

Female preeminences and male absences in voluntary abortion

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.



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Martha Celia Ramírez-Gálvez**

Introduction

My first involvement with abortion as a research topic was as undergraduate student. The marginalization and illegality to which women are subjected because of this choice—associated, in many cases, to stories of suffering and infectious processes that put their lives at risk—led me to politically engage with a feminist NGO focused on promoting women’s sexual and reproductive rights.

Faced with a concrete situation highly conflictive and destabilizing of legal and social normative frameworks, as is the case with abortion, that NGO sought to provide women with analytical and affirmation tools to legitimate their decision to terminate a pregnancy, based on the right to self determination. The ultimate goal was to improve women’s living conditions and promote greater equity in their relationships.

However, the reproductive field, where we sought the exercise of autonomy, is a relational field *par excellence*, determined not only by women’s desires, life projects (professional, economic e affective) and moral and religious values. It is also often determined by negotiations with the desires, projects and values of the partner involved in the pregnancy.

Men were present not only in women’s narratives about their abandonment, conflict or solidarity in that particular situation. They were also present in the NGO’s waiting rooms, made invisible or marginalized from our commitment to the women, or being considered in our intervention only when their position became an obstacle to the woman’s decision. In these cases, including men in the process became strategic. We sought a negotiated exit in which they took “responsibility” (sometimes against their will) for the abortion or made a commitment to the inviolability of their partner’s body integrity. However, in order to get to that point, we also needed to see them as subjects, hear them and promote a change of attitude, since the men, as much as the women, were influenced by social, normative and, in some cases, religious conventions.

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The cornerstone of reproductive rights, a result of feminist struggles, is women's capacity to regulate their own sexuality and reproductive capacity. These rights also demand that men take responsibility for the consequences of the exercise of their sexuality (Azeredo and Stolcke, 1991). More recently, international treaties have established the promotion of mutually respectful and equal relations between the genders as a commitment of governments and communities (International Conference on Population and Development – ICPD, Cairo, 1994) and the promotion of “mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behavior and its consequences” (Beijing Platform for Action). This is a landmark for the debate on reproduction that, nonetheless, is problematic in its distribution of rights and responsibilities among men and women involved in a reproductive event. This issue has been discussed by several authors in Brazil (Ávila and Gouveia, 1996; Corrêa and Petchesky, 1996; Ardaillon, 1997; Arilha, Ridenti e Medrado, 1998; Corrêa and Ávila, 2003).

Still, what do we know about what men think about abortion, what happens to them during a voluntary termination of pregnancy, how this decision affects them and how this situation can contribute to changes in attitudes toward the responsible exercise of sexuality?

The research

On the fields of intervention, political mobilization and production of knowledge, abortion has traditionally been framed as a women's issue. In producing knowledge about a given field, we reproduce conventions based on which we render visible certain events, dynamics, and subjects and obscure the presence of other dimensions or impede the participation of other actors. An analysis of studies about abortion carried out in Latin America with funds from the *Population Council* showed that, despite research results showing the importance of the partner's participation in abortion, men were ignored or underestimated in the data interpretation and the discussion of results. According to the authors of this study, the theories and biases that guide research on abortion may force the analysis, focusing the process on women and ignoring other factors that they try to express (Tolbert, Morris and Romero, 1994).

Instigated by the previously mentioned experience with the NGO and its “inconsistencies” with international treaties, I decided to continue researching this theme.¹ I tried to rid myself of the perspective that sees abortion as a women's issue and to radicalize the gender perspective in the research's empirical and analytical fields. In light of these considerations, I sought to question the reproductive field's configuration in the political and conceptual spheres, as well as in the representations of men and women, based

¹ The research corresponds to my Master's thesis in Social Anthropology, presented in 1999. Since then, the discussion about male participation in the reproductive field has advanced, but the issues presented here correspond to the analysis found in the thesis. See Ramirez-Gálvez (1999).

on the case of voluntary abortion. Specifically, I sought to observe the gender dynamic activated by an unwanted or inopportune pregnancy that ended in abortion, paying particular attention to the repertoires, arguments and forms of negotiation of an issue that involves men and women, albeit differently.

The researched group was composed of people with university degrees. With this approach, I sought to challenge the view of abortion as a result of disinformation and lack of access to contraception.² Therefore, my claims correspond to this particular group. Based on this restriction, I acknowledge that social dynamics, pervaded by gender, are different in other social groups.

Informants were nominated through a network system. This strategy provided an interesting information straight away. Informants found it strange when asked whether they knew women **and** men who had gone through an abortion, as if this event did not belong to the male universe. Most people on the network knew women and, in fact, we reached the number of women informants more quickly. Contact with men was a longer, more difficult process, despite them having a higher termination average (2.4 abortions among men and 1.3 among women). In all, I analyzed 27 narratives about terminations of pregnancies experienced by eight women and seven men (some informants had more than one abortion experience). Both the male interviewees and the male partners of female interviewees played an active role in searching for information, contacts and means to carry out the abortion. If, in this group, they had a higher number of abortion experiences in which they actively participated, how can we explain the lack of visibility of this event in their lives?

Male interviewees stated they had never been questioned about this experience and had only talked about it in depth on few occasions. This possibly determined their willingness to talk about this reproductive event in detail. I present some aspects I consider more relevant in order to contrast female and male experiences of abortion.³

Some authors (Di Giovanni, 1983; Arilha, Ridente and Medrado, 1998; Guevara, 1998) claim that male reproductive behavior is associated with the type of relationship and the degree of affective involvement with their partner. However, male participation in the process is also determined by the type and degree of participation they are allowed to have by the woman. Women in the group did not always manifest an interest in sharing the responsibility for reproductive acts with men, especially in the cases of occasional encounters, relationships with lesser affective commitment or when they believed the man's position could interfere with their decision to terminate the pregnancy.

² A research carried out in Colombia claims that the likelihood of abortion is higher among more highly educated women because they are more intolerant of unwanted pregnancies due to other life projects (Universidad Externado de Colombia, 1994).

³ A broader discussion of the research results can be found in Ramirez-Gálvez (1999, 2000).

An unexpected or unwanted pregnancy—which implies the imminence of a possible maternity/paternity—brings up, among other things, the idea of forming or consolidating a family project. This leads to an evaluation of the relationship and the partners' projects toward each other and, consequently, of the desire and willingness to form bonds in the concrete situation in which the pregnancy takes place. In this social group, possibly unlike in popular segments (Arihã, Ridente and Medrado 1998; Almeida, 2002), the decision to have a child seems to depend on the evaluation of the relationship, with a clear distinction being drawn between the partner to “hook up with” and the one with whom to start a family. For women in this group, having a stable affective relationship is essential when it comes to having children, as is the conjunction of this plan with the possibility of accomplishing professional projects and economic stability.

There were differences between men and women in the retrospective reflection on the decision to abort. Generally speaking, women's evaluations rested on the fact that the decision did not thwart personal and professional plans and on the event's meaning for the affirmation of their autonomy—that is, on its gains. If for these women the intensity of the affective involvement and the relationship's quality are important in having a child, they become insufficient to prevent the decision to terminate a pregnancy. This seemed difficult to understand for some of the interviewed men, for whom the rejection of the pregnancy became, in some cases, a criterion for evaluating their partner's desire, love and commitment.

Men's retrospective evaluation rested mostly on the loss of the relationship and of the project of starting a family. However, this evaluation was not abstract, but based on events that followed the end of the relationship, on the fact that the former partner later had children and that some of them, who were in their forties, had no children at the time of the interview. This evaluation, especially the feeling of frustration of the desire to have a child and of being partners in “aborted relationships”, may be related to the realization that their desire—in this sphere—is limited or determined by women's willingness.

One of the main issues that arise when female and male perspectives on reproduction are compared is women and men's different involvement in the process, specifically the implications of gestation and abortion for the body.

The pregnant body and women's reproductive rights were presented as essential aspects in the arguments or repertoires of the group's negotiations. Male interviewees stated the moral impossibility of imposing or requesting the continuity of a project that compromised their partners' bodies. In the group, women's autonomy to choose to end a pregnancy was unanimous. The main argument for this right is the fact that the pregnancy takes place in women's bodies, as well as the fact that the initial care for children is attributed to women.

Though men and women believe that, ideally, resolution of pregnancies should include discussion and participation of both people involved, especially when there is a relationship (excluding occasional encounters), the body's inviolability is seen as a principle of human dignity and freedom that necessarily leads to the supremacy of women's desire or will. The corporeality of pregnancy is a limit to men's reproductive desire and right, faced with which they may only opine and, ultimately, accept their partner's decision. Male interviewees thus claimed the nonexistence of men's autonomy of reproductive desire once a pregnancy occurs.

If this female power seems easier to accept in the case of terminating a pregnancy, the unilateral nature of women's decision causes indignation when they opt, against their partner's will, to continue a pregnancy and then demand that the partner take responsibility for the child or, in other cases, alienate the father from his right to parent.

Male interviewees spoke of the affection that arose from the experience. Nonetheless, this experience, however intense, "concrete" or painful, was always minimized when compared to the female bodily experience. In this group of men and women, highly influenced by feminist demands, abortion is viewed as a woman's right in which it falls to each of the sexes to carry out their corresponding gender performance.

In the analyzed narratives, once the decision to terminate the pregnancy was made, the search for adequate and safe abortion conditions became a determinant aspect. That is, the abortion would only happen under conditions that assured the integrity of the woman's health. In the cases in which the decision was shared, the male partners had an active role during the entire process: searching for information (for example, the method of use, action and risks of *Cytotec*⁴); checking the clinic's or physician's safety conditions and reliability; paying for the intervention in part or in full; and providing care, company and support after the event. Some of the male interviewees claimed they had to make some kind of "sacrifice" in order to symbolically compensate their partner's bodily involvement in the situation, such as renouncing an economic project or a training trip abroad.

As a result of this research, which was partially and briefly presented here, I believe that the experience of abortion transcends the event's materiality and that we are possibly limiting our understanding of this field by not considering its other forms of "incorporation" that mobilize subjective experiences despite not leaving a mark on the body. As an example, I present the concern manifested by one male interviewee—childless and with a history of five abortions with different partners—about his reproductive future. Though these experiences have left no marks on his body, during the interview he expressed his concern that he may have exhausted his "share of little souls".

⁴ Trade name of the abortifacient drug Misoprostol. (Translator's note)

The challenges of including a gender perspective in the field of abortion

An unwanted or unplanned pregnancy is a result of a couple's sexual activity⁵, though the marks of this event fall on the female body. When the male perspective is included, it complicates the resolution of conflicts and policy making in this field.

An abortion compromises women's corporeality and leaves men's bodies intact. Put in these terms, abortion is, by definition, an asymmetrical field. A situation in which the scale oscillates both ways without reaching a balance. In terms of bodily involvement, women have to subject themselves to the termination, bearing the physical and psychic costs and risks of a medical procedure that is unregulated, due to its illegality, as well as the legal risk and the moral judgment to which they may be subjected in certain contexts that condemn abortion. In this view, men are left with a more comfortable position, since the experience does not physically affect them, though the issue is translated into a lack of autonomy to decide the future of pregnancies in which they are co-participants, when there is a conflict.

Discussions of disruptive situations such as abortion are an excellent setting in which to discuss forms of social organization and to understand dynamics, performances and relationships between actors. In an event that is traditionally seen as a "women's issue" in discussions, research, law making and everyday observations, thinking about gender dynamics and taking them to their fullest analytical extent presents us with challenges, especially in the event's political dimension.

How can we promote the free exercise of choice in a decision that, despite materializing in one body, involves the life and responsibility of another member of the couple? Decisions in this field are generally determined not only by their implications in a specific moment of maternity in women's lives, but also by the partner's stance faced with the imminence of a child, by the expectations of forming or consolidating a couple, as well as by ideas and values mobilized by pregnancy and the possibility of abortion.

This is only one dimension of the matter. In fact, there are other social dynamics in which gender configurations are different or in which the partner's coercion and/or abandonment may determine in other ways the decision and the resolution process. Configuring this field as essentially female may have limited the understanding of male participation, excluding it from the debate. I believe that changing this is essential if we wish to promote more equitable relations which overcome the social asymmetry that places the costs and responsibilities of reproduction on women.

⁵ I am considering consensual sexual relations.

That men talk about these issues is not canonical, although they also have stories to tell and challenge us to face the complexity, both conceptual and political, that involves including this perspective in the attempt to balance the loads and in the search for modes of intervention that promote solidarity and more equitable relationships.

Including the male perspective at the analytical level does not at all imply, in practical terms, forcing a woman to have a child or an abortion against her will, nor does it turn men into victims. However, I believe it is important to identify current conceptual and political challenges that are a product of women's struggles and demands in this field. I conclude wondering if restricting the understanding of abortion to a body issue does not put us in a trap. One would have to consider whether validating this experience solely in its bodily dimension is not a way of naturalizing or essentializing the inexorability of the reproductive future which feminist theoreticians and militants questioned decades ago.

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