

Mother Tongues and the Death of Women: Applying Feminist Theory to Historically, Linguistically, and Philosophically Contextualize the Current Abortion Debate in Bolivia

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Abstract : The debate regarding the morality, and therefore legality, of abortion has many social, political, and medical ramifications worldwide. In a developing country like Bolivia, carrying a pregnancy to delivery is incredibly risky. Given the very high maternal mortality rate in Bolivia, greater consideration has been given to the (de)criminalization of abortion - a contributing cause of maternal death. In the spring of 2017, the Bolivian government proposed to loosen restrictions on women's access to receiving a safe abortion, which was met with harsh criticism from 'pro-vida' (pro-life) factions. Although the current Bolivian government Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism) portrays an agenda of decolonization, or to seek a 'traditionally-modern' society, nevertheless, Bolivia still has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the Americas, because of centuries of colonial and patriarchal order. Applying a feminist critique and using the abortion debate as the central point, this paper argues that the 'traditionally-modern' society Bolivia strives towards is a paradox, and in fact only contributes to the reciprocal process of the death of 'mother tongues' and the unnecessary death of women. This claim is supported by a critical analysis of historical texts about Spanish Colonialism in Bolivia; the linguistic reality of reproductive educational strategies, and the philosophical framework which the Bolivian government and its citizens implement. This analysis is demonstrated in the current state of women's access to reproductive healthcare in Cochabamba, Bolivia based on recent fieldwork which included audits of clinics and hospitals, interviews, and participant observation. This paper has two major findings: 1) the language used by opponents of abortion in Bolivia is not consistent with the claim of being 'pro-life' but more accurately with being 'pro-potential'; 2) when the topic of reproductive health appears in Cochabamba, Bolivia, it is often found written in the Spanish language, and does not cater to the many indigenous communities that inhabit or visit this city. Finally, this paper considers the crucial role of public health documentation to better inform the abortion debate, as well as the necessity of expanding reproductive health information to more than text-based materials in Cochabamba. This may include more culturally appropriate messages and mediums that cater to the oral tradition of the indigenous communities, who historically and currently have some of the highest fertility rates. If the objective of one who opposes abortion is to save human lives, then preventing the death of women should equally be of paramount importance. But rather, the 'pro-life' movement in Bolivia is willing to risk the lives of to-be mothers, by judicial punishment or death, for the chance of a potential baby. Until abortion is fully legal, safe, and accessible, there will always be the vestiges of colonial and patriarchal order in Bolivia which only perpetuates the needless death of women.

Keywords : abortion, feminist theory, Quechua, reproductive health education

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