentalisms to then explain the history of Catholic fundamentalisms in Argentina and their connections to economic and military power. It also examines dissident voices within the Catholic Church. As in other contexts, the fight against the legalization of abortion gives rise to the most virulent confrontations between fundamentalists and feminists. The authors explain Argentine legislation—which only allows abortion to save the life "of the mother" and in cases of rape of a "woman who is of unsound mind or retarded"—and then examine the shocking case of Ana María Acevedo, a young woman with cancer who was denied treatment which would have saved her life, by fundamentalist doctors because it would have ended her pregnancy.

The case study concludes by enumerating and analyzing the legal and political strategies employed by the Multisectorial both in their search for justice for Ana María and in the fight to legalize abortion in Argentina. Such legalization would save women's lives, especially the lives of women who do not have access to abortion due to economic and class barriers.



## Religious Fundamentalisms

We define religious fundamentalisms as cultural beliefs and practices that operate on the basis of beliefs about transcendence, divinity and eternity, and the fundamental, personal and private ideas of human beings, with the goal of imposing a unique and dogmatic vision of reality, to the benefit of the interests of the dominant classes and religious hierarchy.

The term “religious fundamentalisms” was coined at the beginning of the last century by Christian restoration movements that wished to return to a medieval and counter reformatory paradigm for the church, wherein it played a political and social role—as well as a religious one—that increased its power. It is a traditionalist, conservative response to modernity and secularization, which it rejects, based on a patriarchal construction of society and the family.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentalisms are imposed by religions all over the world, and in Latin America and Argentina, by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church;<sup>2</sup> however, they are used by all powerful sectors that defend *la pensée unique*,<sup>3</sup> market globalization and the capitalist mode of production.

In this patriarchal logic, the domination of women’s bodies is paramount: religious fundamentalisms have legitimized the state’s direct intervention in our bodies, denying us the right and ability to make decisions about our own bodies and therefore about our sexuality. Fundamentally, they deny that there is a difference between the roles of woman and mother, transforming the great power of maternity into an instrument of masculine domination and ignoring the predominant place of pleasure. Their control over education<sup>4</sup>—both public and private—is key to replicating beings suitable to the capitalist system they support. The circle closes when, full of guilt and directives regarding how to act, women uncritically reproduce the discourse that we are victims and act on it.

We believe we must examine what attracts some people to religious fundamentalisms. In *The Language of Passion*, Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa says:

No church is democratic. All churches postulate a truth that is overwhelmingly backed up by the transcendence and wand-waving omnipotence of a divine being; against this omnipotence all rational arguments must dash themselves and be shattered. Churches would negate themselves—they would cease to exist—if they were flexible and tolerant... [Translation: Natasha Wimmer]

Added to these three elements common to all churches—dogma, omnipotence of a divine being and the promise of eternal life—is another factor: the slogan “the end of ideologies,” coined by imperialistic industries in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which has not been harmless. The slogan that “only one world is now possible” attacked hope, utopias and dreams of change. The lie did not last long because it quickly became clear that this “only possible world” stripped half of the planet’s inhabitants of conditions conducive to dignity; nevertheless the idea prospered by working against the possibility of agency, social organization and of struggle, submerged in passivity, indifference to politics and the disengagement of millions of people. And it created an existential vacuum that religions cleverly filled.

Since there is no domination without resistance and the ideological struggle continues, voices continue to speak against fundamentalists, stripping them naked and exposing how they work, their rules and their *modus operandi*. It is our intention to become one of those voices.

## Religious Fundamentalisms in the Latin American and Argentine Political and Cultural Context

The pluralism and democracy which seem inherent in our country collide against Article 2 of our Constitution, which states: “The federal government supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church.” In reality, this translates into a series of questionable privileges, such as exemption from property taxes or the provision of state subsidies for private Catholic schools.

The church interfered every time laws on divorce and joint custody were debated and authorized,<sup>5</sup> and it continues to interfere in discussions of sex education, civil unions for same sex couples and each time individual women request a legal abortion.

However, within Christianity there have been dissident voices that uphold secularism as part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and that adopt as their own modern discourses of emancipation. These tendencies, inspired by the Second Vatican Council and liberation theologies, have found and continue to find expression in Latin America through the Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo (Priests for the Third World Movement), which has ties to the Marxist Left and was most active in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Catholic Church, in its crusade for restoration and through the papal authority of John Paul II, worked to end the influence of liberation theology in Latin America and thereby became complicit with the ruling military dictatorships in the 1970s and the disappearance and

murder of not a few nuns and priests in the Global South. Others were excommunicated from the church.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to trying to erase liberation theology, the Vatican supported and continues to support the activities of Catholic groups such as Opus Dei, the Legión de Cristo (Legion of Christ) and los Sodalicios de Vida Cristiana (Society of Apostolic Life) in the region as part of its strategy to re-conquer Latin America. In Argentina, Opus Dei has made the most advances.<sup>7</sup> It has its own private universities and its members hold strategic professorships in public universities (in the schools of medicine, philosophy, legal studies and social sciences). It exerts influence over the media and public hospitals. It is linked to businesspeople, members of the judiciary and legislators, and has a presence in every place of civic importance in the nation.

Since the end of the last century, priests and the religious who have upheld a social justice viewpoint and what has been called the *Opción por los Pobres* (Option for the Poor), as characterized by the priests and nuns in the Third World in the 1960s and 1970s, have been called “shantytown priests” (*curas villeros* in Spanish).<sup>8</sup> From the humble shantytowns where they build their churches, they turn a critical and committed eye on society, poverty and inequality, working to build a more just and united society.

[Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir](#) (CDD, Catholics for the Right to Decide; affiliated with the North American network, Catholics for Choice), a network of Catholic women that has worked in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Paraguay since the 1990s, has also created an important gathering space and acts as a reference point. Based on Catholic theology, feminism and the principles of citizenship, it works to promote women’s rights and advocates regionally and internationally to advance the sexual and reproductive rights of women in the region.

We do not believe that the upsurge in movements in Argentina such as the shantytown priests or the CDD in the 1990s began by chance; that decade was marked by neoliberal policies and corruption scandals. We believe they began as manifestations of resistance. And in this century, Joseph Ratzinger’s ascension to Saint Peter’s throne after the death of Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) has ensured the continuity of Christian orthodoxy, the fundamentalist trend in Catholicism and the persecution of those who oppose its policies.

However, it is important to re-examine the analysis of fundamentalisms and religions as the traditional power structure, which, based on a religious discourse, maintain the patriarchy and the traditional family

as well as opposition to the feminist movement and sexual minorities. As Juan Marco Vaggione has stated, today it is no longer so easy to define the borders between the secular and the religious: “...religious activism is characterized by a growing strategic secularism. Rather than citing religious texts, increasingly, religious activism justifies its agenda with legal and scientific discourses.”<sup>9</sup> The author challenges us to analyze the political roles that religion is assuming in current societies.

In response to the impact of the feminist and sexual diversity movements, their reactions have taken new forms and, without abandoning dogma, these anti-rights groups—now organized in civil society associations—impede, with an apparently democratic game, the development of a genuinely democratic and pluralistic society.

### The Argentine Penal Code and Religious Fundamentalisms’ Gains on Laws and Rights Won by Women

In the same chapter, the [Argentine Penal Code](#) establishes the crimes of homicide and abortion, classifying the latter as a crime against life. It establishes sanctions for medical professionals who perform abortions and women who request them. Article 88 states, “Any woman who causes her own abortion or consents to an abortion performed by another person shall be sentenced to 1 to 4 years in prison.<sup>10</sup> A woman’s attempt is not punishable.”

Two paragraphs in Article 86 of the Penal Code<sup>11</sup> mention non-criminalized abortions; each situation includes two exceptions: a) abortion when the life or health of the mother is in danger<sup>12</sup> and b) abortion if the pregnancy is the result of rape of a woman who is of “unsound mind or retarded.” We will refer to both types of abortion merely as “legal abortions” in this article.

The Argentine Penal Code does not require judicial authorization for legal abortions. Women from the middle and upper classes who need abortions—legal or otherwise—go to private clinics and, with money, are able to terminate their pregnancies. But women with fewer resources cannot pay for an abortion in a private clinic and getting a legal abortion in a public hospital is becoming more and more difficult.

Why? Because public hospitals do not respect or protect a woman’s decision to have an abortion. When conservatives learn that an abortion is going to be performed<sup>13</sup>—informed by hospital personnel—they attempt to block it and in some cases succeed by creating legal obstacles, bringing the case to court and to the media, threatening the medical professionals involved, and creating drama. Under the pretext of protecting life, they subject women to forced maternity or sure death.

Another obstacle is that women are not duly informed of their right to an abortion in the circumstances allowed by law; some hospitals lie, plain and simple, telling women it is a crime and obstructing access by asking for unnecessary authorizations while they rely on the advance of the pregnancy.

Self-titled “pro-life” groups<sup>14</sup> are not only against the unrestricted decriminalization and legalization of abortion, as demanded by the women’s movement, but also against abortions already allowed by Argentine legislation and Article 86 of the Penal Code. As we can see, the main victims of these groups are poor women, as they are clearly in a discriminatory situation in comparison with women from the upper and middle class.

### **Santa Fe, Bastion of Religious Fundamentalisms**

The city of Santa Fe is the capital of the province of the same name, located in the central part of the country. It was founded in 1573 by the Spanish conquistador Juan de Garay who invaded our land with “the cross and the sword” to create a port city between the already established cities of Asunción del Paraguay and Nuestra Señora del Buen Ayre. He named it Santa Fe de la Vera Cruz in homage to the Catholic faith. The characteristics of its founding—the location and the name, which remain the same even today—have over time defined it as a politically conservative Catholic city.

Although it is the capital of an important agricultural and livestock-producing province, our city has few real resources and its population, of 500,000 inhabitants, has gradually become poorer as a result of neoliberal policies and two separate instances of flooding in the last ten years that left a third of the population homeless and defenceless. These people live in conditions of extreme poverty, for the most part do not have employment and survive on social welfare. They have large families, with many children, which makes access to the most basic rights such as housing, health and education even more difficult. In this context, one of the basic problems is the lack of sex education in schools, together with the lack of access to contraception and information about contraceptives and non-compliance—in all ways—with the current Ley de Salud Sexual y Procreación Responsable (Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation Act).<sup>15</sup>

From our perspective as women, we believe that women who do not know about their reproductive cycle cannot control their lives or their bodies; therefore it is essential for fundamentalisms to prevent sex education as an efficient and economic way of maintaining dominance over women. Fundamentalist sectors with ties to the Catholic Church influence education and public health in our country and affect the

rights of women, especially the most impoverished women. At times public hospitals do not comply with their obligation to provide free contraceptives, to provide emergency contraception, or to perform tubal ligations; they provide the results of Pap smears years later, subject women—even women giving birth—to long waiting times because they cannot maintain services, they do not report violence against women and they re-traumatize them in cases of rape.

### **The Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe in the Women’s Movement**

The Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe is a feminist collective composed of individual women, women’s organizations, civil society organizations and political parties. The group provides support to the struggles of popular movements but specifically focuses on advocating for women’s human rights. It got its start in March 2005 with a widely disseminated invitation to jointly organize a public activity for March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women’s Day.

It is part of the Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito, which was launched in May 2005. It coordinates actions with different Argentine women’s organizations for the decriminalization and legalization of abortion in Argentina, the historic demand of the women’s and feminist movement. The campaign’s slogan is:

**Sex education to inform choice  
Contraception to avoid abortion  
Legal abortion to save women’s lives**

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005, a march was held in Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina, to deliver to Congress the thousands and thousands of signatures collected during the previous six months of the campaign to demand a law legalizing abortion to end the deaths of women due to clandestine abortion.

The first large-scale reaction was evident at the national level, at the XXI Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres (National Women’s Meeting) held in October 2006 in Jujuy province. Self-described “pro-life groups” (people with ties to the Catholic church and students from the Catholic University of Santa Fe) attended, trying to sabotage the voices calling for the legalization of abortion.<sup>16</sup>

Since then, the women’s movement and the campaign’s strategies have spread throughout the country and we’re beginning to see the first results: some court rulings in favour of legal abortions when the interpretation of the law has been contested.

In the face of the women's movement's advances, the fundamentalisms' reaction has been ferocious and systematic. They have demonstrated in front of hospitals, shouting insults and waving placards; threatened judges, doctors and officials; showed videos of dismembered fetuses; and pressured politicians not to support the decriminalization and legalization of abortion.

It was during this fight in April 2007 that we learned of Ana María Acevedo's case from the media.

### Ana María Acevedo

Ana María was 20 years old, a native of the city of Vera, located 300 km north of the capital of Santa Fe. Never having completed her primary education, Ana María worked cleaning homes. The mother of three small children already, when she had the youngest child, doctors did not perform the tubal ligation she requested.

In May 2006 she went to a public hospital providing mid-level care (known as SAMCO) in the city of Vera with severe pain in her upper right jaw. A dentist removed a molar. The pain continued and over a period of five months, the dentist ignored the requests of Ana María and her family to refer her to a hospital providing a higher level of care. Finally, Norma Cuevas and Aroldo Acevedo—Ana María's mother and father—decided to transfer her, assuming the possible risks themselves. Once in Santa Fe, in Cullen Hospital (another public hospital) they performed open surgery, extracting a growth from the facial region. It was diagnosed as a cancerous tumour (alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma). She was then transferred to Iturraspe Hospital (another public hospital) for radio- and chemotherapy.

During her examination, they determined that she was four or five weeks pregnant. Without informing Ana María or her parents of the pregnancy, or that an abortion was a possible alternative in order to begin treatment for the cancer, the doctors decided to send her back to Vera, telling her only that she should return in five months (March 2007). They did not give her any medication or treatment.

However, Ana María returned to Hospital Iturraspe one month earlier than ordered. The cancer had advanced due to lack of treatment and she suffered from severe pain and the deformation of her face. In February 2007 they admitted her to the oncology department and consulted with the gynaecology department. She was not treated by either department. The oncology department did not administer the chemotherapy or radiotherapy indicated to treat the cancer, and the gynaecology department did not perform a therapeutic abortion as allowed by the Penal Code in such cases.

Her mother and father requested an abortion but the doctors refused, saying that it "was not allowed and they would all be put in prison." It was not difficult for the doctors to deceive Ana María's parents: impoverished; strangers to the busy capital city, to medical treatment and legal procedures; sleeping in the hospital corridors because they did not have money to pay for lodgings; and extremely vulnerable due to the advancing illness of their daughter. They were easy prey for fundamentalists.

In response to the parents' requests, the doctors involved the hospital's Bioethics Committee (hereinafter "the Committee"). After discussion and exchanges of opinions, the Committee issued its report from which are provided the following extracted quotes:

*"The indicated treatment for the condition suffered by the patient is contraindicated if she is pregnant; as a result, the attending doctors decided to suspend orders for treatment."*

*"The prognosis is bad; at this state of the illness chemotherapy or radiotherapy can still be administered as a possible way of improving quality of life; another surgery has been ruled out. However, since the patient is pregnant, both therapeutic options are also ruled out."*

*"Has a therapeutic abortion been considered at any point? Due to the beliefs and religious and cultural tenets at this hospital (and in Santa Fe), no."*

*"The family and parents have stated that no one is doing anything for her. In fact this is the case, while they are treating her for pain, they are not treating the illness."*

Once the Committee's decision was issued, the desperate parents went to the Prosecutor's Office, which sent them to the Ombud's Office. Neither office took the case, arguing that they did not have jurisdiction to do so.

Ana María was forced to continue her pregnancy and was not given the treatment necessary for her cancer. In addition, she was subjected to degrading, inhuman and cruel treatment as the lack of services, care and medication caused intolerable, intense pain as well deformation to her face that was spreading to cover her entire face and neck.

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007, according to a detailed medical history, she was found to be in a pre-mortem state, with insufficient respiration and failure of internal organs. The doctors performed surgery—which the doctors called a caesarean—at 22 to 23 weeks of pregnancy. The female

infant survived less than 24 hours. After the surgery, despite her critical health, Ana María was given three sessions of chemotherapy, which further lowered her defences. She finally died on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007, without having had the chance to fight for her life.

## Strategies

Ana María's death has become a test case for the women's and feminist movements in our country, and especially for the Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito as it exposed for all to see the worst of the doctor-hospital associations and their close ties with fundamentalisms.

The Multisectorial de Mujeres has implemented legal and political strategies to address the case.

As the legal representatives of Aroldo Acevedo and Norma Cuevas, we filed a lawsuit regarding the investigation of criminal responsibility on the part of the medical personnel and the Bioethics Committee of Iturraspe Hospital who prevented a legal abortion. We have also filed a civil suit against Santa Fe Province and its health officials. Our objectives include:

- Bring to justice those responsible for the death of Ana María;
- Establish the idea that refusing to perform a legal abortion is a crime;
- Establish case law in Argentina as this is the first time doctors are being prosecuted for "criminal negligence leading to personal injury and failure to comply with the responsibilities of a public official" for not performing a legal abortion.

In the political sphere, we proposed the following:

- Publicize the case, thereby bringing the issue of abortion to the public and exposing the hypocrisy of those in power, the vulnerability of the most impoverished women, who cannot access safe abortions, and the fragility of the provincial and national public health system resulting in the State's inability to protect women;
- Raise awareness in society using this test case, which has had a strong impact on many mainstream organizations as well as on individual women and men who were not previously in favour of decriminalizing and legalizing abortion and now are; and
- Publicize the feminists' ideological position, which includes

diversity, plurality and freedom of thought, and which as a result comes into confrontation with fundamentalist beliefs and their negative impact on society and especially on women.

## Political Activities and Alliances

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the date of Ana María Acevedo's death, the Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe invited social, political, and human rights organizations and unions to come together for an *escrache* (public demonstration) in front of Iturraspe Hospital.<sup>17</sup> In response to the *escrache*, the director of the hospital met with us. He stated that "no one had requested an abortion, not the family, the patient or the doctors," as if it were not the doctors' obligation to guarantee conditions favouring informed consent to medical practices. A few days later, the medical association published an announcement supporting the actions of the doctors in the case as well as the decision of the Bioethics Committee.

On May 28<sup>th</sup>, the International Day of Action for Women's Health, we demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Health, demanding a hearing with the minister and the immediate regulation of non-criminal abortions. We were not given a hearing, but the minister initiated an internal administrative summary proceeding within the Ministry of Health to determine and assign responsibilities.

At the same time, Ana María's parents filed a criminal report for their daughter's death with the Prosecutor in the Santa Fe courts. They were assisted by a lawyer who had been recommended to them. They later terminated that relationship as explained below.

Given the public's interest in the case, the provincial legislature issued a formal request for information to the minister of health. Our organization was present for the hearing. The minister clearly defended the medical professionals involved with her statement that "no one had asked for an abortion for Ana María Acevedo."

The publication of Ana María's medical file and the Bioethics Committee's report exposed the impact of fundamentalisms in very real way. The document—which characterized the Acevedo family as "very aggressive, threatening to go to the legal authorities"—clearly showed that Ana María and her parents had requested an abortion and the doctors had denied her request. At that time, the governor of the province decided to remove the director of Iturraspe Hospital. Ana María Acevedo's parents, family members and neighbours in Vera called for a March for Justice, which was held on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007. The Multisectorial was present. On the same day as the march in Vera, in Santa Fe, an unknown person painted the door of the legal offices of

Mirtha Manzur—a lawyer from the Multisectorial—with the slogan “God loves you.”

The fundamentalisms’ attack, supported by print and broadcast media, was very fierce, so it was very important to create a network of alliances. These included state agencies such as the Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo (National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism, INADI); academia, such as the Gender, University and Society Program of the Universidad Nacional del Litoral de Santa Fe; the association Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide); provincial deputies; city council members in Santa Fe; journalists; and independent medical professionals.

With the financial support of the [Red de Salud de las Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe](#) (RSMLAC, Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Health Network), the Multisectorial de Mujeres created a memorial mural honouring Ana María Acevedo, created by artists and graphic designers in Santa Fe.<sup>18</sup> Our colleagues at [CDD-Córdoba](#) generously disseminated a photo of the mural, which has been viewed all over the world.

With the support of the Global Fund for Women and the management of the NGO Palabras (a member of the Multisectorial de Mujeres) we developed a project to continue publicizing the case on all fronts.

Due to this national exposure and our alliances with national legislators, on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007, members of the Comisión de Acción Social y Salud Pública (Social Action and Public Health Committee) of the Chamber of Deputies presented to their peers a draft resolution expressing their regret over the death of Ana María.

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the Multisectorial attended the XXII Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres in the city of Cordoba, where more



than 20,000 women from all over the country met for three days to discuss, compare experiences and determine strategies for the future. The recent death of Ana María Acevedo was our call to arms. Norma Cuevas, having decided to fight for the right to abortion and seek justice for her daughter, joined us at the meeting and also at the Workshop on Strategies for Legal, Safe and Free Abortion. In a very emotional speech, she shared her daughter’s story.<sup>19</sup> This experience struck her very hard and on returning to Vera she and her husband decided to end the lawyer-client relationship with their legal counsel—who had, without consulting them, recently met with the bishop of Santa Fe to assure him that the family was not “fighting for abortion”—and entrust the Multisectorial’s lawyers with their daughter’s case.

The legal proceedings will no doubt take a long time. At the end of June 2008 we achieved a legal victory: the doctors mainly responsible for Ana María Acevedo’s death were prosecuted, although they have not yet been sentenced.

To commemorate the first anniversary of Ana María’s death, we demonstrated in front of Iturraspe Hospital; an effective strategy, as feminist activists from all over the country attended. We also handed out street posters for the campaign and created a second memorial mural for Ana María. After the demonstration there was a march as well as a forum for discussion and exchange between feminists.

In order to generate publicity about the case and to reach and raise awareness among academia, we began holding debates on legal abortion and humane post-abortion care at the schools of law and medicine of the Universidad Nacional del Litoral. Young and older men from fundamentalist groups attended both events with the goal of impeding or preventing the debates. They distributed pamphlets and other materials against the right to choose.

The short [video](#)<sup>20</sup> on Ana María that we filmed deserves mention. The video shows her life, her death and the tireless struggle of her family and the Multisectorial in pursuit of justice. It also shows how the case was taken up the feminist movement throughout Argentina. The video gives us a glimpse of the real Ana María, a young woman with a hint of a smile; it shows the hospital where she died and reflects back our own image in search of justice. Information about the video has been disseminated at our activities, it is available on YouTube, and it has been shown elsewhere as well.

Due to the political impact of the publicity surrounding this case, members of the Multisectorial de Mujeres are sought after for panels and seminars all over the country and asked to share successful strategies to combat fundamentalisms.

## Looking Ahead

We believe that the strategy of fighting on two fronts, legally and politically, is an effective tool for the struggle, but it must be used in conjunction with other civil society organizations. The legal battle is very important, but profound transformation is only achieved by raising awareness among all sectors of society, especially persecuted, neglected and discriminated against sectors, such as women. In order to increase the political impact, we also use playful and creative elements, taking our activism to the streets, plazas, neighbourhoods, health centers, the halls of the courts, legislative chambers, the media, universities, etc.

The public debate about abortion has started in Argentina and there is no going back. We believe it will be a hard fight, but many sectors of society now have more awareness regarding the issues, including a good number of provincial officials and legislators. As a result, in June 2009, the Ley Provincial de Adhesión a la Guía Nacional de Atención de Abortos No Punibles (Provincial Act on Adherence to the National Legal Abortion Care Guide) was approved.<sup>21</sup>

On the legal front, we intend to bring the case to the international sphere, either with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights or the United Nations.

There have also been undesirable consequences. For example, the worst aspects of medical associations—fundamentalism, authoritarianism and intolerance—which have blocked each of our actions, have been revealed. However, we must acknowledge that many doctors have approached us, interested in learning about the details of the case.

Fundamentalist groups have brought the same perseverance with which they blocked our debates to damaging the two murals honouring Ana María Acevedo. They have painted over in black the words written there. With even more perseverance and conviction we repaired both murals, under the slogans: “For every word you cross out we will paint a thousand more” and “Light the lamps, the witches are coming back.”<sup>22</sup>

One unintended result that was nevertheless extremely satisfying was the relationship we established with Ana María’s family and the support we have been able to give them. We are very proud of Norma’s activism, her participation at the Encuentro de Mujeres and her recognition as an Outstanding Woman by the Chamber of Deputies for her strength and struggle for justice for her daughter.

Knowledge of the underlying causes, motivations and attractions of fundamentalisms enable us to retrace the steps, denaturalize the moral and religious discourse, question these truths that have historically been

seen as monolithic, and expose their *modus operandi*. These tasks are necessary to build truly secular and democratic states, where plurality and diversity of ideas are considered paramount.

Deconstructing the discourse enshrining the idea that secularism is in opposition to religion challenges us to work for the idea that what secularism really opposes is the theocratic state and the authoritarianism of dogmas. It is therefore imperative that the women’s movement fight for the secularization of the state as a first step to begin the debate, on an equal footing with all sectors, on the appropriation of our bodies and our sexuality.

Lastly, we must note that Ana María Acevedo’s case has transformed our lives as feminist activists in support of women’s rights. Through our activism and our personal lives each one of us has felt the pain that she suffered and it has led us to rebel.

This fight is for all women, so that not a single other woman will be denied the right to make decisions about her body; it is a fight for her as well as a fight for all. For Ana María, because her life deserves to be remembered, because it is necessary, urgent and essential that justice be done.

In her memory, to keep her story alive, we dedicate this work to her:  
**ANA MARÍA ACEVEDO**

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Marta Vasallo, *En nombre de la vida (In the name of life)*, Córdoba: Editorial Gráfica SEM, 2005. We have drawn on the author's ideas in this section.

<sup>2</sup> According to an analysis by Ana Güesmez, the fact that the Catholic church is one of the most recognized social institutions does not speak to the legitimacy of the church, but rather the weakness of public institutions.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: The expression "*pensée unique*" (French for "single thought") refers to the claim of supremacy of neoliberalism as an ideology. See Wikipedia entry on "*Pensée unique*."

<sup>4</sup> Also in the area of health: in many public hospitals in Argentina, gynaecology, obstetrics and maternity wards are staffed by nurses who are nuns, which makes it impossible to access any information about contraception. It is also common to see crucifixes hanging on the walls in judicial chambers, schoolrooms and hospital rooms—all public spaces.

<sup>5</sup> Law 23.515 of 1987 and Law 23.264 of 1985.

<sup>6</sup> We cannot forget the important legacy of Alice Dumont, Leonie Duquet, Carlos Mujica, Enrique Angelelli, the religious Pallottines, and many others. Dumont and Duquet, French nuns who assisted the families of the disappeared, were kidnapped in Buenos Aires in December 1977 and later killed. Mujica, a priest who lived and worked in poor neighbourhoods (*villas*) in Buenos Aires, was murdered in May 1974. Angelelli, bishop of La Rioja, who clashed with the economically powerful in his defence of impoverished people, died in 1976 in a staged automobile accident. In July 1976, three priests (Alfredo Kelly, Alfredo Leaden and Pedro Duffau) and two seminarians (Salvador Barbeito and Emilio Barlett) from the Pallottines order were murdered in the church where they lived and worked. In all cases it has been proven that the perpetrators of these crimes were members of the Argentine security forces, or in the case of Mujica, right-wing paramilitary groups.

<sup>7</sup> Opus Dei has 85,000 members worldwide and 29,400 in Latin America (according to the article "Personas del Opus Dei (People of Opus Dei)," on the [Opus Dei](#) website in Argentina). The identity of most of its members is public, but in the case of influential people in politics or business, the relationship is often kept secret. Emilio J. Corbière, *Opus Dei: El totalitarismo católico* (Opus Dei: Catholic Totalitarianism), Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See "[Documento de los curas villeros](#) (Document of the Shantytown priests)," on the website of Diario Libre: [www.diariolibre.info](#).

<sup>9</sup> Juan Marco Vaggione, "Los Roles Políticos de la Religión. Género y Sexualidad más allá del Secularismo (Religion's Political Roles: Gender and Sexuality beyond Secularism)," in Vasallo, *op.cit.*: 149.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth pointing out that this is the only article of the Penal Code that uses the feminine form "reprimida" [meaning "sentenced," here; clearly indicating the subject is female]. Before and after, the Code employs sexist language using the masculine, repeating the formula: "*He* who commits such a crime shall be sentenced [literally: *reprimido*, the masculine form] to a specific number of years in prison."

<sup>11</sup> Article 86 of the Argentine Penal Code is available online at the Justiniano (Argentine Legal Search Engine) website [www.justiniano.com/codigos\\_juridicos/codigo\\_penal.htm](#).

<sup>12</sup> Note that the use of the word "mother" where it should read "woman" is not by chance.

<sup>13</sup> As has happened in Guernica, a city in La Plata, Buenos Aires Province; Mendoza, Mendoza Province; and the city of Paraná, Entre Ríos Province, among others.

<sup>14</sup> In the interests of revealing the true identity of fundamentalists, feminists maintain that they are not pro-life groups but rather "groups against women's rights."

<sup>15</sup> Passed in 2002, one of the main objectives of the law is "to increase people's sexual health and responsible procreation to the highest level so that they may make decisions free from discrimination, coercion and violence" and "guarantee to all people access to information and orientation as well as services and methods supporting sexual health and responsible procreation."

<sup>16</sup> In Argentina these national women's meetings have been held in a different province every year since 1986. They are self-organized and self-financed. The meeting in October 2009 in Tucumán brought together more than 20,000 women. For more information, visit [www.24-encuentromujeres.com.ar](#).

<sup>17</sup> The *escrache* has been used extensively in Argentina by [Agrupación H.I.J.O.S.](#) (Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio—Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetfulness and Silence), a human rights organization of the sons and daughters of the disappeared, murdered, exiled and ex-political prisoners of the last military dictatorship. The *escrache* consists of a public demonstration to make visible the invisible, uncover what has been covered up, and identify those individuals responsible. In Argentina, *escraches* have been used for people guilty of acts of genocide, including Jorge Rafael Videla (dictator, a member of the group responsible for the coup, and usurper to the presidency between 1976 and 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Martín Moschen, Ana Cilla, Ignacio Carranza and José Ramírez.

<sup>19</sup> At the workshop were a group of Catholic women who usually organize their attendance through the churches prior to the Encuentros, and they reproached Norma for having wanted to kill her grandchild. Almost crying, Ana María's mother said, "But you don't understand, if my daughter died..." Of course they understood, but they believed that women must sacrifice their lives for the unborn. And that's what they said in the workshop. In any event, they were a minority that was expelled by the other participants.

<sup>20</sup> Directed by María Victoria Rey, who has a degree in social communication. (The [video](#) can be found online at [www.youtube.com](#) using the search words "Ana María Acevedo.")

<sup>21</sup> See Sonia Tessa, "[Para que nadie pueda negarse](#) (So no one can be denied)," *Página12*, Suplemento Rosario12, 8 June 2009. The Guía para la Atención Integral de los Abortos No Punibles (Guide for Integrated Care for Legal Abortion) was created

in 2007 by the national Ministry of Health. One of its objectives is to avoid the traps set by fundamentalists in cases of legal abortion, for example, requiring judicial authorization, which is not necessary.

<sup>22</sup> This phrase is emblematic of the generation of Argentine national rock and the word “witch” is used as a synonym for “inquisitor.” The phrase suggests lighting lamps against the darkness.

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### ***Author Bios:***

**Lucila Puyol** is a feminist author and a popular educator. She is an activist for women’s human rights, a member of the Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe, the feminist NGO Palabras, the NGO Canoa-Hábitat Popular and [Agrupación H.I.J.O.S.](#) Her father was disappeared and her mother was a political prisoner of the last Argentine military dictatorship. She is working towards her master’s in gender at the Universidad Nacional de Rosario.

**Paula Condrac** is a feminist, social psychologist and lawyer. She is an activist for women’s human rights, a member of the Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe and the NGO Canoa-Hábitat Popular. She is a member of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year team at the Primera Escuela de Psicología Social de Santa Fe Dr. Enrique Pichon Rivière (Dr. Pichone Riviere First School of Social Psychology of Santa Fe) and of the Human Rights and Gender Departments at CYDEPSP (Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones en Psicología Social Pichoniana/Pichoniana Centre for Social Psychology Studies and Research).

### ***Organizational Bio:***

The Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe is a feminist collective composed of individual women, women’s organizations, civil society organizations and political parties. Since its founding in March 2005, the group has provided support to the struggles of popular movements but specifically focuses on advocating for women’s human rights. Lucila Puyol, Paula Condrac and Mirtha Manzur are members of the Multisectorial de Mujeres de Santa Fe’s legal team, which is responsible for the legal actions in the Ana María Acevedo case.