

Feminism on the offensive: a pro-life manifesto

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The debate in political circles and in the media in recent decades around the question of abortion has been accompanied by a growing monopoly ownership of the defence of the right to life by the Right, in a way that skillfully counter-poses it to the feminist demand of the right to choose.

Although we as feminists have defended ourselves against these Sibylline accusations of egoism and/or infanticide, coming from the propaganda machine of the Catholic Church and its secular followers, we should recognize that our attempts at questioning the defence of life as the exclusive instrument of the Right have so far produced very few results. As "anti-choice" as they may be, the anti-choice activists are known by everyone as "pro-life", and as pro-life as it may be, the feminist movement is still identified as "pro-abortion".

However, apart from its calculated polarization, this logic is wrong. Feminism defends life. And it always has done. And that is why at a time when the paragons of traditional morality come out of their burrows to attack once again freedom and the right to decide, in a context where the cuts and the caverns combine to resurrect the vision of women as submissive and full of abnegation, it is more than ever necessary from a strategic perspective to assert feminism as being profoundly pro-life and to get rid of the semantic corset that is being imposed on us from outside.

A feminist pro-life manifesto does not only strengthen the demand for women's freedom and autonomy as key elements of women's struggle: it also allows us, at a time when the Right is back on the offensive, criminalizing us and robbing us of our rights, to assert and substantiate our re-appropriation of life as emancipatory path and guiding principle. Here is a first draft:

A question of rights...

1. Feminism defends the right of women to terminate their pregnancies in a safe manner. As the World Health Organization stresses, the prohibition of abortion only serves to increase maternal mortality; today, on a world scale, 47,000 women die each year because they terminate their pregnancy in a clandestine way. Thirteen per cent of maternal deaths are due to unsafe abortions and the majority of cases occur in countries with restrictive legislation on abortion.

The number of voluntary terminations of pregnancy does not diminish when legislation is harsh; on the other hand, the number of dangerous abortions increases. It is out of respect for the memory of all those women who, while trying to exercise their right not to have a child, have found themselves in unsanitary situations, have risked their lives or indeed died, that feminism is pro-life.

2. According to the UN the term "clandestine and unsafe abortion" refers not only to risks to the health and the lives of women, but also to the negation of their right to information, to life and to

freedom. Thus, this type of abortion does not just represent a health problem; it is first and foremost a question of human, social and economic rights.

The many obstacles that prevent women from accessing abortion in a free and equal way - for example the fact of having the means necessary to travel and/or pay for a discreet private clinic, their age, place of residence, country of origin or administrative position - are not only patently hypocritical, they are also discriminatory. If all of these barriers still exist in the present legislation of the Spanish state concerning abortion, they will increase if the Popular Party carries out its threat to reform that legislation. It is because it is determined to eliminate these barriers that feminism is pro-life.

3. The main factors that promote the reduction of unwanted pregnancies and abortions among young women are the increased use of contraceptives, better access to information and better sexual and relationship education: all that has been demanded for years by the feminist movement.

In spite of the fact that this same Right that calls us "anti- life" is opposed to our young people having safe, free and intelligent sexual relations, it is necessary and urgent to create and transmit a model of sexuality that is rewarding, mature and safe. We will not succeed in doing that by hypocritically advocating abstinence or by silence, but rather by ensuring that young people's choices are increasingly based on information, freedom and mutual respect. It is by its firm defence of the prevention of unwanted pregnancies - and therefore, of abortions - on the basis of the transmission of values of equality and autonomy that feminism is pro- life.

... for everyone, men and women!

4. In his delusional crusade against women's right to choose, the minister Gallardón threatens to make the present legislation even more restrictive than it was in 1985 and he proposes suppressing the criterion of foetus malformation as a reason for abortion. He does so with the argument that all those people who have been born or are "about to be born" with any kind of disability must have the same rights as other citizens.

As feminists , we can already wonder how the right-wing forces at the head of and in the shadow of the government have the impudence to proclaim themselves heroic saviours of a section of society to which they deny any kind of dignified existence through their measures of austerity and privatization in the services, programmes and other forms of support to people with limited autonomy. Is the Popular Party not rather seeking to create a situation where it is families, and women in particular, who take sole responsibility for those that the PP forces to be born, but in whom it loses interest from the very first minute of their lives? The same families and the same women that they drive into poverty because of their fraudulent rescue of the banks and their destruction of the Welfare State? It is by its firm denunciation of this imposture which pretends to defend social rights from Monday to Thursday while destroying them by their decrees just before the weekend, that feminism asserts itself, today more than ever, as pro-life.

5. The Popular Party not only forces women to become mothers against their will, it also prevents many other women, who want to be mothers and feel prepared for it, to actually become mothers. It does this through the defense of forced sterilization of people with psychic disabilities, despite the opposition of social organizations and the recommendations of the UN. It does so by opposing before the Constitutional Tribunal marriage between people of the same sex, because it considers that only the heterosexual family is the "natural" framework for raising fchildren (sic). And it does so by preventing women living alone and lesbians from having access to public services of medically assisted reproduction in order to have a child without the direct intervention of a man.

The government thus divides women into “good” and “bad” mothers, good and bad women, and it decides who can start a family and who cannot. Gallardón says that motherhood makes women really women, but he forgets to make it clear (such forgetfulness!) that he is only talking about those women who have an adequate sexual orientation, who want to form the correct type of family (nuclear, heterosexual, etc...) and who do not have any kind of mental disability. Only the God of Rouco Varela (Archbishop of Madrid and president of the Spanish Episcopal Conference) knows what might happen if we allow children to be brought up among “queers” and “dykes” or if we guarantee that persons with physical handicaps will have full autonomy in decisions concerning their bodies and their sexuality. It is, finally, in its determination to defend the rights and freedoms of all people, and to do so from Monday to Sunday, that feminism is pro-life.

A more just and a freer society

Feminism is pro-life because its *raison d'être* is to build a more just and a freer society, one which places welfare and common good at the centre of everything; a society which does not condemn its poorest, youngest and most vulnerable women to bleed to death because of a clandestine abortion; a society which does not aspire to domesticate people's bodies and their lives and to force them into moralistic little pigeon-holes; a society that educates its young people in principles of reason, responsibility and truth, so that their actions will not have negative impacts on themselves or on other people; a society that integrates, cares for and genuinely respects people with functional diversity: that accepts freedom for all human beings to make decisions concerning their feelings and their desires and that does not say one thing and do another.

Nevertheless, it is the prohibitive and anti-choice discourse that has the advantage today. We do not have much time: new attacks are being prepared. Let us take to the streets, let us take back possession of what is ours and go on the offensive. Feminism, today and always, is pro-life.

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P.S.

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