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11 October

Published: Liberation

Abortion Access: The Mexican "Acompañantas" Supporting Their American Sisters

In Mexico, activists who have spent years helping women obtain abortions are now assisting American women in circumventing stricter laws imposed across several U.S. states. They provide abortion pills and train women to become support advocates.

Ali (1) drops a small white pill into a plastic bag, turns the key in the ignition, and drives through the American-style grid of Matamoros, a border city where the automotive industry has found cheap labor. Across the Rio Grande lies Brownsville, Texas, a gateway to the United States. Ali pulls into a large parking lot serving fast-food restaurants and a supermarket. A young woman approaches. Ali steps out of the car, exchanges a few words, and hands her the small bag. Moments later, a family passes by, led by the mother; Ali slips another package discreetly under her sleeve. "Seeing a family normalizes the act," she smiles.

Ali is one of the founders of *Matamoros Decide*, a collective (2) that has supported Mexican women seeking abortions since 2018. In her room, two scarves hang on the wall: a purple one, symbolizing the fight against femicide, and a green one, representing the pro-abortion movement. "Some people's religion isn't everyone's law," reads one of them. In a corner, dozens of abortion pill packets, recently delivered, are stored. "Our stock varies based on shipments: sometimes we get more mifepristone, other times more misoprostol. I keep pills at home, at work, and at my girlfriend's, just in case." Without donations, these collectives wouldn't survive.

While Mexico has gradually legalized abortion since 2006, culminating in decriminalization by the Supreme Court in 2023, access remains limited due to public policies rooted in patriarchy and a weak healthcare system. Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, the tide is shifting. Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* on June 24, 2022, more than a dozen states have outlawed abortion. This reversal, encouraged by former President Donald Trump, has become a pivotal issue in the upcoming U.S. presidential election on November 5, where Trump faces off against Democratic candidate Kamala Harris. Harris calls the situation a "health crisis" of which Trump is the "architect."

According to Anu Kumar, president of Ipas, an international organization advocating for abortion access, "This is the result of decades of mobilization by anti-rights conservatives, with hundreds of restrictive local laws passed." The dynamic along the Rio Grande has now reversed, and for several years, a hidden network of Mexican activists has been assisting American women forced to seek new ways to terminate their pregnancies.

A Network of White Pellets

At sunset, Ali meets her friends from the collective in a neighborhood of Matamoros. Despite the fading light, the heat remains oppressive. They crack open beers: Lyla, 32; Ale, 31; Beth, 28; Les, 26; and Ali, 38—the older sister figure of a generation of Mexican women forged in the struggle for rights against patriarchy and Catholicism. Having initially focused on the fight against femicide, the collective soon began receiving abortion requests.

"The 2010s were a turning point for abortion movements in Latin America," Ali recalls. "After a protest in 2018, a trained activist named Arenita came to teach us." They organized themselves as *acompañantas*: providing medication, covering ultrasound costs, offering lodging, and following up with patients through a dedicated app. "We've helped minors, women with no resources, even migrants," Les explains. Emotional support is essential to their work.

The 2022 overturning of *Roe* brought an influx of demand, leading to new collaborations. Mexicans and Americans alike became more inventive, building a vast solidarity network. When a *pocha*—a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent—visits family in Mexico, she carries pills back to the States. The same occurs when Mexicans travel to work in Texas.

"Once, a mother who came with her daughter to pick up pills asked if she could help too," Ali recounts. "Since then, she regularly transports medication to Brownsville." It's similar to smuggling illegal substances, but these white pellets save women's lives.

Since its launch, *Matamoros Decide* has grown rapidly. "We now assist between 30 to 50 women a month," Ale says. "Some weekends, we see 25 women in just two days!" About 20% of their current cases involve U.S. women. Initially, calls came from Brownsville, but now they originate from across Texas and other restrictive states like Arkansas and Louisiana. "We ask Texas women to come in person because packages sent there are scanned," Les explains. "We only ship to more distant states."

Transnational Sorority

Beyond pill distribution, Mexican activists have begun training their American counterparts. In February, 19 activists from the U.S. traveled to learn from Mexican activists, including Kate, who comes from a "red state" that has banned abortion. Since 2021, she has witnessed clinic closures and increasing influence from Christian churches.

"I underwent three days of intensive training with Mexican guides," Kate says via a video call, requesting anonymity. "They've taken abortion care to the next level, assuming risks in a hostile environment." The Mexican activists' work challenges authority by proving that abortion doesn't require medical professionals or legal approval—just knowledge and solidarity.

Language barriers fall along the Rio Grande, and Anglo-American and Latin cultures intertwine. Transnational sorority flows across the border.

Cross-border exchanges have always been common. Opposite the International Bridge, where the colorful Mexican flag flies, pharmacies and medical offices serve U.S. patients seeking affordable treatment. "In the past, Americans helped Mexican women when abortion was restricted here. But there has always been a flow of U.S. patients as well," Ali notes.

General practitioners, dentists, and plastic surgeons in Mexico offer cheaper services, though not always ethically. "A 28-pill box of misoprostol costs 700 pesos, but some pharmacies sell individual pills for 250 pesos each, profiting off women's needs," Ali adds.

According to Anu Kumar, the *acompañantas* embody "a deeply rooted human rights culture. Mexican civil society is prepared to take control, as activists have done within political institutions themselves. In contrast, U.S. pro-abortion activists have been sidelined from decision-making power."

Anti-Rights Movement

For Lyla, born in Texas to Mexican parents, the situation feels personal. She moved to Mexico and became an activist after needing help with an unplanned pregnancy. "I already had two children and couldn't bring another into the world."

Following her abortion, she joined early protests, where about 30 women wore green scarves to conceal their identities and avoid tabloid exposure. Their chants still echo: "*Abortion yes, abortion no, I choose my path!*" and "*Get your rosaries off our ovaries!*" "I decided then that no one else should go through what I did," Lyla recalls.

Yet challenges persist. "Once, a U.S. immigration officer recognized the *Matamoros Decide* sticker on my phone and tossed all my belongings on the ground in contempt," Lyla says. "I'm sure he was searching for pills."

Ali shares a similar experience: "One time, a friend's abusive boyfriend threatened me. We're never entirely safe." The collective now uses an encrypted app to enhance security and avoid run-ins with toxic individuals.

Lyla checks the list of fellow activists on the app. "As Mexican women, we're proud to protect our American sisters," she says. Les adds, "People call the U.S. the 'first world' or 'developed world,' but what defines that? Money? The economy? Racism is on the rise there, and rights are being rolled back. Yes, Mexico has much to improve, but we won't step back on this."

Ali is certain: "The more vulnerable women's rights become on the other side, the more we'll be here to defend them."

By Diego Calmard, Matamoros, Mexico

Photo: Mahé Elipe

(1): All names have been changed.

(2): The term is intentionally feminized.