

Words To Win By

Episode 6: Legalizing Abortion - Argentina

Transcript

Anat:

I wanna tell you about another podcast. I think you'll love El ILO on Twitter and other social networks. When someone says Abdo ILO in Spanish, it means they're gonna dive deep buckle up for a thread. With analysis, context, history and more El ELO is all those things. Any invitation to a deeper conversation and understanding of the news from Latin America, every Friday, the hosts speak to local journalists, contributors, Fe news reporters, and some of the most trusted voices from the region. What happened and where is the news headed on the next episode? Friday, December 17th. They'll look back 20 years to ed Argentina's groundbreaking economic and political crisis that has shaped the country ever since what happened on December, 2001 in Argentina, what was behind the government's abrupt decision? And what role did the international monetary fund play? What happened after Argentina paid off their debt? And why did it rapidly become indebted all over again? What does the current crisis in Argentina look like? What differences and similarities does it have with what happened 20 years ago? Is there any hope to break? What seems to be a vicious cycle? Listen to a Lilo wherever you get your podcast.

[Crowd noise]

Anat:

What you're hearing is the exact moment abortion was legalized in Argentina. It was 4 a.m. on a Wednesday morning December 30th 2020. 39 YES's, 29 NO's, and 1 abstention. Massive crowds who had been standing vigil as the Senate completed their voting line the plaza near the Argentinian Congress. Screams of joy, tears of relief as green smoke is released into the air, swirling around the gathering of mostly women - from grandmothers to teens - waiving the green handkerchiefs that connected their decades of struggle and served as a core symbol throughout this campaign.

Theme Song:

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing? And so many others, grieve. By way of they reply, I say a Fool, such as I who sees this song is Somewhere to begin.

Anat:

Hi, I'm Anat Shenker-Osorio, and this is Words to Win By. Today, we're heading to Argentina, where organizers and journalists, doctors and nurses, lawyers and actresses, lifelong activists and newly energized teens employed distinct messages, each intended for a key audience, into

a harmonious winning campaign. With a solid understanding of engaging and growing the base as well as converting the middle, this broad coalition of forces proved you can change hearts and minds, and with them votes and laws.

And they succeeded in Argentina. A predominantly Catholic country and homeland of current Pope Francis, with a brutal history of dictatorship that paved the way for hostility to women's rights.

As Mariela Belski, long time feminist, activist and lawyer, and Executive Director of Amnesty International Argentina, explains in translation, the fight to legalize abortion has been a long road across a host of challenges. She told me about the very beginning of her career in the feminist movement.

If you want to hear from Mariela and the other incredible organizers in this story in their own words you can listen to the spanish version of this episode

Mariella:

I was very young then. The truth is that the feminist movement that concretely fights for many issues of gender, but specifically for abortion decriminalization and legalization, started in the 80s. We were at the end of a tough dictatorship in Argentina, and these women knew that it was going to be a long road. But it was going to be a fight that they were going to win throughout the years.

Anat:

The military regime under Jorge Rafael Videla that lasted until 1983 was a repressive era that afforded little opportunity for organizing around women's rights. When it ended, women in Argentina began making up for lost time. In addition to taking on gender-based violence, women's rights, and political representation, activists fought for comprehensive sex education, and contraceptives. By the 90s, the right to safe and legal abortion became an additional demand. Organizers started by putting out pamphlets and having encounter groups across the country, taking the once taboo topic of abortion out of just the cities and into the provinces. Then, in 2005, the movement acquired new momentum with the inception of Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito/The National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion in Argentina. They adopted a symbol deeply resonant to Argentinians: the handkerchief.

Mariella:

The handkerchiefs come from the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

Anat:

The Mothers of Plaza Mayo was a human rights association formed in 1977 protesting what's known in Argentina as the "desaparecidos."

Mariella:

Once a week they walked around the Plaza de Mayo with handkerchiefs tied to their heads, demanding that their children reappear, alive. Those white handkerchiefs were the symbol of those mothers, wives, and grandmothers who fought during the dictatorship.

Anat:

The women who started the National Campaign adopted this handkerchief, signaling continuity with longstanding movements for human rights and women's rights. A symbol of solidarity with mothers and grandmothers past who were willing to confront the very essence of repressive male power: a brutal dictatorship. Instead of white, they made their cloths green to symbolize hope and renewal. It was imprinted with the words: "Educación sexual para decidir, anticonceptivo para no abortar, aborto legal para no morir" - "Sex education to decide, contraception to avoid abortions, legal abortion so we don't die."

Mariella:

The interesting thing about the handkerchief is that it is about love. It transcended Argentina's borders. Now it is the symbol of the fight for legal abortion in the whole region, Mexico and Chile took it and made it their own. Each country adopted it

Anat:

At around the same time, the movement against femicide reignited with a first march on June 3, 2015 after the murder of Chiara Perez. The trending hashtag on Twitter, where the protest was organized, also became the slogan of a wave of marches: #NiUnaMenos. Not one fewer.

Mariella:

The extremely high level of femicides that happen in Argentina is a structural problem. It happens every day. The rate of murdered women is extremely high, and they are mainly murdered by family members, relatives, neighbors. Which basically means that we have to say "enough;" that we have to say not even one more woman should die due to femicide.

Anat:

What's notable about #NiUnaMenos is that the most top of mind phrase would be #NiUnaMas in Spanish. The same goes for English, where we'd anticipate #NotOneMore. t at first hearing it likely garnered surprise and, thus, drew attention.

Where another common approach, for example "end gender based violence" or "stop abuse," has you think about the harms wrought, "Ni Una Menos" likely makes you think about an actual person or people. It flips the standard frame. Thanks to the incredible success of the movement, "ni una menos" is now echoed across Latin America. Not only has "ni una menos" been pivotal on addressing violence against women, campaigners realized it could also encompass making the case for access to legal abortion.

Mariella:

Of course, we were asking for an end to femicides. But from then on, abortion decriminalization was added to our calls in the marches as well.

Anat:

Over the years the campaign got going, President Macri made a critical step: Though he declared himself anti-abortion, he gave his party members leave to vote their conscience. Also, because abortion had been so seldom discussed in Argentina, legalization didn't seem like a real possibility. So, Catholic and Evangelical churches were relatively silent on the matter, lending the campaign rhetorical room to persuade and mobilize for a while without audible opposition. The campaign included a diverse array of groups spanning the whole country. It was initially centered around women integral to the movement for decades, But in 2018 leaders quickly recognized they would need additional voices, forces and approaches to succeed.

Paula:

My name is Paula Ávila Guillén. I am a human rights attorney, activist, feminist, and also, the executive director of WEC, Women's Equality Center. We believe that the campaign started 15 years ago when the national campaign for the movement decided to bring together an array of movements. And those first leaders were the ones who shaped everything that has happened. They deserve the recognition for everything that has happened in Argentina. That is something that I want to make very clear

Anat:

Paula and WEC carved out a very specific, and critical niche, in the campaign.

Paula:

We started working in Argentina at the behest of the local organizers. They realized that there was going to be a moment when they, by themselves couldn't grow more and wouldn't be able to reach certain groups of people. There was going to be a group of people with whom our feminist messages wouldn't resonate. So if we weren't able to convince that audience one way or another, we were going to lose. As simple as that.

Anat:

While others focus squarely on increasing activism among the base. WEC aimed at another audience, the persuadable middle.

Paula:

Well, the first thing that we did was an analysis of the context, because if there is something we have learned, it is that there's no magical formula that works for everything. For reaching the whole world and all audiences in every country, whatever we do has to be purposeful and specific to the context. So I believe that one of the most successful things we did in Argentina was to focus our study in the provinces instead of Buenos Aires. We knew that the great majority of people in the middle were there mainly they were the people who at the end were going to influence the vote.

Anat:

Deep dives, exploring conflicted voters, often reveal that messages we've used for decades in gender immediate resistance messages that are already recognized as standard progressive slogans, including in this case name checking feminism can have otherwise reachable voters put up walls. Persuasion can often require saying something new.

Paula:

There are certain messengers that are much more effective in conveying the same feminist message, but in a different way,

Anat:

Some messengers are better than others. And in the case of abortion, in many places, the dominant spokespeople on the topic, human rights lawyers proved to be among the least compelling. Instead medical providers were among the most.

Paula:

In our analysis, we found the doc nurses and healthcare providers were the constant variable, the person they trusted, but in the case of Argentina, there was something very interesting. It couldn't be a random doctor. It had to be a doctor from the provinces. It had to be their primary physician, their doctor, or someone close to their doctor.

Anat:

Identity plays a massive role in how people come to political judgements. As the saying goes, we don't see things as they are, but rather as we are and on a topic as weighty and polarized as abortion, people can easily hold onto a sense that what my kind of person believes about this is X. This is all done unconsciously, of course, people's sense of self and of belonging to whatever our identity group is foundational and colors our views. But we want to believe ourselves rational creatures who make judgements based on evidence and logic. And so we seek out precisely the information required to reaffirm what we already believe in Argentina. There was a perception that supporters of legal abortion were all in big cities. So part of persuading people in the provinces required rupturing. The idea that this was a rural versus urban divide. And because WEC understands that people are indeed driven by feeling and not by logic, they crafted messages delivered by medical care providers, from the provinces that elicited emotion, instead of reciting facts.

Paula:

A lot of times when doctors have been the messengers, they talked about data and that does not move a lot of people at the end of the day, when people vote, their decision comes from their gut, from their emotion. So when we started talking with the doctors about the campaign, they started telling us stories that they had experienced in the emergency rooms, stories about women who they couldn't save. Heartbreaking stories about young girls who got to the emergency room with such a severe infection due to a clandestine abortion that their uterus had to be removed. Those girls would not be able to become mothers and their stories made us shatter. And we said, okay, this is the way we need doctors to tell the stories of women, because

when they do that, there's not the same level of rejection. We realized that across the country, when a woman tells her own story about an abortion, there is a tendency to judge her. But when another person tells a story, as woman, the judgment fades away, people are more open to hear the story. And when they hear those stories, there is no way that their hearts won't be touched.

Anat:

The WEC team took down hours of testimony and turned complex accounts from these medical providers into short social media, worthy clips. While undeniably calling up sadness, pain and loss, the overarching message of these stories and of this approach to having care providers as lead messengers was "salvemos miles de vidas." let's save thousands of lives.

In stark contrast to what many people assume is required for persuasion, this approach arguably goes straight to the heart of the matter. Indeed, given that the absolute crux of the opposition argument is "life" and being, according to them, "pro-life," it might seem that taking up the mantle of saving lives would be a precarious message for a campaign to legalize abortion. And while it is absolutely true that we do not want to ever argue on our opposition's turf, we also must recognize that there are foundational concepts - life, freedom and family among them -- that we absolutely cannot let them pretend to own.

I asked Paula if the campaign felt any trepidation around embracing the idea of saving lives at the core of their argument.

Paula:

One of the things that I enjoyed most during the campaign was to claim life as a word that belongs to us. And it was really important to claim our existence because they focus so intently in the embryo. It it's like we do not exist. I believe that it was very important to do that. I also believe that there are a lot of other words beside life that we need to reclaim and make them ours.

Anat:

Indeed. Not only did they fearlessly claim the mantle of being for life. One of their core slogans about the campaign itself was "nos sembraron miedo y nos crecieron alas." they planted fear in us and we grew wings. After several years of organizing in 2018 members of Congress, brokered an alliance expressing support for abortion. This was a very rare rupture of party lines, which historically have been very strong in Argentina. No one thought Congress would vote to legalize, but the inner party group did stellar work, truly airing the issue. They conducted a robust debate. And in the lead up to the vote, brought in experts from cross domains and view points to speak on the issue in the lower chamber. Mariella told me she still remembers when the congressmen and women came out onto the stage.

Mariella:

It was very impactful because in a country with very distinctive politics, with a lot of cracks, with a lot of differences, we saw that it was possible to build something in women's favor. This is something that will be ingrained in the retina in my eyes. And in my mind, that is something I will never forget. For me. It was a wonderful demonstration of advocacy for women rights,

Anat:

Luciana Peker, a feminist journalist and author, was among the people who testified.

Luciana:

I wanted to say something from my heart and from what I was experiencing. I wanted to say that it was a revolution for my daughter, for my niece, for all the teenagers that participated in 2018. And to whom I helped since I was a teenager in high school, until it became law, it was for them. And it was irreversible. We were fighting in order of a better world for our daughters

Anat:

Luciana's message, "La revolución de las hijas," the revolution of the daughters, took off. The phrase was adopted by members of Congress became a hashtag on social media and inspired young people to take up the cause. It also became the title of her book on this campaign, the notion of framing this, not merely as a revolution, but one carried out for, and by the next generation taps into one of the most effective arguments that progressives can make across issues. Namely that our opposition is mired in a dangerous, old way of thinking and wants to take us backwards where we represent a compelling forward facing force for better.

Luciana:

I believe that it is the revolution of the daughters. It is the revolution of the girls, because I believe that the fight is about the possibility of a better future. That's why young women are so important. I believe that in a world at the risk of an environmental collapse, what the conservative actors want to tell us is to go back to the old world. Why? So men who were always in charge can again have their quota of power. They deny global warming and want us to believe that the past was better. Then politically there's a strong fight for the future. If you can have sex now and not risk death, well, two years ago you could die because you had sex. That means we live in a better world now. Then the revolution of the daughters shows us that the world can be a better place for women and for girls.

Anat:

Meanwhile, the opposition, which had been pretty quiet, woke up and began organizing. They adopted a blue handkerchief as their symbol.

[CLIP]

Anat:

After the lengthy period of testimony, then came the first big trial for the bill in August of 2018. When the bill was first introduced, it passed the lower house and achievement, no one expected. But it didn't have enough votes to pass the Senate and become law under Macri's presidency. Despite the loss, many women said they believe for the first time that Argentina would legalize abortion eventually

Luciana:

Even though the conservative sectors and the right wing wanted to stop the legislation, which they achieved for a little while, they wouldn't be able to stop the will of our daughters. The revolution of the daughters will not stop. It may be halted by politics or in another country, but nothing will stop what our daughters want for themselves. And that is what finally happened.

Anat:

Mariella knew just before the defeat in the Senate, that the bill wasn't going to pass. And so Amnesty Argentina preemptively put out a full page New York Times ad across global editions of the paper. It showed a green hanger.

Mariella:

A green hanger that said goodbye, clandestine abortion. The world is watching

Anat:

These words depicted alongside a very familiar symbol. The coat hanger were intended as a clear warning to senators in Argentina. This kicked off a campaign of international pressure across global mainstream media and also in the streets where the handkerchief remained the main campaign symbol, Amnesty used the coat hanger to raise the stakes and signal the dangers of Argentina's current laws, both symbols in a nod to consistency and critical repetition were green.

Mariella:

This campaign transcended. Amnistia took the coat hanger as a symbol of the fight against clandestine abortion. A few days later, some coat hangers with the names of the senators who voted against the legislation popped up hanging outside Congress.

Anat:

The coat hanger brings to the fore what happens when abortion is not legal and people take matters quite literally into their own hands. In this, it is arguably fear-based messaging, but in a country like Argentina, where abortion had never been legal, the coat hanger is also a reality check. It succinctly says abortion is happening. The question is not around whether or not people will do this, but rather how. And at what harm to themselves. The defeat in the Senate was also a call to action for Paula.

Paula:

When the bill didn't pass, we realized that one of the reasons for that was a big void in communication. The vast majority of people hadn't received the message about the campaign to legalize abortion. We believed that everybody was talking about this issue. And in part it was because of social media. It made us believe that the issue that we saw was important for everyone. But when we did research about public opinion and focus groups, we realized that the vast majority of people were not interested in this matter because it didn't affect them. Because they didn't have time because they were concerned about paying their bills, taking their kids to school, surviving, eating, working. After the bill did not pass the first time, we realized that we had to help strengthen and grow the green movement as much as we could. What do we do in

order to let the world see the wonders that are happening in Argentina? What do we do in order to make those videos of spectacular marches viral? So we try to connect the rest of the world with what was going on in Argentina. And I believe that it worked because the movement grew and the green wave became a green tsunami that is reaching the whole region.

Anat:

The green handkerchief and the green hanger became the green wave - La Marea Verde. With long time feminist organizers in Buenos Aires, medical providers in the provinces and young people across the country, ready to see this new bill across the finish line. Meanwhile, President Macri lost his second presidential run to Alberto Fernandez, who campaigned promising to make abortion legal and free. Fernandez took office December of 2019. His election brought fresh hope. Shortly after taking office Fernandez sent an abortion legalization discussion bill up for debate and promised changes.

In November of 2020. He said "the criminalization of abortion has achieved nothing" after putting the legislation to Congress for the final vote.

[News Clip]

Anat:

This incredible victory was felt not just in Argentina, but around the world. For women in Latin America, in particular, the legalization of abortion in Argentina felt like a monumental shift.

Luciana:

I want to add that the fight in Argentina was not a local battle. It was a battle for all Latin America, because the degree of violence in Latin America is worse than in Argentina. It was important to legalize the abortion in Argentina, but it is more important that it gets legalized in all Latin America. We should not stop here. All women should fight together to achieve the same in the whole region.

Anat:

We see in Argentina's example, lessons about engaging the base and persuading the middle and having different yet never conflicting messages matched two different audiences. In order to inspire and sustain mobilization from a growing base, campaigners tapped into long established symbols that could transmit at a glance continuity with the legacy of human rights struggle. These objects also enabled people to signal their affiliation, to make being part of the campaign, an element of their identity. And they used a single color, green, to land uniformity and thus consistency to otherwise disparate messages. This high and sustained base engagement also proved core to persuasion. It led for example, to granddaughters speaking to grandmothers about the need to legalize abortion. Also integral persuasion was the use of medical care providers representing the target audiences thus clearly from rural areas. Their effective appeals to emotion and bold reclamation of saving lives helped conflicted voters understand why legalizing abortion is the moral decision. To be sure every place is different and local customs, culture and context matter. But these lessons have applicable elements, both in places

attempting to legalize abortion and in places that are contending with unrelenting attacks on this, right. Coupled with punishing restrictions that make abortion care inaccessible, especially for people of color and those struggling to make ends meet.

Paula:

For me. One of the biggest lessons is that we have to start seeing the patterns that exist in the region and in all countries in a different way, and try to identify them in order to be much more successful with our strategies.

Anat:

The first lesson, as we just heard from Paula is the need to make our strategies and narratives echo across places. Just as the right wing deploys, a fairly consistent message across borders. The language may vary, but by repeating common themes, our opposition renders their message more familiar and thus potent in each particular place. Another lesson Paula offers centers squarely on persuasion.

Paula:

We have to accept that not all of us are the best messengers for all kinds of audiences. We have to accept that some people can relate better with other people. If there is someone who is a better messenger than me, why would I say no to that person? We don't need to know everything. We don't have to be everything.

We don't have to be loved by everyone. I believe that we have to allow other voices to join us. Other voices that can talk in their own way. They will repeat the message from the moment of their lives and the places where they are, the more voices join us. The more we will get other people's attention about this issue.

Anat:

And then finally, an overarching lesson, no matter what the particular audience or objective.

Paula:

Another lesson, which I believe is a very important one, is to stop being afraid of the opposition and stop thinking about how to react. It terrifies me to see the amount of time that we waste thinking about them and what are we going to do with them? We can't do anything with them. It's draining, it's emotionally and mentally draining. It drains our resources. It drains everyone. And to me, it doesn't make sense to do that. They will exist. They will prepare their agenda and they will do their job. What we have to do is work double, harder, better. Let's not allow them to distract us

Anat:

And here, as long time listeners of this podcast know, Paula is singing my song. I often like to joke that if the left had written the story of David, it would be a biography of Goliath. Because we like to talk about our opposition all the time. And in so doing, we render the already incredibly powerful even more forceful and risk bringing to the fore for our base that this is a fight we

cannot win and thus it's really not worth trying. David bested his rival against seemingly impossible odds and for that to work out, we need to say more about who we are, what we want and what we're capable of doing.

And it is providing and sustaining this will to fight that is arguably most important of all.

Luciana:

I believe that we have to mobilize, we have to get out to the streets, we have to write, that we have to fight. I believe that we have to avoid conflicts among ourselves. Let's try to be very clear to reach everyone and to be successful messengers. Let's try to be popular, to be massive and number let's be ambitious and be impactful in our society.

Anat:

Words to Win by is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Grace Lynch, Britany Martinez and Sundus Hassan Nooli with editorial support from Ale Tejada, Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Liz Brown, Anthony Torres, and Jillian Marcells. Our executive producers are Jenny Kaplan and me, Anat Shenker-Osorio. Our theme music is written by T.R. Richie, produced and arranged by Dan Leon. Special thanks to our translator Chari Velazquez, and our voice over actors, Silvana Lombardini, Carmen Borla, and Eliana González. So please let others know and, and review the show. Wherever you listen to your podcast.

Theme Song:

A song is somewhere to begin to search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done and a song, it's somewhere to begin.

Anat:

Hey, everyone, it's Anat today. We heard from the amazing activists and organizers that help legalized abortion in Argentina. But as you've likely heard here in the us, there's currently a case making its way through the Supreme court that could severely restrict and possibly even have the justices overturn Roe V. Wade in light of this news, I wanna tell you about another show from wonder media network called ordinary equality in their second season. Co-host Kate Kelly and Jamia Wilson unpacked the history of reproductive rights in America. They chart the ever shifting political, religious and social forces that shaped the issue from colonial America to the seminal Roe V. Wade decision to the present to discover how we found ourselves here today and understand exactly what's at stake. Listen to ordinary equality, wherever you get your podcasts.