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NGO's AND ADVOCACY COMMUNICATIONS ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS: FROM THE NORTH TO THE SOUTH

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Abstract

Women in developing and developed countries can still suffer from constraints on their ability to exercise their reproductive rights, being subject to gendered norms and forms of control over their bodies and encountering various difficulties to accessing healthcare services. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) thus continue to matter for the advancement of gender equality, whilst communications when strategically used can shape support for progressive policies. This project seeks to advance research on gender development and advocacy communications for social change. A core question asked here is how can communications be better used for advocacy on SRHR? Making use of a mixed methods approach, this research engages with a sample of 52 feminist and health NGOs, located in both the North and the South. In depth interviews with gender experts from the organizations were combined with a survey applied to the communication professionals, followed by content and discourse analysis of their institutional websites and social media engagement. This paper provides a condensed examination of the early research findings and core theoretical frameworks, arguing over the need to deconstruct discourses around SRHR under challenging times and concluding that NGOs need better communication strategies and practices in their advocacy communication efforts.

Keywords: *gender development, SRHR, NGOs, advocacy, communications*

Introduction

"Myth: to support abortion is to be against having children. Fact: abortion is 1 of many forms of reproductive care that enable…bodily autonomy" stated a tweet from *Ibis Reproductive Health* posted in March 2019.[i] This strategy of rebuking general assumptions around abortion, and replacing them with hard facts, is a form of advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) that is quintessential of the communications work that is carried out by many health and feminist non-profit organizations (NGOs) in their efforts to advance women's rights in the field. Such an approach to language and discourse around women's health and sexuality is symptomatic of the current times: rationality, science and facts are undermined in favour of personal opinion, or "common sense thinking", around gender equality more broadly or on SRHR specifically, all of which have been manipulated by powerful groups for their own political interests.

Research has shown that NGOs face various challenges advocating for human rights (McPherson, 2015; Powers, 2014; Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014), including from attacks of right wing populist groups to the impact of decades of cuts in public health services worldwide, with the potential of being exacerbated in the post COVID-19 pandemic period[ii]. I argue here for the need of NGO advocacy communications work to *deconstruct* language and discourses around SRHR that currently circulate in the public sphere as part of a "gender ideology" backlash (Butler, 2019), and which work to distort reproductive health discourses and propagate misinformation. I further underline how NGOs should use communications more strategically to gather support and generate impact. I start by assessing core theoretical perspectives on gender and development, beginning with a discussion on women's "reproductive bodies" within development before moving to examine the role of feminist and health NGOs and their communication efforts on SRHR, followed by a condensed summary of the research findings.

Theoretical frameworks and rationale

Feminist literature on gender and development has underlined how information and new communication technologies traditionally served capitalist, neoliberal and colonial relations of power (Gajjala and Mamidipudi, 1999), whilst the tradition of feminist research on the relationship between women and technologies has largely underlined how technology has been predominantly male dominated (Grint and Gill, 1995; Wacjman, 1991, 2000; Haraway, 2000). Particularly since

the 1990's onwards however, studies on feminist movements and activism underscored the paradoxes of new communication technologies, arguing for the web's feminist dimensions, and how these offered marginalised groups - from social to feminists NGOs and individuals - possibilities for empowerment outside of the constraints of the offline world (Daniels, 2009; Haraway, 1991; Harcourt, 2013; Shade, 2003; Young, 2015).

Many feminist NGOs and women's groups have since the decade of the 1990's engaged in transnational activism through international platforms and conferences, from Beijing 1995 to Cairo's 1994 International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD), contributing to make significant progress in the SRHR field. From feminist organizations in Latin America to others across Asia, many of the feminists groups from the global South became "professionalised" (Narayanaswamy, 2014; Alvarez, 2009), receiving research funding and playing a prominent role in influencing mainstream thinking on gender at the local and global levels alongside more powerful organizations of the North (Harcourt, 2009).

The gains made in the last decades on women's rights however have been undermined discursively by various conservative and religious groups across the world since the 1990's, and particularly from the early 2000's. Advocates claim that feminists harbour a "gender ideology", one which promotes a "culture of death" and imposes the "gender agenda" on all. Here are attempts of re-establishing the biological role of reproduction as the natural fate of women, in a direct clash with the campaign on liberating women's bodies espoused by progressives. In various countries, civil society has experienced a retreat from the public sphere, from the US to Poland in Eastern Europe and to Brazil in Latin America, amid also rising opposition towards human and minority rights. This has occurred within a context where the Western liberal democratic consensus of the past decades has began to be challenged.[iii] However, it is in moments of bleakness that calls for action are the more pressing.

In order to examine the ways in which communications and new technologies can be better used for advocacy and activism on gender and health, this research has investigated a total of 52 feminist and health NGOs and networks located in the North and South, placing a particular focus on Latin America (Brazil) and Asia (India) within an international context. Despite advancements in rhetoric in international development, with the shift away from the "population control" debate towards a focus on "reproductive health" and "sexuality" as part of a human rights framework, I argue that discourses and narratives around women and SRHR in development have remained confused, when not grounded in stereotypical notions of femininity and of women's sexuality (Harcourt, 2009; Matos, 2016; Wilkins, 2016;). This does little to advance the cause, or safeguard

SRHR from the current attacks made by conservative groups within the global (and mediated) public sphere.

This research aims to contribute to the theoretical debates on the lack of voice given to women in development and the persistence of stereotypical gendered discourses which continue to privilege the *body* over female agency (Harcourt, 2009; Wilkins, 2016, Matos, 2016; Narayanaswamy, 2017), as well as to discussions on the role of advocacy communications and NGOs for social change (McPherson, 2015; Powers, 2014), and feminist perspectives on health communications and activism around sexual and reproductive health and rights (Waisbord and Obregon, 2012; Tufte, 2012; Correa and Petchesky, 1994). I thus ask here how are health and feminist NGOs using communications for advocacy on SRHR? What are the communication strategies used, and how do offline and online communications reflect on daily practices? Adopting qualitative and some quantitative methods, this research combined in depth interviews with gender experts from the organizations with a survey style questionnaire applied to the communication directors, as well as content and discourse analysis of their institutional websites and of their social media engagement on *Twitter* and *Facebook*. This paper offers a condensed summary of early research results.

"Women's bodies" and reproductive rights in gender and development

Mainstream development discourse has traditionally understood "development" as being all about economic growth. Frameworks built into the dominant modernization paradigm claimed that developing countries needed to "catch up" with the more developed North through the adoption of "modern lifestyles", infrastructure and technologies. In the last decades critical feminist perspectives on development have questioned its previous emphasis on economic growth (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Harcourt, 2009), highlighting the need to include the role of culture and gender, attain to issues of development sustainability as well as engage in a more nuanced view of communications, as process of *dialogue* and participation (Waisbord, 2015; Manyozo, 2012).

Feminists from the global South have discussed the relationship between women's bodies, patriarchy and European colonialism, establishing a link between the former exploited colonies with the *exotic hyper-sexualised bodies* of the "Other" (Radcliffe, 2015), further noting how these assumptions influenced discourses in development as well as the communications about women from developing countries in the West in literature, policy and media (Matos, 2016; Mohanty,

1984, 2000; Wilkins, 2016). Representations of women within development have traditionally portrayed women as a homogenous group of “Third World women” deprived of agency and “in need of saving” by powerful Western masculine subjects. Feminists from the “First World” were frequently seen as endorsing the racism of their own cultures, contributing to the oppression of marginalised women (Mohanty, 1984, 2000; Rai, 2011; Spivak,1988).

Despite criticisms of the dominant representations of women within development as “victims lacking in agency”, these narratives have been somewhat sustained. The *female body* nonetheless has historically been a site of oppression and social control in much of the West as well (Bordo, 1992), with *female reproductive bodies* continuing to be stereotyped within development discourse and practice (Wilkins, 2016), affecting both the developed and developing world. Although power relations between the North and the South have remained contested, the last decades have seen increasing alliances between different feminist groups across the world, many uniting around the need to uphold basic women’s rights in areas such as reproductive health and bodily autonomy, the gender pay gap and gender-based violence.

Examples of campaigns abound throughout the world, from the Argentine *NiUnaMenos* to Amnesty International’s global campaign *My Body, My Rights* to the popular *#MeToo* movement. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996, 1) already stated how evidence shows that, despite divisions, women can and do “unite around diverse issues”, being further “able to transcend national differences….” Such strategies of re-uniting around women’s causes, such as female embodiment, bodily autonomy or “body politics” (Harcourt, 2009), have re-emerged with renewed enthusiasm. Many of the gender experts interviewed here have defended the need to rebuilt bridges. Erin Williams[iv], programme director for Sexual and Reproductive Rights from the *Global Fund Women*, stressed the importance of improving communications between feminist organisations, stating that current “*voices that are pushing for gender equality are coming from the South.*”

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of Cairo’s ICPD, feminist scholars underlined the paradoxes that began to exist for “Southern women’s NGOs”, from Latin America to India (Narayanaswamy, 2014), many who moved away from a previous marginalised position to the frontline of UN-led debates on women’s rights. Feminist NGOs were also accused of having been co-opted by development (Alvarez, 2009) and also of creating a *disconnect* between themselves, the “card-carrying expert feminists” working internationally, and their less privileged sisters working locally and with less national influence (Alvarez, 2009; Narayanaswamy, 2014). The 1994 Cairo ICPD conference was however hailed for having shifted the debate within development away from the previous Malthusian language of population control - which had marked international development

thinking in relation to the "Third World" during the modernization period - to one on women's rights, sexuality and reproductive autonomy, thus shaping official rhetoric in the field (Correa and Petchesky, 1994; Garita in Harcourt et al, 2015; Lottes, 2013).

Harcourt (2009, 45) has further underlined the pragmatic strategies adopted by these groups at the Cairo conference in her book *Body Politics in Development*, stating how health movement interests and women's groups united to secure health rights. New concepts, such as "reproductive health", were combined with discussions on sexuality, empowerment and cultural difference, moving the very playing field of development discourse. In the post-Cairo stage, many feminists however lamented the lack of transformation of reality "on the ground", with many stating that women's rights had been reduced to issues of "safe abortion services" (Harcourt, 2009). Wider macro-economic inequities, as well as different understandings on SRHR, were insufficiently problematised, with criticisms having abounded on the tensions which existed between individualistic liberal principles and the collective responsibilities of states (Correa and Petchesky, 1994).[v]

Latin American countries are interesting case studies to examine the role of NGOs and communications for development in relation to gender equality and SRHR. The region of Latin America is known for having the second highest rates of adolescent motherhood after sub-Saharan Africa, with 30-50% of sexually active women aged 15 to 24 who do not use any contraceptive method (Richardson and Birn, 2011). As the *Centre of Reproductive Rights* states, many countries in Latin America have problems of access to maternal health services and comprehensive sexuality education, with abortion being an illegal practice for over 90% of the women in the region. In the post-Covid-19 context, researchers from the Guttmacher Institute have argued that low and middle-income countries will see further pressures on health systems, such as an additional 15 million unwanted pregnancies over the course of a year (Riley et al, 2020)

Known for the prevalence of gendered norms and for its rigid views on women's bodies and role in society, countries in Latin America have traditionally adopted double standards when it comes to sexual morality and reproductive health. Statistics have underlined how privileged women from the upper classes will have abortions in private illegal clinics, whilst others from poorer working class backgrounds risk their lives in unsafe abortion procedures (Kulezycki, 2011, 199). Nonetheless, despite the growth in the backlash against progressive policies on women's rights throughout much of Latin America, similarly to the rising opposition forces in other European countries, opinion polls in the region have shown that the population is less divided, supporting legalisation of abortion in certain instances and wanting an expansion of debate in the

public sphere on the topic. Elected in 2018 and supported by conservative and religious groups who had in the last decades engaged in cultural wars in Congress and within society against the advancements of the re-democratization period, the Bolsonaro government has intensified the rolling back of women's rights, further starting to vote also in alignment with various countries, including Arab states, that oppose SRHR at the UN Human Rights Council. Thus communications can and should play a wider role in *constructing/deconstructing* discourses around women's rights on SRHR, issues examined next.

NGOs, online activism and advocacy communications

Sociologists and social movement scholars have been debating in the last years the possibilities offered by the Internet for digital democracy and online activism, including the opportunities created for less privileged groups, including women, to mobilize and advocate for gender equality (Haraway,1991, 2000; Grint and Gill, 1995; Young, 2015). Some of the literature on gender and development however has been critical of the impact of communications and new technologies (ICTSs) for the development of women in developing countries. Gajjala and Mamidipudi (1999, 9) argue that the Internet is celebrated for enhancing democracy in the North and South, however it has tended to reflect "perceptions of Northern society that Southern women are brown…..and ignorant" (Gajjala and Mamidipudi, 1999, 15). Others have been more positive, seeing communication technologies as both enabling as well as constraining. Communication technologies can be a vital tool for advocacy and for the mobilization of feminists transnationally, providing opportunities for political engagement which are restricted in the offline world (Youngs, 2015).

Access to the Internet however has remained unequal, limiting democratic participation. In Latin America it is rapidly expanding, providing opportunities for both democratization *and* regressions. Problems of access however are not the only challenges. The issue of *how to* use online communications more effectively, in assistance with other media, is of equal importance. For until now it has been well resourced groups who have managed to use new technologies for their benefit, managing offline and online communications effectively, such as the cases of the use of communications for political campaigning during the US 2016 Trump election and the UK EU referendum have shown.

Examining challenges posed to the use of communications for global social change, Waisbord (2015, 150) has stressed the scarcity of research that has been done in the field on policy advocacy, further underscoring how this activity is in itself an *exercise in communications*, one which

includes the mobilization of publics in support of a particular cause to information sharing**.** Servaes and Malikhao (2012, 229 in Wilkins, 2014, 58) have defined "advocacy" as being a "key term in development discourse", one which aims to "foster public policies that are supportive to the solution of an issue…". I further draw here from Stroup and Murdie´s (2012, 427) work on international NGO advocacy, and how they emphasise the differences in tactics, with organizations making use of information strategically to target publics. Nonetheless, as Wilkins and Mody (2001, 392) have argued, technologies in development have traditionally been used more for the transmission of information, and less for dialogue under participatory models. The authors further emphasize the importance of evaluating the content of communication interventions, assessing issues such as the efficiency of messages.

Research has also shown how various health and feminists NGOs from the global South, including Latin America but also in Asia, have played an important role in the last decades advocating for reproductive health and women's bodily autonomy (Richardson and Birn, 2011; Alvarez, 2009). NGO efforts on advocacy around SRHR however have been inserted in larger struggles over *meanings*, as well as on different understandings and approaches to reproductive health, many of which are built within a human rights and public health framework that are not necessarily "activist" driven. NGOs working on SRHR thus operate slightly differently than other civic and human rights organizations (Powers, 2014), or social movements, when it comes to online activism. Many engage in advocacy from a less explicit political position, but one rather grounded in research and technical expertise.

Advocacy here is thus less focused on protests and instead on creating awareness, researching knowledge and transmitting facts. However, personal women's issues (i.e. women's bodies) have become political, with advocacy here carrying political dimensions. A lot of content on SRHR seeks to persuade specific publics, including through the appeal to emotions and use of digital storytelling. Similarly to other human rights NGOs, those working in the field use communications with different understandings of what this entails, adopting different practices, including restoring to journalistic devices like "fact checking" (McPherson, 2015; Powers, 2014).

Understandings around what SRHR means can be confusing, and not just for the general public. Here lie deeper philosophical and personal debates on definitions of motherhood, modernity and women's sexuality. The current conceptualization of women's reproductive bodies as l*acking*, subject to control and surveillance, further only reinforces patriarchal (as well as colonial) views of women from developing *and* developed countries, including poorer women in the West. The fact that these bodies are constructed in development discourse and practice as

"devoid of agency" feeds into persistent attempts of control, be it the State or religious groups, thus standing in the way of long-term progress.

Data and Methods

This research has adopted a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative methodology with some quantitative concerns in an attempt investigate the use of communications and online technologies by NGOs for advocacy. My aim here has been to assess the implications of this for international development, particularly in countries of the global South. I am interested in how such processes can be connected to a wider democratization of these societies as well as how concerns with basic women's rights, in both the North and South, can serve as bridges for undermining differences, working to rebuild new parameters and agendas of transnational feminist solidarity across regions.

In order to conduct a cross-national and comparative study, one research assistant student was based in India with another two focusing on Latin America in Brazil and another one in the UK, all working on the project during a separate period of three months in 2019 and 2020. India was chosen due to a variety of reasons, including the fact that it is one of the world's largest democracies in the global South and, similarly to other Latin American countries, the nation has wide social and economic inequalities, health disparities and a vibrant civil society and feminist movements. A total of 52 health and feminist non-profit organizations (NGOs) and networks working on SRHR, from large research-led organizations to more grassroots ones, were selected due to the impact of their work, credibility and influence.

Some organizations have a clear research-led focus, such as *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* (SRHM), whilst others could be classified as being a "feminist network" whilst others can be defined as humanitarian or focused on poverty alleviation. Among those included here are *Amnesty* and *Care International* (UK), *Anis* and *Reprolatina* (Brazil), *Promosex* (Uruguay) and *Population Foundation of India*, all of which engage with advocacy around SRHR differently, either more broadly (including from comprehensive sexuality education to gender-based violence, or LGBT rights) to single issues, such as family planning (i.e. *Family Planning 2020*).

In depth interviews with the directors of the NGOs, as well as gender experts working for agencies such as UNFPA, were combined with a questionnaire applied to the communication professionals. A content and discourse analysis of the institutional websites of these organizations, including their social media engagement, was also conducted. Data was collected during the

months of March to June 2019 and from April to June 2020. A total of 9 organizations were located in Asia, Europe (11), Latin America (19), the US (9) and a further 4 operate as international networks, and therefore classified as "international." A total of 50 people were interviewed, either face to face, via Skype, or responded to the questionnaire. The examination of the social media engagement of the NGOs on *Facebook* and *Twitter* was done during a two week period (25th of March to the 7th of April, 2019), with a collection of a total of 1.505 tweets: 521 from the US, 358 from Asia, 327 from Latin America, 265 from Europe and another 34 were "international".

I approached this debate on the uses of communication technologies by NGOs firstly by stressing the limits, both in terms of use as well as access by communities in need of information on reproductive health. NGOs compete in an environment where there is increasing loss of funding, of which the area of SRHR is critical. In order to examine how the communication tools on the websites are used for advocacy, I sought to assess the *type of information* provided. In order to make sense of the data, I designed a codebook including five categories (*fundraising*, *advocacy, community engagement*, *mobilization* and *information).* Under each, a list of four to seven items were included.[vi] The codebook was influenced by political communication typologies, including the one provided by Foot and Schneider (2006) and further developed by Stein (2009). As Stein (2009, 755) has argued, this type of typology includes categories which present information and promote interaction, such as *hyperlinks*, widely used in political communications to mobilize supporters.

Community engagement refers to the type of dialogue and flow of communications that is taking place between the organisation and the targeted publics, whilst *mobilization* is associated with protest, although this process in itself involves various strategies of engaging members. The same can be said of *advocacy* and *information,* as facts and more "objective" material can be placed under the latter, being also used for *advocacy*, whereas the latter is more associated with emotions and is seen as being more "subjective". The distinction between these categories can thus be blurred, underlying the complexities of communication use, for certain content can be placed under both *information* and *advocacy*. However it is precisely in this sphere of ambiguity that facts can be open to dispute.

Non-frequency content analysis was combined with quantitative concerns on the *quantity* and diversity of communicative content posted by the organizations on social media, and their use of different communication tools (offline and online) for advocacy. Advocacy communication activities seek to make use of language and communications with the intention of *persuading*

groups of people around a particular cause in order to influence policy. Thus the examination of content is crucial here, and discourse analysis was chosen as the preferred method for the investigation of the social media engagement of the organizations as well as their blog posts.

Fairclough (2001) has classified "discourse" as *social practices*, with discourses being ways in which social agents act in the world, adding that it is through *language* that different social groups can exercise power over others. Van Dijk (2001) has further noted how critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the instrument for examining how the construction of gender takes place in everyday speech. Both these discourse analysis approaches are useful methodological frameworks to examine the competing discourses on women's reproductive health, articulated through the advocacy communications strategies of both Northern and Southern NGO's.

I am thus interested in the *construction/deconstruction* of discourses around SRHR, and how these are played out in the NGOs advocacy communication practices. I have taken an epistemological position here in order to permit some flexibility with the standard questions designed for the communication professionals and gender experts. The questions for the latter covered topics on SRHR, from achievements to terminology and communications, whereas the communications survey asked the organisations to assess their own communication strategies. For the discourse analysis of social media, a further two categories, "emotion" and "reason", where added to the original 5 categories, as well as "lobbying". In order to ensure fairness and respect to the diversity of understandings of the topic in different countries, both questionnaires provided scope for the interviewer to apply questions based on local specificities and the interviewee's expertise.

Interviews

The responses from the interviews as well as from the communication questionnaires, combined with the results from the content analysis of the institutional websites and the discourse analysis of the social media engagement of these on *Twitter* and *Facebook*, revealed a great diversity in the use of communications and new technologies for advocacy on SRHR. All of the responses from the survey and in depth interviews confirmed the difficulties of advocating for SRHR in a climate of political and religious opposition, as well as scarcity of funds for projects, combined with the pressing need to create wider awareness and knowledge so as to mobilize diverse publics to the cause.

Here I borrow and develop from Power's (2014) discussion on the components that shape civic NGOs' publicity and communication strategies, some of which encounter resemblances to the news production processes in journalism (Waisbord, 2015), and which include a focus on resources to desired impacts. In the case of the NGOs examined here, factors that shape the organizational dynamics have included the feminist theorizations and approaches to SRHR, although all adhere to a human rights framework; as well as the targeted publics; resources and communication strategies. All these factors *shape* the information and communications used on SRHR by these organizations, as well as their intended outcomes and the various challenges that they face (see table 1 in appendices).

Concerns were also raised around the terminology used by advocates on SRHR issues, as well as the neglect of feminist demands around "women's agency" in reproductive health discourses. Alvaro Serrano[vii], regional communication adviser for Latin America and the Caribbean, of the UNPFA (United Nations Population Fund), underscored the language difficulties around the use of the term, leading to a lack of knowledge on SRHR:

"….we need to go back to the understand the meaning of the words…..in order to understand the message that is being used by right groups, and then we need to go back to understand the language and in order to do that, we need do an exercise in de-constructing that message,…and then we need to re-construct it in order to construct a message that is understood by the public…… we need to take those messages, de-construct, repackage it and go back to governments and the champions of rights….. you know Brazil, Bolsonaro and the conservative groups were supportive of that campaign, using the words that we have seen used in the US also. The big discussion is about gender, so every political movement in Latin America totally uses the word "gender", "abortion" and "reproductive health and rights""

Naiosola Likimani[viii], lead of the UK's *SheDecides* global movement, further criticised the predominance of the "medical discourse" in the field, which pushed aside questions of women's agency and alienated many feminists:

"I think another challenge that helps explain why we are stagnated is that, over time the approach to SRHR has become quite *a medicalised one*.,,,.. what started off as a conversation around rights….became a different kind of conversation. And we actually stopped seeing women's rights organisations in particular participating in SRHR….it….became much more a question of quantitative targets,…'what are the causes of maternal mortality, and what do we need to reduce it?'...And so questions around agency…seemed to disappear….and now are being re-introduced..….even if you make certain technologies…etc available, if a women still does not have the right to make that choice…., it does not matter that this technology is available….. If she does not have the agency to use that choice, if there is still stigma and misunderstanding around women's bodies…. and there is still violence that still occurs in the background….…."

Moreover, the scarcity of funds to invest further in communications obliges many organisations to think creatively on how to advocate for SRHR, from recognising the importance of

communications for feminist and health NGOs to partnering with others to share content, amplifying impact. The director of communications of the NGO *Family Planning 2020,* Tamar Abrams[ix] for one underlined the centrality of communications for SRHR:

> "For a long time there was no alignment on messaging. People said whatever their organization wanted…. As a consequence the public perceptions of family planning were quite skewed…In the last five years I would say people have gotten smarter….and are being better about lining messages…it is really impossible to do communications without an eye towards advocacy. We have a wonderful person in the office…so the two of us got to work together. The tools that we create are designed to drive advocacy…..There is a misperception….that everyone can do communications….They take it seriously, but they do not understand that it is an art, in the same way that advocacy…it requires a certain level of knowledge… I have seen a lot of organizations, particularly globally, if they have a small staff, communications is not representative…"

Thus the recognition here of the centrality of communications for advocacy attests to the value that is placed on the content's credibility. Similarly to other civic organizations, the credibility of the information or research provided by these NGOs can translate into support from the public and funding, in a similar process to the professional or quality demands placed on journalism (McPherson, 2014; Powers, 2015). Advocacy on SRHR thus walks a thin line between adherence to facts, expertise and "neutrality" on one hand and militancy and political positions around women's bodily autonomy on the other, paradoxes further examined in the following sections.

Content analysis of NGOs' websites: from "fact checking" to digital storytelling

The content analysis of the websites showed how organisations share extensive and detailed resources online, from reports to videos. Many of the websites are professionally designed and highly user friendly, although many also share stories from the media. Most of the organisations were active in all of the 5 communication categories, with some stating explicitly their intention of mingling emotional content with facts. *Amnesty International* for instance showed presence in all categories, whereas other organizations privileged more information, as was the case of *Change* and the *Centre for Reproductive Rights*. Organizations like *Global Fund for Women* appeared more strongly in the categories of "fundraising" and "mobilization", and less on information, reflecting their priorities as a fundraising organization.

Most NGOs recognised the importance of the use of online communications for advocacy, however underlining its limits. Many argued that offline, lobbying or face to face advocacy with stakeholders or decision-making people, was more effective than online tools. Most organizations claimed that their online communications was "very effective" or "somewhat effective". Some

underlined how they seek to embed communications in all of their activities. Serra Sippel[x] president of the *NGO Centre for Health and Equity* (Change), stated how "communications is the key to all advocacy".

There were also differences between the organizations in terms of social media engagement. From the social media platforms, *Twitter* showed itself to be most popular for advocacy and mobilization. In terms of post frequency, the highest number of posts shared on *Twitter* during the period analysed was done by the US NGOs, whilst *Facebook* was used more by Latin American organisations. Of the total of 1.505 tweets collected from the organizations, many mingled emotional content with the more "objective" facts, with some emphasising one over another. A total of 433 tweets were placed under "emotion" and another 922 on "reason", showing the predominance of advocacy communication practices on SRHR through the appeal to scientific facts. However, the total number of tweets placed under "advocacy" were quite high, of 977, whereas the total tweets on "fundraising" were of only 15, of which 11 were just from *Care International UK*.

The combined *Twitter* and *Facebook* tweets and post feeds totalised 2.164. The results also showed that the frequency of tweets and *Facebook* posts were also quite uneven, and not necessarily *all* the larger organizations engaged more on social media as one would expect. That said, the higher number of tweets did come from some of larger research-led organisations, like the *Centre for Reproductive Rights* (109), *Crea India* (165), *Global Fund for Women* (135) and *Promosex* with 168. However, many equally prestigious NGOs recorded a lower number of tweets, such as 34 for *Change*, 20 for *Ibis* and 3 for *Akahata*. Some tweets were placed under "advocacy", such as *CREA India*, with 134, whereas others relied more on facts and reports ("reason"), such as the *Centre for Reproductive Rights* (96).

NGOs in Latin America showed less activity on *Twitter*, with 10 not posting anything during the period and another 4 did not have posts either on *Twitter* or *Facebook.* The total number of *Facebook* posts was thus significantly less than *Twitter*, totalising 741 posts: Latin America appeared with 298, US (162), Asia had 104, Europe (161) and international (16). Similarly to the pattern detected on *Twitter*, *Facebook* also saw a predominance of the content classified as "reason" (415) over "emotion" (252). The total amount for "advocacy" for instance was of 474, "community engagement" (138), "information" (37), "lobbying" (13) and "fundraising" (10).

SRHR themes and discourses

A multiplicity of issues on SRHR where explored by the organisations on social media, ranging from safe abortion practices, to sexual assault and child pregnancy. Popular hashtags included *#safeabortionisaright* and *#TodasLasfamiliassonfamilia* ("All Families are families") (*Akahata* and *Asap)*; "Young people have started speaking" (*Centre for Catalysing Change*) and *#Family planning to achieve* (*Family Planning 2020*).

The US organisations explored widely the *Global Gag Rule* debate, whereas various Latin American NGOs mingled other concerns. The hashtag *#NinasNoMadres* (GirlsNotMothers) (see figure 1 in the appendices) circulated in many of the pages, including on the front cover of *Twitter* of the Peruvian NGO *Promsex*. The latter was the most active organisation on *Twitter*, with 169 tweets (see figure 2). As the Director of Promsex, Susana Chavez[xi], affirmed, "…the idea is to sensitize the public about these themes, as their systematic breach transforms these in a violation of human rights.…."

In order to compensate for lack of funds, many organisations tweeted and posted news reports on SRHR on *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Nonetheless, NGOs in Brazil tended to use media reports more often in comparison to other Latin American, European and US organisations. This can partly be explained by problems of insufficient resources, although it also involves cultural dynamics. Well known prestigious organizations like the Brazilian *Anis* and *Sexuality Policy Watch*, a global forum based in Brazil and the US, were however active on platforms like *Facebook*, sharing a lot of mainstream media content strategically for advocacy.

Mainstream media texts tended thus to be used here with a *personalised angle*, with organizations restoring to different forms of *hashtag activism*, such as in the case of the *#Mexico president* and *#Obrador* hashtags from the tweet posted by *Safe Abortion Women's Rights* on the possibility of an abortion referendum (see figure 3). Here there was an intersection of the "old and new" media, with tweets being used with direct messages followed by a hyperlink leading to the original text of the *International Campaign for Women's Rights for Safe Abortion* (published by Reuters, whilst the sources are attributed to *Al Jazeera*). The emphasis placed by this tweet on women's rights as being "beyond personal opinion" also alludes to the demands of veracity that is required of factual journalism, making it possible to place this tweet in line with other examples of deconstruction of "gender ideology" abortion myths. Similarly, *Women's Link Worldwide* posted on *Facebook* a news article from the UK newspaper *The Independent* on the many women

crossing the border from Venezuela to seek antenatal care, with the hashtags *#Colombia* and *#Venezuela* (see figure 4).

Although the use of journalism reports has its benefits, given the more in depth factual reporting done by the media in areas such as teenage pregnancy, the reality is that on social media this does not necessarily lead to more reasoned debate. Arguably, the use of factual reporting as a tool for advocacy communications seeks to influence public opinion, including the added appeal to accessible and "conversational" language which mirrors journalistic commentary and human interest stories.

Many organizations adopted the popular journalistic tool of "fact checking" in an age of fake news to advocate for SRHR and combat misinformation, in an attempt to combat prejudices and stigma. This was the case of NGOs like *Ibis Reproductive Health* and *Change*, both who restored to the use of statistics in their communications on *Twitter* (see figures 5 and 6). *Ibis* underscored that the discussion on women's bodily autonomy should not be understood as being "all about abortion", and that this is part of a complex debate which involves individual choices and collective responsibilities. The NGO *Change* utilised the hashtag *#SRHRFactCheck*, adopting journalistic practice. Using also the hashtag *#GlobalGagRule*, it underlined the US's responsibility in expanding the policy, underscoring the increase of deaths worldwide due to illegal abortion practices.

The "hard facts" here are thus used to emphasise the credibility of the claims made against the persistence of "false" ideas on SRHR. These advocacy communication efforts on *Twitter* implicitly allude to "common sense" assumptions around reproductive health articulated in the mediated public sphere, largely propelled by groups who see the advancement of policies on gender as being part of a "gender ideology" that goes against the traditional biological reproductive role of women as well as supposedly undermining rights of others. A growing popular communication strategy used here by the organizations is that of *digital storytelling*, utilised also to explore issues from abortion to sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV), seeking further to appeal to emotions through personal identification.

Anis conducted an interesting campaign here called *#Euvoucontar* (I will tell) (see figure 7), sharing some similarities with other more high profile campaigns like the *#MeToo* movement, and the Brazilian version *#MeuPrimeiroAssedio* (MyFirstHarrassment) (Matos, 2016, 2017). Here the campaign consisted of videos where activists read anonymous confessions of women who had had abortions, striving to grant oppressed women an opportunity to voice their experiences whilst seeking out empathy and solidarity for their suffering.

Conclusion

The results from this study underline that despite a lot of creativity shown in many of the communication campaigns and strategies of NGOs advocating for SRHR, there are challenges to be overcome. How messages can be framed in a way that engages more is key here. New technologies offer opportunities for feminist mobilization (Young, 2015), but it can also be difficult to be heard in a grounded space (Thrall et al, 2014; McPherson, 2015). Some NGOs with resources can afford focus groups to assess the impact of messages, or have advocacy and communications departments work together, as is the case of organizations like *Care UK* or *Family Planning*. NGOs however can do more in getting their messages across, moving beyond elite publics or "preaching to the converted", making their content connect more to people's needs.

Despite the current pessimism, many of those interviewed shared a sense of *momentum*, highlighting a widespread sense that concerns with women's bodily autonomy and health are topics destined to grow in importance, particularly in a post-COVID-19 context. Furthermore, in the context of discussions around the US's *Global Gag Rule,* opportunities for more in depth debate have emerged in the public sphere. This includes wider avenues for discussion on issues such as the *de-criminalisation* of abortion, to the examination of male infertility and the need for states to guarantee better access to quality SRHR services for more vulnerable women's groups.

Here improvements in the messaging around SRHR within health communications are a must (Tufte, 2012). Organizations need to utilise all forms of communication channels in their advocacy efforts. However, there is no one right model of communications that fits all. Communications on SRHR needs nevertheless to move beyond messages which seek to change individual behaviour, providing merely individual solutions whilst sideling deep-seated structural gender inequalities, or simply mimicking traditional social marketing health campaigns (Waisbord and Obregon, 2012). SRHR messages need to be sensitive to cultural contexts, considering the needs of communities in an effort to understand *why* there is resistance, thus undermining "gender ideology" discourses.

The results show that organizations are waking up to the need of better communicating, seeing communications as a tool for potent advocacy, although some are yet to include communications in strategic plans. There is also need to know more how those specific publics, from the media to the "general public", process content on SRHR. This needs to be juxtaposed to a more critical comprehension of the *development praxis*, and of its underpinnings in neoliberal economics, as well as how it continues to depict women as bodies *lacking* in agency (Wilkins, 2016; Harcourt, 2009). This is a first step towards the *deconstruction* of the weak role of women within

development – and which is reflected in stereotypical gendered discourses and imagery -, as well as the whole *rhetoric* around SRHR, in a move towards a new agenda on women's rights.

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[i] See https://twitter.com/IbisRH/status/1110642376928907264

[ii] The *United Nations Population Fund* (UNFPA) and the *UN Women* in March 2020 alerted to the detrimental impact that the coronavirus pandemic could have on women’s rights, compromising the UN’s 2030 deadline to achieve gender equality under the *Global Goals for Sustainable Development*.

[iii] Influenced by the political pressure of the Trump administration, the Bolsonaro government in Brazil has engaged in a series of attacks on SRHR, including undermining words such as “gender” from previously signed international documents. It further abstained from voting on sexual and reproductive health and rights at the UN Human Rights Council in June 2019.

[iv] Interviewed in March, 2019.

[v] Sexual and reproductive health and rights encompass include a range of reproductive health and sexuality concerns, from HIV/Aids and sexually transmitted diseases, to maternity health, family planning and contraceptives, womb cancer, fertility treatment, FGM, comprehensive sexuality education to the role of male reproductive bodies, including adjunct areas linked to sexuality, such as gender identity and LGBT rights.

[vi] These were policy reports, press releases, media articles, publications, facts, CEO speeches and archives (for *information*); information (emotional), campaigns, events, discussion forums, membership, volunteering and newsletter (for *advocacy*); emails, discussion forums, contact organisation, member profiles, local events, workshops, training and international agenda (for *community engagement)*; donations, funding, partners and lobbying politicians (for *fundraising*) and online petitions, action alerts, protests and organisation of campaigns (for *mobilization*).

[vii] Interviewed in March, 2019.

[viii] Interviewed in May 2019

[ix] Interviewed in March 2019.

[x] Interviewed in March 2019.

[xi] Responded to the gender and communications questionnaires in April 2019.