

Faith, Power, and Silence: Religious and Conservative Interference in Bolivian Public Policy and the Political Construction of “Gender Ideology”

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Abstract

I. A Faith That Liberates and a Faith That Binds

I believe in God. I say it plainly. I don't attend church. I'd like to, but the interference of Judeo-Christian church leaders in Bolivian public life, their double standards, and their use of God's name to judge and impede the exercise of rights by girls and women, especially the poorest, have taken away my desire. That, too, is a loss.

The first time I entered a faith community, I was just over 15 years old. I was searching for God, yes, but I was also searching for belonging, meaning, and a refuge from the questions no one wanted to answer. Years later, when I faced a painful family breakup, that same space that had sheltered me became a tribunal. Guilt, blame, and shame operated with great precision. No one spoke of the separation within the home; everyone spoke of sin.

Keywords: Faith, Power, and Silence

Introduction

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This essay stems from that experience, but it is not an autobiography. It is an analysis of how this personal experience is reproduced on a large scale in the lives of millions of Bolivian women when religious institutions and conservative actors intervene in public policy to block rights guaranteed by the Constitution itself. Article 4 of the Constitution establishes that Bolivia is a secular state. This principle is not a legal detail; it is the promise that no creed can be imposed on people's rights. A promise that, unfortunately, is broken every day.

I never had to choose between my faith and my feminist principles. To be a feminist, I didn't have to stop being who I am, and to be a person of faith, I didn't have to renounce my commitment to human rights. This false dichotomy is one of the tools conservatism uses to silence us. My faith is mine, it is private, and it will never be imposed. I believe that human rights are the common ground that unites us beyond the diversity of beliefs. This diversity can and must unite around this common ground to advance rights, not to regress.

The data supporting this analysis comes from the Observatory of Sexual and Reproductive Rights (DSDR) of Catholics for Choice (CDD). Bolivia is the setting, but the dynamics described here are continental.

II. The Origin of “Gender Ideology”: Between the Religious and the Political

The concept of “gender ideology” is not an analytical category that emerged from social research; it is a deliberate political-religious construct. Its origins can be traced back to papal documents of the 1990s, especially the interventions at the Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995) Conferences, where the Holy See articulated its opposition to any agenda that recognized women’s reproductive autonomy or sexual and gender diversity.

Its central argument maintains that there is a supposed “ideology” that seeks to destroy the family and confuse children. This narrative transforms rights into threats and those who promote them into agents of a hidden global plan. However, it would be a mistake to reduce this phenomenon to the strictly religious sphere. In recent years, neoconservatism has transcended ecclesiastical institutions to align itself with conservative parties and political movements that use moral language without necessarily having a religious motivation. “Gender ideology” is today both an ecclesiastical banner and a tool for political mobilization that transcends the religious field.

III. Secular Bolivia in the Constitution, Conservative Bolivia in Practice

Article 4 of the Political Constitution of the Plurinational State establishes that the State is secular and guarantees freedom of religion and spiritual beliefs. This was a historic milestone with a distinct voice, that of us Catholics, defending freedom of conscience. Secularism is not the absence of religion, but rather the guarantee of freedom of conscience. This fundamental right protects each person's ability to decide on their own ethical and reproductive life without external coercion. When the State allows particular dogmas to block public policies, it violates the law and infringes upon the moral sovereignty of women.

Despite this legal framework, the gap with institutional practice is enormous. Religious leaders pressure health officials and public authorities to incorporate the phrase “God, Country, Family” into official speeches. According to a study by Ciudadanía, UNFPA, and Oxfam (2025), 63.4% of the Bolivian population believes that, in the event of a conflict between science and religion, the latter should prevail. This is the cultural foundation upon which state protection operates.

No area better illustrates this gap than access to Legal Interruption of Pregnancy (ILE). Although Constitutional Ruling 0206/2014 decriminalized abortion under specific circumstances, data from

the CDD Observatory on Sexual and Reproductive Rights for 2025 show a 25.8% drop in ILE registrations compared to the previous year, due to increased obstacles. The central obstacle is institutionalized conscientious objection, which is not an individual decision by the doctor, but a corporate barrier that shuts down services. That is not conscience; it is religious or conservative power exercised over other people's bodies.

IV. The Bodies That Pay the Price

Behind every statistic is a body. In 2025, 85 legal abortions were performed on girls under 14 years old, compared to 769 births in the same age group. That is, 98% of pregnancies in this age range resulted in forced births. These figures reflect sexual violence and forced motherhood. The 2023 National Survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health (EDSA 2023) (Ministry of Health and Sports, 2024) shows progress in reducing overall adolescent fertility, but the situation for girls under 14 remains critical, where pregnancy is, by legal definition, the result of rape.

Conservatism operates through three intertwined mechanisms: guilt, which presents the female body as a source of sin; silence surrounding sexuality and pleasure; and the normalization of child motherhood as a supposed divine order. The UNFPA and Plan International study (2020) documents how these systems push girls into forced unions under social pressure. Furthermore, 30.5% of Bolivian women in unions have experienced violence from their partner in the past year (UN Women et al., 2026). These mechanisms are also reinforced by certain media outlets that stigmatize the victims (CDD Bolivia, 2025).

V. Why Faith Can Be Part of the Answer

Excluding voices of faith from public debate doesn't eliminate religious influence; it simply makes it less visible and harder to challenge. What works best, in my opinion, is the debate within the religious sphere. We are women of faith who challenge the hierarchy from within. Feminist theology doesn't deny biblical texts; it liberates them from fundamentalist interpretations. Learning to reread faith from the perspective of the realities that weigh us down is not betrayal, it's consistency.

Our existence is proof that faith and rights are not incompatible. Faith communities reach where the State does not. When a community leader says that a girl's body belongs to her and not to the aggressor, something radically changes. Diversity strengthens us when it unites around human rights, ensuring that no belief is a pretext for leaving women unprotected.

VI. Conclusion: Tenderness Is Also Revolutionary

Religious interference in Bolivian politics has devastating consequences for the most vulnerable women. To move forward, we need secularism to be a systematic practice, for scientific evidence to prevail over dogma, and for us to build community around a common foundation: the right to live free from violence. I believe in God. I am a feminist. I am a human rights activist. I never had to give up any of that to be the other. When tenderness toward oneself and others becomes a political act, something fundamental has changed. My faith makes me stronger. My faith is mine. And tenderness is also revolutionary.

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