

VITAL INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVISTS

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VOICES TO INSPIRE

The abortion rights landscape has been evolving across the United States and Latin America for decades. In Latin America, the Marea Verde ("Green Wave") movement that originated in Argentina rapidly spread across the region, catalyzing policy change for women's autonomy, which led to the legalization of abortion in Argentina (2021), Colombia (2022), and several Mexican states. In the United States, the fall of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 triggered a wave of state-level restrictions and renewed anti-abortion policy advocacy. Since then, reproductive rights movements and advocates have responded with legal challenges, ballot initiatives, and reform effort, which have met both progress and resistance.

The VITAL project identified key factors shaping abortion policy across the Americas and fostered cross-border learning among advocates, practitioners, activists, and policymakers. Through 45 key informant interviews and three focus groups in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States, we explored what enables or hinders successful abortion rights advocacy, how and why movements collaborate, and how they have responded to policy challenges in their respective contexts. The findings from VITAL highlight actionable lessons and strategies that can inform practical, context-specific, and collaborative approaches to advancing abortion rights and access across the region.



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KEY ISSUES FOR ACTIVISTS

Activists are the heart of the abortion movement. They organize, march, and give their lives over to the cause and the people they are fighting for. For decades, activists and movement leaders in Latin America and the United States have been at the forefront of building and sustaining reproductive justice movements. Activists around the globe can learn from the lessons, actions, and decisions of these leading voices. Together, they can create movements that advance the legal and social acceptance of abortion, foster intersectional and empowering environments that draw people in, and ensure that activists and their communities are cared for and supported.

ABORTION RIGHTS CANNOT BE FULLY RECOGNIZED WITHOUT OVERCOMING STIGMA AND SOCIAL DECRIMINALIZATION.

Historically, changes to abortion laws have followed years of sustained grassroots activism and efforts to shift public perception toward recognizing the right to safe, legal abortion. As with most social movements, public opinion shapes the narrative that enables or obstructs change. In Argentina, the 2005 national abortion campaign helped transform public opinion and laid the groundwork for Marea Verde, the grassroots movement. Yet, even where abortion is legal and widely accepted, stigma, due to internalized shame or fear of ostracism, can often prevent people from seeking care or joining movements. Participants in both Latin America and the United States emphasized the importance of “social decriminalization”—challenging social norms that make accessing, supporting, or even saying the word “abortion” taboo. Without addressing stigma at every level, activists and movement leaders cannot fully overcome the barriers to care, policy progress, and movement cohesion that are essential for universal access and acceptance.

“Even if you teach everyone how to perform a safe abortion, if you have good laws, if the culture and perception of women’s moral agency doesn’t change, then access to abortion will equally be affected.”

- Colombia, Direct Service Provider



“You can do whatever you want with policy. You can make abortion legal in every corner of this country, but until people’s attitudes change, until there’s a culture shift, things won’t change.”

- California, Grassroots Activist

COLLABORATION ACROSS BORDERS AND MOVEMENTS CREATES OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE LEARNING AND BUILD STRONGER MOVEMENTS, AS LONG AS LEADERS RECOGNIZE THEIR UNIQUE CONTEXT AND “READ THE MOMENT”

The landscape of reproductive justice work is shaped by a range of social, economic, environmental, legal, political, and other contextual factors that can ease or hinder the enactment of desired change. Movements that read and respond to their political and social environments carefully have been more successful at seizing policy windows, pivoting to new strategies, breaking from traditional international, national, or state-level movement models, and defending their positions during periods of backlash. A policy advocate from Colombia, for example, explained that, unlike in Argentina where mass mobilization is possible, “in Colombia we do not have that possibility...because we still have armed social conflict,” which creates insecurity and violence around public demonstrations. Separately, after years of unsuccessful attempts at policy change through legislative channels, Colombian advocates shifted strategic direction by targeting the Constitutional Court rather than the less sympathetic legislature. Similarly, U.S. activists and legal experts emphasized the importance of grassroots organizing at the state and local levels, shifting from pursuing sweeping legislative victories and instead focusing on incremental yet steady change in light of an increasingly conservative legislative and judicial landscape.



Because contextual factors so strongly shape movement strategies, activists and advocates in each of our case study geographies reported that it was difficult to work across borders or learn from other movements. They felt their particular environments were too distinct for strategies used elsewhere to be directly applicable. “Argentina is Argentina” is a phrase repeated by participants from all three of our Latin American case study countries who believed it would be futile for others to try to replicate their experience. Activists across Latin America and the United States echoed this sentiment. Likewise, they viewed their political and cultural contexts as too distinct to allow for meaningful cross-border transfer.

However, our research found that movements across countries and states faced more similarities than differences, frequently citing the same barriers and considerations in movement building. Strategies cannot simply be transplanted from one place to another; however, they can be thoughtfully adapted by accounting for the local context. Engaging with historical narratives, past movement approaches, current political landscapes, and community needs can help activists navigate complexity, identify windows of opportunity, and skillfully apply lessons learned. Rather than reinventing the wheel, activists can strengthen their work by drawing on long-standing approaches, using “naming and framing” strategies, and tailoring them to the nuances of their own communities and goals.

INTERSECTIONALITY SUPPORTS EFFORTS TO BUILD A WIDESPREAD, SUSTAINABLE ABORTION ACCESS MOVEMENT, BUT IS CHALLENGING IN PRACTICE.

Within the abortion rights movement, activists and advocates often hold multiple identities and engage across a variety of issues in their personal and professional lives. This vantage point allows them to see how the challenges people face intersect and compound one another. As a result, there has been a growing call to recognize the importance of intersectionality within the movement and to ensure that leadership and strategies reflect this diversity. In both the United States and Latin America, activists spoke about how there is an understanding that while reproductive health services are critical, pregnancy is rarely the only issue people are worried about. In the United States, the term “reproductive justice” is most widely used when talking about these intersections, while Latin American activists use human rights language to frame their movement-building. The most relevant intersectional issues vary by context – for example, the movement in Texas has a strong focus on immigration; Georgia activists heavily consider the connection between abortion and maternal mortality; and many movements in Latin America are underscored by activism around gender-based violence and LGBTQI+ and/or indigenous rights. Key informants acknowledged that intersectional collaboration enables social justice movements to leverage existing networks, engage allies, and foster collaboration across issues to build broader coalitions and serve more of the communities’ intersecting needs.



“Georgia is one of the blackest states. I think it's about 30% black, and so it wouldn't really make sense to have just like a dozen white women plaintiffs in a state where black and brown pregnant people are facing the biggest harms and the brunt of the abortion restrictions.”



- Georgia, Legal Expert

However, reproductive justice actors often struggle to adopt an intersectional approach within their movements and to collaborate effectively across social justice causes. Internally, disagreements arise over how to build intersectional alliances. Some activists stress the importance of solidarity across issues, unified action, and expanding feminist principles to better support marginalized identities and communities with intersecting needs. Others worry that limited funding, media attention, and resources—especially for reproductive justice—make cross-movement collaboration risky, fearing it may dilute rather than strengthen their efforts.



SELF-CARE FOR ACTIVISTS AND MOVEMENT LEADERS IS IMPORTANT FOR MOVEMENT SUSTAINABILITY.

The fight for abortion rights in Latin America and the United States is hard-fought and ongoing. Most key informants and focus group participants reported being overworked and stretched thin due to limited resources. When asked about ways they stay motivated in their work and avoid burnout, their responses ranged from finding moments in their daily routines to decompress, to taking vacations and stepping away from work, to finding joy and meaning in serving others. However, while participants emphasized that self-care was necessary for the long-term sustainability and growth of the movement, there was little clarity on how to address the need for self-care within the movement concretely. They also recognized that not all people who worked within the movement had that privilege.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVISTS

Educate and engage with communities to combat abortion stigma to lay the foundation for successful movement building and change. Tackling abortion stigma takes sustained community engagement and education, both within and outside the reproductive rights movement. Activists shared destigmatization strategies, such as normalizing abortion in everyday conversation, educating peers about the harms of abortion bans, and connecting abortion rights to other social issues people care about.

Collaborate and engage with global reproductive rights movements, while ensuring that lessons learned are applied with a local lens. Participants emphasized their desire to work across borders, learn from activists in other states, countries, and regions, and use those lessons to fight for abortion access at home. While convenings, gatherings, and coalitions with movements across borders have grown over the years, more strategic, sustained, and intentional engagement is needed.

Strengthen alliances across sectors to build intersectional partnerships that can provide support in difficult times and better serve community needs. Building intentionally intersectional movements requires finding common ground within and beyond the reproductive justice community and seeking out ways for mutual support with other social movements. Activists should align community and movement needs, center the voices of those most impacted, and collaborate across diverse social justice sectors.

Build time for self-care into budgets and workloads to combat burnout. Self-care, rest, and reflection are necessary for addressing burnout and building lasting, sustainable grassroots movements. Work with donors to resource those opportunities. Engage with staff and volunteers to understand the support they need and explore how self-care can enhance their well-being and support the movement's goals.

