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Voicing Abortion Experiences to Reduce Stigma: Lessons from an Online Storytelling Platform in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This study is a discourse analysis of an online abortion-storytelling platform in Mexico called Lightbulbs. The platform contributes to reducing stigma by showing a diversity of experiences and contesting stereotypes through participants' own voices, which is powerful in a context where public discourse about abortion is polemic and rarely based on personal experience. Yet, tensions exist regarding what kinds of stories are less visible or silenced in online storytelling. We conclude with implications for reproductive rights activists who may unwittingly undermine the potential of storytelling for transformative justice in relation to access to safe and legal abortion.

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Introduction

Abortion storytelling has become a key strategy used by feminist sexual and reproductive rights activists globally to reduce the stigma and silence that surrounds abortion. Storytelling has been used in a variety of ways, including to influence legislative change, to improve community attitudes, to give voice to marginalized experiences, and to transform people's experiences of isolation (Belfrage et al., 2019; Cockrill & Biggs, 2018; Hagen, 2020; Kissling, 2018). Storytelling is also part of a broad range of related online strategies (e.g., providing pills and support for self-managed abortions) to improve abortion access that have gained increased importance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abortion stigma can be defined as “a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to ideals of womanhood” (Kumar et al., 2009, p. 628). Research has shown that abortion stigma is a common phenomenon across diverse contexts globally, but it manifests in particular ways according to local social and cultural constructs and individual lifeworlds (Kumar et al., 2009). Abortion stigma is produced by oversimplifying complex social situations, rhetorically separating abortion as an exceptional experience, and categorizing people who have abortions as deviant (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). This process creates negative stereotypes about people who have abortions, which leads to discrimination (Kumar, 2009; Link & Phelan, 2001). Abortion stigma can have a negative impact on people's experience of and access to abortion, particularly when it intersects with

other structural oppression including sexism, racism, and socioeconomic inequalities (Cockrill & Biggs, 2018; Cockrill & Nack, 2013; Herrera & Zivy, 2002; Hessini, 2014; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Sorhaindo et al., 2014).

Several factors contribute to the stigmatization of abortion in Mexico, including the adverse legal context (abortion is permitted for any reason up to 12 weeks in Mexico City and more recently in some other states, but it is greatly restricted elsewhere),¹ Catholic public discourse that exacerbates shame or guilt, and entrenched gender norms, based on an idealization of motherhood and the control of women's sexuality (Amuchástegui et al., 2010; McMurtrie et al., 2012; Sorhaindo et al., 2014).

Much research has focused on negative experiences of abortion stigma, yet many women in Mexico are proud of their abortion decisions, value putting their own health and well-being first, and have found the experience life-transforming (Belfrage et al., 2019; Ortíz Ramírez, 2020; Sorhaindo et al., 2014). These positive experiences are usually enhanced when women can speak openly about their abortions (Astbury-Ward, 2012; Belfrage et al., 2019; Ortíz Ramírez, 2020).

Despite the prolific nature of storytelling initiatives, research on storytelling and abortion stigma has predominantly been conducted in the United States (Cockrill & Biggs, 2018; Sisson & Kimport, 2016). Anglophone feminists have highlighted the importance of making positive abortion experiences more visible to counteract stigmatizing abortion rhetoric (Baird & Millar, 2019; Cockrill 2014; Thomsen, 2013). Sharing diverse personal stories publicly can also help to debunk stigmatizing stereotypes about people who have abortions, which can lead to greater empathy and understanding.

However, there are also inherent tensions regarding the use of personal stories to change public opinion, particularly in contexts where abortion is restricted and highly stigmatized. In such contexts, personal stories must often be carefully curated for fear that the power of their message may be diluted, that they could reinforce certain stigmas, or even be co-opted by antiabortion actors. This often leaves little room for nuanced or complex abortion experiences in storytelling (Allen, 2015). The results of Allen's (2015) analysis of online abortion storytelling cautions that people who do not fulfill certain pro-choice norms in terms of demographic background, moral decision-making, or emotional response to their abortion may be dissuaded from telling their stories online. Although public abortion storytelling is becoming more common in Mexico,² we are unaware of any research that presents an analysis of publicly shared abortion testimonies in this context.

The Lightbulbs Platform

In 2017, an alliance of pro-rights³ organizations that work to advance abortion rights in Mexico created a public-facing online platform called Lightbulbs (*Focos* in Spanish, www.focos.org.mx) where women who have experienced abortions can share their

¹In the rest of the country, abortion is criminalized and only permitted under certain circumstances, such as rape. Seventeen states (of 32) also have constitutions that protect life from the moment of conception. While a Supreme Court decision in 2021 ruled that criminal punishment of abortion is unconstitutional, many state legislations remain restrictive.

²See, for example, Fondo Maria's "*Yo aborto, yo acompaño, yo transformo*" (I have abortions, I accompany, I transform) campaign (<https://www.fondomaria.org/blog>).

³We have chosen to use the term "pro-rights" rather than "pro-choice." Although historically abortion rights activism in Mexico has been heavily influenced by pro-choice discourse from the United States, discourse used by activists is also

personal story. The platform has three goals: to build a safe space free of prejudice for women to contribute their stories; to apply a feminist ethical lens to the issue of abortion; and to make abortions more visible as a common reproductive practice among diverse women in Mexico. The name *Lightbulbs* is derived from the platform's front page, where users can "turn on" a lightbulb on a map of Mexico as a way of representing their abortion and thus metaphorically "light up" Mexico by breaking the silence. They can then share their story using one of five media: writing a testimony; sharing a video, image, or audio file; or creating a digital *ex-voto*.⁴ For those who choose to write their story, the platform offers prompting questions. However, this is framed as a guide rather than a template. The questions are: "How did you feel when you found out you were pregnant? How did you feel after the abortion? What made you feel better after making the decision to terminate the pregnancy? What do you think helped you to live the experience in a more positive way? Or in what way would you have liked to experience it? How do you imagine yourself in 5 years?"

The content, structure, and length are left completely open to the author. Once uploaded to the platform, stories are then read, edited, and approved for publication by the organizations that coordinate the platform according to loose guidelines. Edits are usually only made to grammar and punctuation to improve clarity; however, some self-stigmatizing language is removed from some testimonies, and testimonies that contain overtly antiabortion content are not made public.

The Present Study

As feminist researcher-activists⁵ working in the sexual and reproductive rights space in Mexico, we have become interested in exploring the tensions between offering a space to share abortion stories that respects a diversity of voices and experiences, while at the same time advancing a political agenda that relies on certain discourses about abortion. This article presents a case study of the *Lightbulbs* platform as a storytelling intervention to reduce abortion stigma. In the study we aimed to understand more about who tells their stories online, how they represent their abortion experience, and what lessons this leaves us as feminist activists seeking to advance sexual and reproductive rights through online storytelling.

The data that inform this article were derived from an extensive discourse analysis of abortion testimonials submitted for publication by women on the *Lightbulbs* platform. We used the testimonials on the *Lightbulbs* platform to explore the following questions:

- How do people discursively express their experiences of abortion online?
- How does the *Lightbulbs* platform contribute to our understanding of the effectiveness of online storytelling to destigmatize abortion?

articulated within a broader framework of human rights and citizenship (see Lamas, 1997). We use pro-rights to capture this broader framework.

⁴*Ex-votos* are hand-painted votive offerings to saints, which are commonly placed in Catholic churches in Mexico as a way of giving thanks for prayers answered (Pineda, 2004). The platform offers seven preset images to choose from, with the option of adding a short one- or two-line sentence at the bottom of the image.

⁵We use this term to make transparent our positionality as feminist researchers engaged in work in reproductive rights nongovernmental organizations in Mexico. Our critique of activist practice is very much a self-critique.

Table 1. Background information present in women's testimonials on the Lightbulbs platform ($N = 200$).

	%
Women's characteristics ^a	
University students	26
Professional working women	17
High-school or younger	11
Mothers confronting a new pregnancy	7
Rape survivors	2
Insufficient information	37
Location where abortions took place	
In their home state	16
Traveled to Mexico City	18
Unspecified	66
Facility where abortions took place	
Private clinic	28
Public hospital	18
At home ^b	9
NGO health centers	4
Unspecified	41
Abortion method	
Medical (pill) abortion	19
Surgical abortion	19
Both (medical and surgical) ^c	5
Unspecified	57

^aAt the time of the abortion.

^bAbortions carried out at home using medication, often using information offered online or over the phone by reproductive rights activists.

^cFollowing the failure of pill-induced abortion, these women sought out a surgical one.

- What implications do these findings have for reproductive rights advocates and our practice?

Method

Data

In total, 200 testimonials⁶ published between July 2017 and April 2018 were analyzed.⁷ Both the testimonials in their original form and their public-facing edited versions were included in the analysis so that we could interrogate critically the criteria used in editing women's testimonials. We did not have access to any identifying information about the women who wrote the testimonials, apart from what was shared publicly on the platform (first name or pseudonym). Background demographic information of contributors to the Lightbulbs platform was sometimes difficult to discern given the open-ended format of testimonials. However, Table 1 contains a basic summary of what we could find. It can be inferred that the platform is largely used by educated and professional women who often had access to abortions in private clinics, whether in their home states or in Mexico City. Other data used for the study, such as life stage at the time of abortion, location, or type of abortion, were derived qualitatively from the narratives. In addition, we carried out

⁶This includes 153 texts, five audios, two videos, 12 *ex-votos*, and four images. An additional 24 texts that had been rejected over the same time period were also included.

⁷Although the platform launched in April 2017, the authors only included testimonials from July onward to minimize data bias because women who contributed testimonials in the first months were directly linked to feminist activist networks.

several interviews with the platform's project coordinators to discuss findings. At the time of the study, the first and third authors were employed in a research and evaluation capacity by the coalition of nongovernmental organizations who fund and coordinate the Lightbulbs platform. The second author was an independent consultant engaged to carry out the study. Participants' consent was obtained when the women submitted their testimonies to the platform. All testimonies, including the original unedited versions, were downloaded by the platform's coordination team and shared with the researchers. Our study was approved by the Population Council's Institutional Review Board.

Analysis

Data analysis methods were designed and conducted by the second author using an approach that combines semiotic and discourse analysis. Semiotics "allows researchers to make more available the unstated, implicit understandings that underlie stories people tell" (Feldman et al., 2004, p. 147). This approach does not question how true stories are, but rather offers insight into how tellers portray themselves and their experiences (Feldman et al., 2004). Discourse analysis assumes that narratives are political, as people make choices "to include some things and exclude others and to view the world in a particular way when other visions are possible" (Stone, 1988, p. 306).

We used both semiotic and discourse analysis methods to identify typologies and meta-narratives that emerged from the stories submitted to the Lightbulbs platform. Typologies are interpretive categorizations based on a clustering of semiotic codes. They are an interpretive lens created through the process of data analysis to allow comparisons and patterns to be drawn across a large body of diverse stories.

We have framed each typology as a kind of "female protagonism." We understand female protagonism as akin to the "female gaze" (TIFF Talks, 2016), a term that has been used in the field of media and film theory as a direct response to Mulvey's (1989) concept of the male gaze. In the context of abortion storytelling, female protagonism is about power and control over one's own story. Although we describe each typology as a kind of female protagonism, we do not mean to make presumptions about the storyteller's personality or intentionality. Instead, the typology describes the discursive strategy; that is, we focus on what the story does, not who the teller is.

Meta-narratives refer to the function or purpose that abortion storytelling holds for diverse narrators. Meta-narratives are not ascribed to individual stories but rather are read across the entire sample of stories (i.e., more than one could be present in a single testimony). Like typologies, they do not seek to ascribe intentionality, rather they are an interpretation of how storytellers frame their experience and appeal to a perceived audience. They are dialogical in the sense that meaning emerges through the reading of the story as much as the telling. In the process of identifying meta-narratives, we considered the possible diverse audiences for the platform, including women seeking information about abortion, women seeking support after abortion, or antiabortion actors who may question the legitimacy of women's reproductive decisions.

Although Lightbulbs is a multimedia platform, we focused our analysis on written text testimonies because they provided the most content for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to establish typologies and meta-narratives in the texts. Semiotic codes were

Table 2. Typologies of female protagonistisms with examples of codes found in testimonies that represent each typology.

Pragmatist: Economic prosperity, education, wanting a full life, unfit partner, maturity, my schedule
Achiever: My schedule, regaining control, death sentence, protecting my future, wanting a full life
Stable couple: Support network, self-worth, prelude to a happy family, not chancing it
Childfree woman: Confident decision, autonomous decision, self-definition, lifting taboo, capacity for love
Responsible mother: Existing children, quality of life for the child, responsibility of bringing up a child, capacity for love
Good daughter: Personal faith, bad luck, split self, emotional safety

developed inductively. Codes were then analyzed together to see what patterns emerged. Typologies and meta-narratives were identified separately by analyzing the whole data set each time.

Results

An overwhelming majority of women chose text as their preferred format for sharing their stories online (87.5%).⁸

We found that stories covered five stages of the pregnancy-abortion-post-abortion process. They included reactions to the pregnancy; decision making; investigating options; the procedure; and reflections on the experience after the abortion. Although individual stories often covered several stages, the greatest focus was reflecting about the experience.

Typologies: Female Protagonisms in Online Abortion Storytelling

The six typologies that we identified are “pragmatist,” “achiever,” “stable couple,” “childfree woman,” “responsible mother,” and “good daughter.” They are presented in Table 2 with examples of their corresponding semiotic codes.

The pragmatist typology emphasized rationality and took into consideration what were presented as “objective” factors in abortion decision-making. This includes circumstances such as bad timing in terms of education or professional career, age, lack of economic resources, or the unsuitability of a partner. These were weighed in testimonies to demonstrate that the abortion was the best decision. The pragmatist typology was by far the most represented across the sample.

The achiever typology shares some characteristics with the pragmatist; however, there is more emphasis on the fact that the unintended pregnancy presents an insurmountable obstacle to achieving one or more personal or professional goals that hold great significance for the storytellers. Continuing with the pregnancy would undermine all previous hard work to achieve them.

The semiotic codes underpinning the pragmatist and achiever typologies concern wanting a full-time career, and mention graduating, securing a fulfilling job, and not sacrificing economic prosperity. In this sense, abortion is constructed as a way of regaining control or not letting one’s life derail.

⁸Ex-votos were the next most popular format of choice (6.8%), then audio (2.8%), images (2.3%), and videos (1.1%).

The stable-couple typology is different than the other typologies because it focuses on a relationship rather than an individual's abortion experience. The pronoun "I" is replaced by the strong prominence of "we" in the narratives, and the abortion decision is framed as a joint decision between the women and their partners. Testimonies that evoke the stable-couple typology emphasize the support felt from partners as a positive contribution to the abortion journey. Abortions are framed as positive experiences that bring couples closer together and as important milestones in the couples' history.

The childfree-woman typology is less represented across the sample. Testimonies that evoke the childfree-woman typology explicitly state their lack of desire to have children, and abortion is associated with the ability to exert this choice. Many narratives draw on feminist tropes that question the hegemonic role of women as mothers and are emphatic in their refusal to take up this role. They frame abortion as a political action.

The typologies of the responsible mother and good daughter are the least represented in the sample. The responsible-mother typology is based on choosing abortion to prioritize providing for other children. The good-daughter typology emphasizes being a dutiful family and community member who is respectful of social and religious norms. Testimonies that take up the good-daughter typology appeal to the audience's empathy by presenting the unintended pregnancy as a "mistake" and emphasizing an ongoing desire to be a mother one day.

Meta-Narratives of the Abortion Testimonies

Four meta-narratives emerged from the analysis. They are "catharsis," "confession," "militant manifesto," and "cautionary tale."

Overall, on the platform, the catharsis and the confession were the most prominent meta-narratives. The catharsis follows a double-act crisis-resolution structure. The pregnancy detonates a crisis, and the abortion is the resolution. The function of the testimony is to alleviate the storyteller's emotion by allowing her to relive her experience and to provide a space for self-reflection and healing. In terms of impact, this style of narrative aims to reassure the audience by presenting them with a resolution that is both a practical and emotional response to the crisis caused by the undesired pregnancy.

The confession meta-narrative is akin to a stream of consciousness. It is the testimonial form at its peak, through the partial and subjective recollection and telling of events. The function of the testimony is to express one's voice, counter feelings of isolation, and reach a better understanding of the self. The confession meta-narrative often correlated with the responsible-mother and good-daughter typologies.

The militant manifesto meta-narrative is less prominent on the platform. It situates the personal experience of abortion within the context of the narrators' beliefs and values. It directly engages with discourses of reproductive rights and feminism. The function of the militant-manifesto testimony is to convince others of the storytellers' right to abortion and, more broadly, of the need to protect, defend, and extend the right to abortion as a fundamental human right. The militant manifesto tries to dispel myths about abortion for its audience by providing a highly detailed and explanatory account of the procedure, including before, during, and after it.

Table 3. Examples of phrases edited out from testimonies submitted to the Lightbulbs platform.

Self-blame statements: “Yes, I am selfish, but who’s gonna fight my corner, if not me?”; “It was not because I wanted to negate my mistake or because I felt I wasn’t guilty.”

Potentially “incriminating” factors for the woman: “Of course, I do not blame everything on alcohol. But it was a very important factor for this to happen.”

Overly graphic descriptions of the physical effects of abortion, as well as descriptions of physical or psychological consequences: “I had a very strong infection after, I took a treatment of antibiotics because the infection was severe”; “During the curettage my uterus was punctured, and they had to operate to repair it so that I would not die from the bleeding”; “It hurt me like nothing in the world had hurt.”

Descriptions of uncaring medical staff: “When I woke up, the first doctor who saw me asked me, but what did you just do? And I broke down in tears, my parents did not know anything, my boyfriend was not there, and that doctor’s question made me feel like a monster.”

Personifying the fetus and references to “maternal instinct”: “A year later, I still think about him and how old he would be, 6 months”; “We did a ritual to thank the aborted baby for allowing us to continue together”; “I discovered that my maternal instinct was powerful even though I had so little time while being full of hormones, I also discovered that I was ready to face all those challenges and changes.”

Mentions of divine punishment: “I do not know if there really is a place of punishment for all the girls that have decided to abort.”

The cautionary-tale narrative is the least prominent on the platform and describes a negative abortion experience outside the legal context. Testimonies that evoke the cautionary tale are presented without emotion, are action-oriented, and attempt to outline “the facts,” making them similar in style to a deposition. The cautionary tale attempts to expose the injustice of legally restricted abortion, so that the narrators’ own experience may help and inform others in the future. It does not aim to discourage other women from seeking an abortion but rather to prompt them to seek abortion in a secure and supervised environment.

Editing the Stories

The impact of the editing practice by the organizations that coordinate the platform was explored by comparing 153 original testimonies with the edited, published version, as well as 24 testimonials that had been “rejected” for publication. All the testimonies that were analyzed had been edited in some way. The great majority of these edits were style corrections for clarity, although the content of some testimonies was edited. Content edits did not change the central message of the stories; however, some stigmatizing language was removed. Removed content included religious tropes, such as fetal personhood or violent and graphic depictions of the abortion procedure. Some examples of the kinds of words and phrases that were edited out are shown in Table 3. When we spoke with the platform’s project-coordination team, we were able to gather that the testimonies were edited to keep intact the overall message that women who have abortions were, are, and continue to feel confident in their abortion decisions. This was reinforced by the prompting questions provided by the platform that encouraged women to frame their experience in a positive light.

Discussion

Breaking the Silence, Stereotypes, and Stigma

The Lightbulbs platform’s approach to reduce stigma lies in constructing a space where women’s voices have authority and reflect a diverse range of, mostly positive, abortion

experiences. The sheer volume of lightbulbs (over 3,000 at the time of this writing) and testimonies shared attest to the fact that the platform has met a need among women to share their experience publicly, if anonymously, among other women's stories. Arguably, the platform works to destigmatize abortion by presenting diverse stories that question stigmatizing stereotypes of women who have abortions. Stereotypes perpetuate stigma by implying that "normal" women do not have abortions and denying the complexity of individual circumstances and experiences (Link & Phelan, 2001; Purcell et al., 2014). The platform serves to counteract these stereotypes by showing a diversity of abortion experiences through the voices and experiences of women themselves.

Testimonies on the platform constantly dialogue with both antiabortion and pro-rights discourses in Mexico. Many of the narratives work positively to question discourses that socially criminalize women. Often, the way in which the narrators present themselves and tell their story seems to be a response (either overt or subtle) to stereotypes that they seek to reject through *their own experience*. For example, the pragmatist and high-achiever typologies place value on means (e.g., education) that will allow them to reach future prosperity for themselves *and* their families. These typologies counter anti-rights tropes that women who have abortions are irrational, selfish, and irresponsible (Allen, 2015).

The stable-couple typology puts forward a similar rationale for abortion but also highlights the active role of male partners in abortion decision-making. This typology presents an alternative narrative to that in which the abortion decision derives from women's loneliness and lack of support from the partner or person directly involved in the pregnancy, or that an abortion experience traumatizes and breaks up couples. The presence of the stable couple in the sample is interesting given that the active and positive role partners can play in the abortion process remains under-explored in stigma-reduction interventions in Mexico.

The responsible mother and the good daughter respond to stigmatizing discourses that judge and single them out. Both typologies, but especially the good daughter, show that traditional Catholic values and abortion are not necessarily contradicting practices. Although the narrators do adhere to certain gendered stereotypes, they still frame abortions as a positive decision. The fact that the responsible-mother and the good-daughter typologies both have the lowest representation in this sample could be explained by the fact that the Lightbulbs platform is unambiguously pro-rights, which can be at odds with some of the beliefs exhibited through these typologies. Nevertheless, the inclusion of these testimonies, and the *ex-voto* images, offer important and culturally relevant portrayals of abortion experiences in Mexico.

Finally, the child-free typology questions motherhood as a mandate for women. This typology places choice and female autonomy as higher values. It "unapologetically" frames abortion as a way to guarantee autonomy without the need to put forward a rationale that explains or justifies it (Baird & Millar, 2019). The childfree-woman typology is less represented in the sample than the pragmatist or achiever typology, which could be explained by the heavy stigma around women who do not want children, particularly in a society that promotes motherhood as a core element for personal fulfillment (Sorhaindo et al., 2014).

The prominence of the catharsis and confession meta-narratives are likely to be the result of the framing of the Lightbulbs platform as a safe space to break the silence and

speak openly about abortion experiences. Although the confession is deeply apologetic, it still highlights the importance of a space like Lightbulbs where narrators can share experiences that they had been carrying in silence, often alone. The narrative arc of the catharsis offers an alternative framing of abortion as a positive solution and often transformative experience, which counteracts stigmatizing discourses prevalent in women's everyday lives (Belfrage et al., 2019).

The presence of the militant manifesto is to be expected on a platform created and promoted by feminist organizations. The link to the Lightbulbs platform is often given to women who have accessed information and accompaniment for self-managed medication abortion. However, the fact that this meta-narrative is less prominent than others suggests that the intervention has succeeded in reaching a broader audience outside feminist circles, which is positive.

Lastly, we hypothesize that the cautionary-tale meta-narrative is less prominent due to both the editing strategy of the platform and that it is likely that most women who post their stories on Lightbulbs had support to terminate their pregnancies through accompaniment or were able to access safe services in a clinic.

Discursive Tensions

Our research suggests that the Lightbulbs platform can contribute to reducing stigma by contesting stereotypes through women's own voices. However, we caution that this potential could be limited by the fact that women's testimonies can also reproduce, often unconsciously, stigmatizing discourses. We do not mean to invalidate women's stories and experiences. In the case of Lightbulbs, women are telling their stories from their own point of view, reconstructing their own subjectivity, and reclaiming it as legitimate, which, knowingly or not, is a political act. Like all political acts, there are tensions that can arise from this process.

Women who share their testimonies on Lightbulbs are encouraged by the nature and objective of the platform (to make abortion more visible and, ultimately, more acceptable to Mexican society) to express their experience in a certain way. Women often use the discursive tools available to them that are bound by socially acceptable norms. For example, the pragmatist, high-achiever, and stable-couple typologies, which are the most represented in the sample, can be likened to the rational, individualized subject of "choice" espoused by liberal feminism (Allen, 2015), while drawing on locally acceptable norms related to class, race, gender, and heteronormativity. We hypothesize that the construction of these narratives is partly because liberal feminist discourse has been the key grand narrative among sexual and reproductive rights advocates in Mexico since the mid-1990s (Lamas, 1997). Stories of people with other class, race, gender, or sexual identities are noticeably absent.

The responsible-mother and good-daughter typologies argue for the right to abortion based on economic hardship and portray the narrators as acceptable members of society who uphold traditional values such as motherhood and redemptive pity. These women rationalize their decisions to mitigate internalized stigma using the discourses available to them in a cultural context that places a high importance on traditional gender roles

and the value of family. However, rationalization can actually contribute to abortion stigma (Cockrill & Nack, 2013). By portraying their identity as acceptable (and thus their abortion as justified), they differentiate themselves from other women who are, by contrast, irresponsible mothers who raise children in “suboptimal” conditions or bad daughters who question gender normativity or betray family values.

The stable couple constructs their mutual support as normative; they need not apologize for finding themselves united in the decision to terminate a pregnancy vis-à-vis those women who face the decision alone, whether or not by choice. The child-free woman is defined by the ability to exercise freedom, a freedom more readily accessible to women of a certain class, as opposed to those women for whom it is not possible (or desirable) to deny the social mandate to mother.

Similar tensions exist in the meta-narratives. The most extreme versions of testimonies that evoke the catharsis and the confession meta-narratives are examples of apologetic discourses commonly associated with internalized stigma. However, the catharsis leaves room for thinking about abortion as a process; what was perhaps once considered a negative experience by women has evolved over time and through reflection into something valuable and life affirming. The militant manifesto could offer a powerful counter-discourse to antiabortion content. However, some women who do not see themselves reflected in such a politicized narration could feel alienated by it.

Finally, the cautionary tale could stigmatize abortions that are safe but do not necessarily take place in an institutionalized and medicalized context. Significant numbers of nongovernmental organizations and activists in Mexico assist women to self-manage abortion using medication. Testimonies that warn against abortions that take place outside hospitals may undermine this good work. Herein lies the tension of fostering the sharing of personal narratives with a political purpose. Most testimony is confined by sociocultural norms and, while the narratives attempt to destigmatize one kind of abortion experience, they may unwittingly exclude and stigmatize others.

Editing Abortion Stories

Another limitation of the Lightbulbs platform is related to the political nature of storytelling. Other authors have drawn attention to the “things we cannot say” (Ludlow, 2008, p. 28) and pointed out that personal stories that are inconsistent with political agendas can be “problematic for movement advancement” (Allen, 2015, p. 45). As part of our analysis, we interrogated activist practices of editing stories. Our analysis suggests that activists’ curation of stories on the platform sought to avoid the repetition of stigmatizing tropes or potential misuse and misrepresentation of women’s narratives by anti-rights movements or efforts. However, the erasure of certain themes (e.g., ambivalence, mental health, fear, or pain) from the testimonies raises questions as to potential unintended implications of such practices. For example, in many contexts in Mexico, there are legal restrictions to access abortion services, and, even when access to abortion is safe through informed self-managed medication abortion, stigmatizing attitudes toward women can make abortion experiences socially and emotionally complex. Erasing these complexities puts activists in danger of invalidating women’s lived experiences and limits the possibility for offering spaces, services, and other interventions to

assist women to share and make sense of their experiences. This is particularly problematic in a context where there is limited feminist counseling care available and psychological “services” related to abortion have largely been taken up by antiabortion and other religious actors (Ortíz Ramírez, 2020).

We also observed in online narratives that the complexities of abortion experiences that derive from structural inequalities, injustice, and stigma are largely absent. For example, the realities of maltreatment or stigmatizing attitudes from some health professionals against people seeking abortion care are downplayed, if not totally erased from the picture, even though this experience is not rare in the Mexican context (Singer, 2017). As activists, we understand the compulsion to distance ourselves from gruesome and misleading descriptions of unsafe abortion practices, yet removing experiences of poor treatment by medical personnel may eliminate the opportunity to talk about quality of care and its importance for positive abortion experiences. By and large, it seems that negative, stigmatizing, and hurtful experiences, which are more pervasive for certain populations, including low-income, sexual- and gender-diverse, adolescent, or Indigenous people (Smith-Oka, 2015), are largely absent from narratives on the Lightbulbs platform. As researcher-activists, we caution that this might have the unintended consequence of contributing to the erasure of social inequalities and justice issues.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, there are limitations in relation to the use of discourse analysis as a research methodology. We have used discourse analysis to understand the potential of abortion storytelling to question stigmatizing stereotypes. Yet discourse is highly interpretative. It does not offer any insights into the intentionality of the storytellers or reactions from audiences. Ideally, we also would have liked to have been able to speak to participants who either posted their stories or read the stories of others in order to find out more about what effect their participation had, if any, on their perceptions and experiences of abortion stigma. This was not possible due to the way the platform protects storytellers’ anonymity. Further research that directly engages the platform’s contributors and audiences would be useful.

Second, typologies and meta-narratives are analytical tools to draw out patterns in testimonies. However, as with any process of analysis through categorization, they could be in danger of essentializing the very diversity of experiences they aim to put forward. We emphasize that typologies and meta-narratives are not personifications, but an interpretive lens that allows us to engage with discursive threads across a large number of testimonies.

Third, although the results of our study do offer insights about how women talk about abortion online in Mexico, the study is limited by a lack of diversity among the participants. This points to limitations of the Lightbulbs intervention itself as, by design, the platform does not contain the testimonials of women who do not have digital literacy or access to the internet. This most likely explains the overrepresentation of discourses of women from educated, middle-class, urban, backgrounds. Further research about how to better engage a broader intersection of participants, particularly those who experience marginalization, is essential.

Conclusion

Although the importance of a platform like Lightbulbs in Mexico cannot be underestimated, and we recognize the potential it holds for destigmatizing abortion experiences, the tension between providing a space for participants to share their distinct and varied experiences, while also guiding writers to avoid reinforcing stigmatizing views or language of abortion, is evident.

Feminist activists should be fully aware of, and constantly reflective about, the way in which utilizing abortion storytelling to put forward certain messaging may also disregard fundamental aspects of women's experiences. We argue that the silencing or erasure of particular experiences has particular consequences in structurally unequal contexts where abortion is criminalized and access is particularly limited for those who face multiple discriminations. A reproductive-justice perspective, which places structural inequalities at the forefront of analysis, would be helpful in broadening activists' reflections, although we also encourage engagement with other feminist frameworks grounded in local contexts outside the United States (Morgan, 2015; Ross, 2006).

We conclude with the following questions for further thought and research. Can a pro-rights framework adequately represent the complexities of abortion experiences of women in contexts like Mexico? If we do not show these complexities publicly, are we contributing to injustice for many women in Mexico, whose experience is less likely to be a matter of choice? What tools can pro-rights activists in Mexico and other contexts develop to broaden our frame of reference to better serve people who directly live the consequences of stigma and discrimination? These questions have particular salience as more health initiatives move online and public communication about abortion experiences becomes more widespread. The challenge lies in developing tools that embrace the complexity of women's experiences while also countering antiabortion discourses that seek to dominate public narratives.

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