

1 Escola de Direito de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8924-089X>

2 Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina

3 Centro de Investigaciones Jurídicas y Sociales, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Córdoba, Córdoba, Argentina
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8190-907X>

4 Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima, Peru
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2656-0589>



Anti-Abortion Mobilization in Latin America: Signs of a Field in Transformation

MOBILIZAÇÃO ANTI-ABORTO NA AMÉRICA LATINA: SINAIS DE UM CAMPO EM TRANSFORMAÇÃO

Marta Rodriguez de Assis Machado¹, María Angélica Peñas-Defago^{2,3}
and Camila Gianella Malca⁴

Abstract

Gender and sexuality have become a focal point of the political divide in Latin America. In many countries, religious actors, political leaders, pro-life and pro-family nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), among others, have come together to promote a neoconservative shift in contemporary regional politics.

Despite the constant public presence of religious actors and their long-standing influence on public policies in the region, recent challenges to sexual and reproductive rights have come from a field in transformation. The anti-abortion mobilization shows important signs of adaptation and mutation on different fronts – networks, alliances, strategies, and frameworks. Finally, this process of renovation has led to the expansion of this dispute towards a broader anti-gender alliance, and the increasing importance of legal strategies and tools by anti-abortion actors is remarkable. The transformations in the anti-abortion field were globally put into action after the conservatives' defeat in the UN Conference in Cairo, and they also interacted with different local processes, in response to the relational dynamics between movement and countermovement. However, we can see important convergences among Latin-American cases. Drawing on evidence from case studies of countries in the region, this article analyses the main characteristics of contemporary anti-abortion activism in Latin America. It identifies significant commonalities among the cases and raises the hypotheses that shifts in the composition of the anti-abortion networks, in mobilization strategies and frames are inserted in a trend that has been transnationally diffused and subject to different processes of vernacularization. This article ultimately calls attention to the need for more empirical research to address the regional dynamics of transnational actors, diffusion processes, and local adaptations.

Keywords

Anti-abortion movement in Latin America; abortion; sexual and reproductive rights; anti-gender campaigns; mobilization and countermobilization; neoconservatism; Latin America.

Resumo

Gênero e sexualidade tornaram-se um foco de polarização política na América Latina. Em muitos países, atores religiosos, líderes políticos e organizações não governamentais (ONGs) "pró-vida" e "pró-família", entre outros, uniram-se para promover uma mudança neoconservadora na política regional contemporânea. Apesar da constante presença pública de atores religiosos e de sua influência de longa data nas políticas públicas da região, os ataques recentes aos direitos sexuais e reprodutivos vêm de um campo em transformação. A mobilização anti-aborto mostra importantes sinais de adaptações e mutações em diferentes frentes – em redes, alianças, estratégias e enquadramentos. Finalmente, esse processo de renovação levou à expansão do próprio campo de disputa para um campo ampliado da aliança antigênero, sendo digna de nota a importância crescente de

estratégias e ferramentas legais para atores antiaborto. As transformações no campo do antiaborto foram colocadas em marcha globalmente com a derrota dos conservadores na Conferência da Organização das Nações Unidas (ONU) no Cairo e interagiram com diferentes processos locais, respondendo às dinâmicas relacionais entre movimento e contramovimento. De qualquer modo, observamos convergências importantes entre os casos latino-americanos. A partir de evidências de alguns estudos de caso de países na região, este artigo analisa as principais características do ativismo antiaborto na área e identifica os pontos comuns entre os casos, levantando a hipótese de que as mudanças atuais na composição das redes antiaborto, suas estratégias de mobilização e enquadramentos indicam uma tendência difundida transnacionalmente, embora sujeita a diferentes processos de vernacularização. O texto, em última instância, chama a atenção para a necessidade de mais pesquisa empírica para acessar as dinâmicas regionais de atores transnacionais, processos de difusão e adaptações locais.

Palavras-chave

Movimento antiaborto na América Latina; aborto; direitos sexuais e reprodutivos; campanhas antigênero; mobilização e contramobilização; neoconservadorismo; América Latina.

INTRODUCTION

The recent actions of neoconservative actors worldwide against sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) have fueled concerns about their negative impacts. One example of these concerns is the call made by a group of United Nations (UN) experts to resist the global battle against SRR deployed by conservative religious groups. These groups' agenda is undermining women's and girls' capacity to make decisions about their own bodies and to receive comprehensive sex education (BENNOUNE, 2017). This is not the first warning that the UN has made regarding this phenomenon. The UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights has also documented the role of fundamentalist and extremist ideologies in the abuse of women's human rights by state and non-state actors, as well as the need to campaign against that abuse and the ideologies that give rise to it (UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 2017). In 2020, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief also highlighted how religious beliefs are invoked as a legitimate justification for violence or discrimination against women, girls, or LGBTQ+ persons (UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 2020).

In Latin America, gender and sexuality have become a focal point of the political divide. Abortion, women and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as sex education in schools, have entered the core of political battles in several countries, increasingly occupying space in electoral disputes and linking certain political actors to a broader conservative political agenda. "Con-

servative” (MUJICA, 2007), “religious conservative” (ROSTAGNOL, 2010), “reactive politicization” (VAGGIONE, 2005), “fundamentalist” (VUOLA, 2005), “backlash mobilization” (RUIBAL, 2014; MACHADO, 2018), and “anti-gender movement” (PATERNOTTE, 2015) are among the terms used to describe such broad opposition to SRR. Other authors, using the concept of “neoconservatism” (GIANELLA-MALCA *et al.*, 2017; BIROLI, MACHADO and VAGGIONE, 2020; LACERDA, 2019), focus on the existence of political rationality and alliances — between religious and non-religious actors, as well as between moral conservative and neoliberal forces — that produce a form of political resistance to cultural and political changes expressed through the regulation of sexual morality (BROWN, 2006 and 2019;¹ COOPER, 2017).

While analyzing cases in different countries, we have noticed that religious actors, political leaders, pro-life and pro-family nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), among others, have become important actors in the neoconservative wave in contemporary regional politics. These actors’ stated goals are to prevent, reverse, or restrict the legalization of abortion. Still, they have reconfigured their alliances and goals to oppose more broadly any measure aimed at gender and sexual orientation equality, such as recognizing same-sex marriage and transgender rights, in addition to promoting sex education in schools. It is important to highlight their shared commitment to traditional norms of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and reproduction, forming a barrier against the “threats” to traditional moral and family values posed by feminist and LGBTIQIA+ movements (VAGGIONE, 2005; PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2016).

Despite the constant public presence of religious actors and their long-standing influence on public policies in the region, the recent challenges to abortion and, more broadly, to sexual and reproductive rights are visibly arising from a field in transformation, which shows signs of adaptation and mutation in the networks, alliances, strategies, and frameworks. This article aims to grasp the main shifts in the trajectory of anti-abortion activism in the region by collecting illustrations from different Latin American countries. It calls attention to the formation of a conservative wave in Latin America, where we see strong signs of reconfiguration and expansion of the anti-abortion field towards a large alliance and audience organized around “anti-gender” campaigns. It also highlights the need for systematic studies that deepen our understanding of regional dynamics, transnational diffusion, and comparisons among different local contexts.

We used primary data of empirical research conducted in some Latin-American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and El Salvador), complementing it with the

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1 Brown (2019) revised her theoretical proposal. She now proposes that more than a confluence, the foundations of current neoconservatism and its defense of tradition are at the very roots of neoliberal thought.

small, but growing literature on the rise of conservative actors in the region (MACHADO, 2012; VAGGIONE, 2012; LEMAITRE, 2013; PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014; RUIBAL, 2014; REZENDE, 2016; GIANELLA-MALCA *et al.*, 2017; MACIEL and MACHADO, 2017; CORRÊA, 2018; GIANELLA-MALCA, 2018; MACHADO, 2018; QUADROS and MADEIRA, 2018; MONTE and VAGGIONE, 2019; MORÁN FAÚNDES and PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2020; VAGGIONE and MACHADO, 2020; VAGGIONE and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2021). Most part of our analysis is rooted in the mobilization within the abortion field, considering it one dimension of the neoconservative mobilization phenomenon. For the purpose of this paper, we refer to the field as *anti-abortion* activism, warning the reader that it is a transitional solution as the expansion of anti-abortion mobilization into a broader “anti-gender” or “neoconservative” mobilization is the object *per se* of this article.

Based on examples and discussions of country-specific episodes, we have traced the main common signs of adaptation of activism, strategies, and framework, which allowed us to formulate the hypothesis that anti-abortion activism has undergone important transformations in the region, expanding its incidence to different fronts. In the different Latin American countries that were analyzed, anti-abortion actors have started to use mobilization tactics generally used by progressive movements, such as marches, protests, litigation, and media campaigns. In some cases, they have also successfully built alliances with formal state institutions, partnered with local political parties, and participated in networks of local, national, and transnational civil society organizations comprising religious, interreligious, and secular groups. The secularization of discourse happened while religious frameworks lost their space to rights language, including disputes around the meaning of human rights. The anti-abortion field has been permeated by litigation, battles of legal interpretation, as well as the professional organization of lawyers, jurists, and think tanks.

The transnational advocacy networks once identified for progressive movements and particularly women’s movements (KECK and SIKKINK, 1998; MERRY, 2006) now seem to be operated by their opponents. Anti-abortion actors are deeply inserted in transnational networks that diffuse their agenda. By analyzing different cases in Latin America, we find traits and influences of strategies and frameworks circulating in the transnational arena. These innovations are diffused internationally and incorporated nationally through processes of *vernacularization*. Levitt & Merry (2009) define vernacularization as the process of connecting transnationally available ideas with a locality, a process in which repertoires and frameworks “[not only] take on some of the ideological and social attributes of the place, but also retain some of their original formulations.” Thus, vernacularization depends on contextual political processes, responding simultaneously to international ideas and specific features of the local dispute. International diffusion interacts with local opportunities, which also guides adaptations and reshaping (LEVITT and MERRY, 2009, p. 452). In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that transnational trends are subjected to local processes of selection and adaptation with different dynamics, which helps explain the

reason why countries similarly influenced by transnational ideas and strategies are undergoing different developments in the region.

This article does not intend to provide a deep analysis of the different dynamics of vernacularization and the particularities of each political context. We do not intend to go deeper in demonstrating the transnational dynamics and coordinating forces behind those processes, nor cover all Latin American countries. However, by following some national cases, we evidenced that there is something new and orchestrated going on in the anti-abortion field in the region. Thus, we do aim to call attention to the formation of a clear general pattern and to the need for more empirical research to deepen our understanding of how the “anti ‘gender ideology’ crusades” (CORRÊA, 2017) spread in Latin America, as well as how they interact with a complex and multidimensional local process that encompasses a diversity of actors and networks by creatively making choices and decisions about strategies, arenas, and frameworks, in addition to adapting them to local socio-cultural and political contexts.

We will proceed as follows. Section one presents the relational theoretical framework we used to understand the phenomenon, which allowed us to see the renovation of the anti-abortion field in the region longitudinally as a reaction to previous threats and advances of feminist, pro-abortion, and LGBTQ+ movements. Section two presents an overview of the main innovations regarding actors and alliances of several countries in the region, which indicates shifts in the profiles of organizations and actors, in addition to the expansion of the anti-abortion network toward party politics and civil society mobilization vis-à-vis the previous centrality of the Catholic Church. Sections three and four analyze the diversification of the repertoire of actions used by anti-abortion actors, such as campaigns, incidence on electoral cycles, and street protests, calling attention to the increasing prominence of legal mobilization strategies and rights frameworks. Finally, section five highlights the use of “gender ideology” as a master framework that redefines the borders of the field itself and boosts alliances across different movements engaged in the defense of a conservative sexual morality under the idea that “gender ideology” threatens traditional family values. While the limits of this article do not allow us to go deep into each case study, we hope that the examples pinpointed hereto flag the shifts taking place in the Latin-American anti-abortion field, signaling its expansion and strengthening. Finally, we aim to call attention to the need for more in-depth studies of neo-conservative mobilization and alliances to broaden the understanding of the current challenges faced by sexual and reproductive policies in the region.

I. MOVEMENTS AND COUNTERMOVEMENTS’ DYNAMICS: THE ANTI-ABORTION REACTION TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In a contextual and relational approach to political conflict, the confrontation between social movements and their opponents generates a chain of actions and reactions, in which

mobilizations and achievements of each side change the balance of opportunities, restrictions, and threats for the other one, triggering a reaction (USEEM and ZALD, 1982; BANASZAK and ONDERCIN, 2010; MEYER and STAGGENBORG, 1996; DELLA PORTA and DIANI, 2006). Understanding the relational approach of contentious politics does not mean that backlash is decisive or that backfire reactions are always able to reverse conquests (CORREDOR, 2021). We aim to locate the process of renovation and reorganization of the anti-abortion field as a reaction to victories by feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups in different instances, both in international and domestic arenas (VAGGIONE, 2005; RUIBAL, 2014). On the international front, even with the presence of conservative alliances in UN conferences and several strategies employed by the Vatican, they could not avoid various victories by the feminist movement: the UN Conference in Vienna (1993) launched the women's human rights framework and supported measures to address violence against women; the UN Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) reaffirmed women's rights as human rights, and moved the control of fertility from the demographic matrix to reproductive rights with the word *gender* appearing for the first time in an official international document; the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) reassured women's right to "control all aspects of their health, especially their own fertility" (FRANCO, 1998).

The defeat of anti-abortion forces in the UN Conferences set in motion counteractions in the anti-abortion field transnationally (LEMAITRE, 2014). After Cairo and on the eve of the Beijing Conference, Pope John Paul II launched the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) to denounce the "culture of death" promoted by international institutions. The document called on Catholics to organize and target legislators and to consider women who have once aborted, especially the poorest ones, as victims of social circumstances and scientific misinformation about the beginning of life.

Meanwhile, UN World Conferences served as tools to boost mobilization in domestic arenas. A new generation of globalized women's organizations and activists were forged in the conferences and the many fora promoted by them (ALVAREZ, 1997). Those activists, deeply connected in a transnational advocacy network, managed to use international resources and framework to mobilize and advance the reproductive rights agenda domestically through grassroots strategies, courts, health guidelines, and bills of law (MONTAÑO, 1996).

The UN Conferences were also used as spaces of transnational connection for the anti-abortion coalition, which included the Vatican, the Catholic States, pro-life US politicians, and the US-based organization Human Life International (HLI). HLI started to fund lobby campaigns, partner with local institutions (such as Pro Vida Mexico), and create local chapters across Latin America throughout the 90s. This transnational anti-abortion network developed its expansion in Latin America and was an important structure for streamlining the reaction to the sexual and reproductive rights paradigm.

The rearrangement of the field happened at different paces, through various configurations and particularities, depending on local processes of vernacularization. Moreover,

domestic anti-abortion mobilizations were also connected to other political processes and contexts, for example, the rise of Christian politicians in several countries in the region and, in some cases, the rise of a broader right-wing populist wave in response to an array of factors, from corruption scandals to inequality, public safety issues and economic stress (BOB, 2012).

In this sense, the position of actors in the field, the alliances, as well as the legal and political balance of opportunities at a local level are crucial to understand why and how transnational trends find their way through national political processes, why they are more successful in some countries than others, and why the recent strengthening of anti-gender advocacy does not manage to simply revert conquered rights. By analyzing the trajectories of abortion battles in the countries across Latin America, we see a variation in regulations, as well as a shifting and volatile scenario. The most recent developments in Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia² brought new hopes to the region; while in the opposite direction, many countries are still dealing with the reality or the threat of total bans on abortion.³ Such heterogeneity is explained by the complex and different socio-political contexts and domestic balances of legal and political opportunity structures. In this article, rather than following each political process, we are more interested in finding common traces of innovation inside the anti-abortion field in different contexts, catalyzed by a transnational process of circulation of new repertoires set in motion by the anti-abortion defeat in Cairo (LEMAITRE, 2014).

2. DIVERSIFICATION OF ACTORS AND RECONFIGURATION OF ALLIANCES TOWARDS PARTY POLITICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY MOBILIZATION

The specialized literature shows the long-standing presence and key role occupied by the Catholic Church in disputes over sexual politics across Latin America, the most Catholic continent of the world (HTUN, 2003; VAGGIONE, 2005; LEMAITRE, 2013; RUIBAL, 2014; PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014; VAGGIONE and MACHADO,

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- 2 In Argentina, since 2021, abortion is allowed until the fourteenth gestational week. After that, it is only permitted in case of rape or to preserve the woman's health or life. In Mexico, in 2021, the Supreme Court issued a decision that allows abortion within a short period of time (early pregnancy). In Colombia, in 2022, the Constitutional Court issued a decision that allows abortion until the twenty-fourth gestational week. Cf. Center for Reproductive Rights (2021).
- 3 In Latin America and in the Caribbean, there are laws that impose the total prohibition of abortion in Suriname, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Haiti (CENTER FOR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, 2021).

2020). However, the field has recently undergone significant changes, amplifying the alliances and diversifying the profile of activists and organizations. In a field formerly dominated and led by the Catholic Church, we now see an assortment of actors – other churches (mainly Evangelical Churches), pro-life and pro-family NGOs, Christian politicians, and professional organizations (such as pro-life lawyers or doctors), research centers and think tanks.

Catholics and Evangelicals⁴ have historically experienced tensions with each other (rooted in many cases in the Catholic Church’s privileges). Their competition has been acute in Latin America, where the emergence and spread of the Evangelical Churches from the Neopentecostal movement in the 2000s had an impact on the Catholic audience (RELIGION..., 2014). However, their shared resistance to sexual and reproductive rights enabled the creation of a common agenda. Advances in sexual and reproductive rights in national and international arenas prompted the alliance, both on transnational and local scales. Catholics and Evangelicals did not become allies only in international forums (SAMUEL, 2007). In several Latin American countries, both sectors have coordinated actions and statements against a more pluralistic sexual agenda (SANTANA, 2020). In Argentina, for instance, in the years of 2018 and 2020, the Catholic Church and different Evangelical Churches came together in different public actions to oppose the congressional debate over the legalization of abortion (LÓPEZ and LOZA, 2021). Before that, they also forged a series of alliances to oppose same-sex marriage, which were legalized by Argentina in 2010 (VAGGIONE and JONES, 2015). In Brazil, a cross-religious and cross-party alliance was formed in 2006 (MACIEL and MACHADO, 2017).

The anti-abortion alliance with the Evangelical Church created a gateway to party politics. Evangelical Churches have been increasingly disputing electoral positions with Christian politicians and parliamentary alliances across the region. Over the last twenty years, Evangelical representatives have entered party politics and evidenced an increasing presence in parliaments in Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Brazil, Chile, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru, among other countries (PASSARINHO, 2019; HINZ, VINUTO and COUTINHO, 2020). In fact, the emergence of confessional Evangelical political parties in several Latin American countries is considered as the main novelty in party systems that changed very little during the continent’s re-democratization processes initiated in the 1980s (SILVA, 2018; MARIANO and GERARDI, 2019; SMITH, 2019). One of the main agendas—and often the

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4 In this article, we used the general term “Evangelical” without ignoring the fact it is actually less uniform than it looks and is composed of different churches. In recent years, many Protestants and Pentecostals have preferred to identify themselves by the specific name of their denomination and by the generic term “Christian” (ALMEIDA, 2017).

foundation of the party platform—pursued by Evangelical and Christian lawmakers is the battle against gender and LGBTQ+ rights (JONES and CARBONELLI, 2012). In Paraguay and Brazil, both of the two elected presidents in 2018, respectively Mario Abdo Benítez and Jair Bolsonaro articulated speeches against LGBTQ+ rights and abortion. They received the strong support of conservative Christian movements. In Brazil, at least since the last decade, Evangelical and pro-life congressional representatives were already influential forces in Parliament and had efficiently blocked the expansion of reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights through legislation. In Costa Rica, opposition to LGBTQ+ rights was boosted among Evangelical groups after the Interamerican Court of Human Rights decision that obliged the State to ensure equal rights to same-sex marriage (MORGAN, 2021a). The Evangelicals' reaction led Fabricio Alvarado, a gospel singer and TV presenter, to significantly rise in the polls (from 3% to 25%), even though he did not eventually win (MACEDO and JACOBUCCI, 2020). Despite different levels of success, the new trend identified in various countries is the forged alliances between religious institutions, mainly Evangelical, and traditional political parties that share their moral and political agenda (VAGGIONE and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2021; SANDOVAL and ASCARZA, 2021).

Furthermore, new political actors were evidenced and gained importance by connecting civil society actors and party politics. After the 2018 legislative debate on abortion in Argentina, a new political party—the Blue Party—was created. The Blue Party is the first political party in Argentina whose main objective is to promote “the protection and defense of human life from conception to natural death.”⁵ The party is supported by Catholic and Evangelical leaders, pro-life NGOs, former legislators, and national officials. An interesting aspect of their political platform is their perspective on the state's economic and social role (MORÁN FAÚNDES and PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2020), clarifying the alliance between moral conservatives and neoliberalism. They support a free-market model and reduce the state's essential functions to lower the fiscal deficit. The budgetary deficit is related to the idea that external debt would motivate the state to follow anti-natalist and pro-abortion policies. The creation of this type of political party is not exclusive to Argentina. The Republican Party was created in Chile, 2019, and presented similar principals and policy platforms (MORÁN FAÚNDES and PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2020).⁶

In Brazil, the Evangelical presence in congress has significantly increased since 2014, with an amount of 85 Congressmen in the House of Representatives and seven senators elected in 2018 (DEPARTAMENTO INTERSINDICAL DE ASSESSORIA PARLAMENTAR,

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⁵ See Partido Celeste (s.d.).

⁶ See Partido Republicano (s.d.).

2018), parliamentary caucuses became crucial in organizing the conservative opposition. Parliamentary caucuses have played a particular role in the creation of the current conservative obstacle in Parliament – nicknamed “BBB caucus”, *Boi* (cattle), Bullet and the Bible (QUADROS and MADEIRA, 2018) – a coalition that currently blocks any advance in the sexual and reproductive agenda. Parliamentary fronts or caucuses have existed in Brazil for a long time as institutionally loose structures that congregate politicians from different parties and ideologies around a common interest, such as business people, the agricultural sector, and the transportation sector (LOPES, 2013). Since its creation in 2003, the Parliamentary Evangelical Caucus has forced taxations for churches as well as for sexual and moral issues, with anti-abortion bills as a primary object of action. A specific anti-abortion caucus was formed in 2006, and a pro-life and pro-family parliamentary caucus was created in 2019. These caucuses often work in alliance with each other, joining forces with other conservative caucuses. Parliamentary caucuses and their great influence are specific to the Brazilian context. The fact is that, by using different configurations, anti-abortion activism has joined electoral disputes and party politics in anti-abortion and anti-gender battles, and has become an important tool for gaining voters who are prone to populism, especially among Christian conservatives.

But this was not the only innovation in the reconfiguration of the anti-abortion field. Besides joining party politics and the parliamentary arena, coalitions between churches and civil society actors have increasingly occupied public spaces. In response to the positive results achieved by the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements in international conferences and national policies in many countries in the region, new organizations were founded on the civil society front, beyond the structures managed by the churches. This process of conservative “NGOization” of neo-conservatism (VAGGIONE, 2005) has evolved in different directions. Although the first conservative NGOs identified themselves as having Catholic roots, in recent years a series of similar NGOs have also emerged in the Evangelical field (VILLAZÓN, 2014; MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2015; PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2016). Some of them are confessional but not necessarily linked to the structure of the churches. Others were completely originated from religious references using pro-family frames or presenting themselves as bioethical institutes, think tanks, scientific-educational, and professional organizations, such as pro-life doctors or lawyers (SIVERINO BAVIO, 2013; IRRAZÁBAL, 2011; MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2015). As Vaggione (2005) points out, the adoption of a secular position is a strategy for achieving greater influence in the public debate and penetrating spaces to which access would be difficult with a discourse expressly based on faith and religious dogma.

In Brazil, the national movement Brazil without Abortion – National Movement of Citizens for Life (*Brasil Sem Aborto – Movimento Nacional da Cidadania pela Vida*), created in 2006, is a self-declared supra-party and supra-religious organization, which presents itself as a group of “professors, students, lawyers, religious and community leaders, jurists and renowned

scientists” who work “in a structured way to guide actions and arguments based on evidence and research in the field of genetics, embryology, bioethics, and on current legislation” (BRASIL SEM ABORTO, *s.d.*). This is a clear statement of its societal roots and its anchoring both in science and law. Other examples in the region of these NGOs are Frente Joven (Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, and Paraguay), the MELISA Institute (Chile), Centro de Bioética, Persona y Familia (Argentina), the NGO Desarrollo Familiar Población (Guatemala), Centro de Investigaciones Sociales Avanzadas (Mexico), among others (MORÁN FAÚNDES *et al.*, 2015; GIANELLA-MALCA, 2018).

These organizations have also demonstrated remarkable transnational organizational capacity. Since the 1990s, international pro-life NGOs such as Human Life International have influenced and provided mobilization expertise for local organizations across the region (PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014). The foundation of new organizations connected to transnational activism increased throughout the region in the last decade. In 2008, the organization Parlamento & Fe (Parliament & Faith) was created in Argentina as an international movement. One of their primary purposes is: “consolidate management teams in each country to promote the eternal values to and through the rulers” (PARLAMENTO & FE, 2020). The transnational scope of legal mobilization also became clear. For example, in the case of *Gretel Artavia Murillo et al. v. Costa Rica*, ruled by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2012, in which more than 16 *amici curiae* were presented by conservative actors (LEMAITRE, SIEDER, 2017). Among them, we find leading transnational anti-abortion organizations, such as ADF International (Alliance Defending Freedom, formerly Alliance Defense Fund), the Center for Legal Studies at C-Fam, and Americans United for Life.

The analysis of different cases allows us to see the renovation of anti-abortion alliances in a two-pronged strategy —the partnership with Christian politicians and Evangelical Churches to influence electoral and parliamentary politics; and the rooting of anti-abortion efforts in civil society. The two axis are well articulated and complimentary, as strong social mobilization in civil society, comprising the organization of protests, marches, campaigns, study groups, philanthropic organizations, etc., and it is also a channel to electoral politics. Under the pro-life and pro-family scope, the anti-abortion movement has promoted alliances among political actors from different parties and interests, as well as civil society organizations, and churches. The alliance between political representation and societal mobilization has significantly empowered the anti-abortion agenda, which gained even more coverage with strategic movements towards secular discourses and the emulation of progressive movements’ strategies.

3. TOWARDS A LARGER ANTI-ABORTION REPERTOIRE OF ACTIONS

While the Catholic Church has been the main actor in the anti-abortion movement, its main mobilization strategy has been to pressure parliamentarians and other political authorities to

influence public policies (VAGGIONE, 2012; LEMAITRE, 2013). It was an invisible backstage work of authorities. As new actors have come onto the scene (such as Evangelicals and NGOs), a different repertoire emerged. The anti-abortion field was taken by the diversification and combination of its strategies, such as litigation, public campaigns, and street mobilizations. Moreover, advocacy before the legislative and executive branches has become more organic due to the Christian politicians, who have created parties, occupied seats in parliament and other public positions, and started to operate within state structures.

From Mexico to Argentina, abortion rights have gained remarkable salience and traction in political campaigns and party politics, with candidates and political leaders regularly publicly stating their positions regarding abortion (GIANELLA-MALCA *et al.*, 2017), and facing orchestrated political attacks from economic and religious elites if they support abortion rights (VITERNA, 2012). Governments that have advanced or openly defended legal abortion rights in the face of mobilized opposition have suffered electoral setbacks and damage to their ratings. In countries like El Salvador and Nicaragua, anti-abortion mobilizations encouraged political parties historically associated with the revolutionary Left to eschew traditional concerns for equality and religious freedom by making alliances with the Catholic Church, instead (VITERNA, 2012 and 2017). Since 2006, such campaigns have been used in Brazil (with the campaign “Vote for Life; Vote for a Candidate Who Defends Life”), when anti-abortion actors succeeded in highlighting the issue at the center of the electoral agenda, as well as in the elections in 2010, 2014, and 2018. In Peru, the same type of campaign has been used in the 2011 and 2016 electoral campaigns, and leading anti-abortion activists played a central role in the mobilization against the 2016 democratically elected government.

Elections have been used as important moments for connecting different strategies, whereby pro-life campaigns support the election of Evangelical or pro-life congresspeople. In Colombia, mobilizations based on anti-gender ideology were used in the “No campaign” against the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the national referendum, although it also represented other interests, such as concerns around land rights and the war on crime (CORREDOR, 2021). Electoral processes are becoming highly polarized in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, and Peru, and presidents are often elected in runoffs by the slimmest of margins. Religious conservative actors in the legislative branch have gained political power to negotiate directly with the executive (VITERNA, 2012; PECHENY *et al.*, 2011; GIANELLA-MALCA, 2017; MACIEL and MACHADO, 2017). In the 2010 Brazilian Presidential election, for example, the then-candidate Dilma Rousseff was pressed to sign a “Letter to the People of God” due to her previous position on abortion rights, committing herself not to advance abortion rights if elected.

Conservative politicians and political parties are well connected with societal mobilization. Recent studies identified the increased use of grassroots mobilization repertoires by right-wing and neoconservative movements during the conservative shift in the 2010s. Among

other themes, such as gun rights, demand for law and order (“mano dura”) policies, and anti-corruption reforms, the opposition to gender and sexual equality policies is identified as an important trigger of such mobilizations (MAYKA and SMITH, 2021; REUTERSWÄRD, 2021; CORREDOR, 2021; DIAS, VON BÜLOW, and GOBBI, 2021; GOLD and PEÑA, 2021).

The development of a protest politics routine became evident through the convening of marches, walks, protests, and blockades in front of courts, public buildings, hospitals, etc. in several countries across the region. In El Salvador (1997) and Nicaragua (2007), the pro-life movements (consisting of parliamentarians and members of civil society) have succeeded in convening hundreds of thousands of protesters for marches in support of bills to introduce absolute abortion bans (FEUSIER, 2012). The *Brazil without Abortion* movement (“Brasil sem Aborto”) facilitates massive annual marches at the headquarters of the Federal Government by bringing together several small, local pro-life and pro-family organizations dispersed throughout the country (REZENDE, 2016). These marches have been an important channel for disseminating and unifying strategies and frameworks. Yáñez (2021) explains that protests have been important occasions for anti-abortion organizations to recruit large groups of young people.

Anti-abortion street mobilizations have been massive and visible outside the institution’s buildings in the last crucial decisions made in the region. During the Argentinian debate about abortion liberalization in Congress, hundreds of pro and anti-abortion activists – identified as “greens” versus “blue” were summoned and remained for days in the congress surroundings to follow the voting (FELITTI and MORALES, 2020). The same happened in the recent Colombian trial, when supporters of decriminalizing abortion and their opponents stood outside the courtroom, separated by fences (TURKEWITZ, 2022). During these processes of legal reform, the conservative actors created key alliances with numerous media and professional organizations (FEUSIER, 2012; PEÑAS DEFAGO, MORÁN FAÚNDES, and VAGGIONE, 2018).

Large demonstrations also took to the streets in reaction to recent positive developments for SRR activists. In Mexico (2021), after the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) ruled the criminalization of abortion unconstitutional, and thousands of protesters took to the streets across the country, in a national march “A Favor de la Mujer y de la Vida”, (“To Support Women and Life”) to express opposition (MENA, GARCÍA, 2021). In Colombia (2022), the “Movilización Nacional por la Vida” (“National Mobilization for Life”) was organized by more than 15 civil society organizations against the recent rule by the Constitutional Court of Colombia that decriminalized abortion up to 24 weeks of gestation (CIENTOS, 2022).

A systematic data collection and analysis of anti-abortion protest politics in the region is still inexistent. In addition to the visible facet of protest politics, the social texture of anti-abortion activism in Latin America also comprises micro-mobilization strategies silently conducted by civil society organizations, such as bioethics institutes, health providers, and

professional organizations that aim to spread conscience objection among health professionals as a form of civil disobedience, to hinder the implementation of reproductive rights. Conscience objection (CO) has been a known and a growing form of denying access to abortion rights in different Latin American countries since the 1990s (PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2010; IRRÁZABAL, 2011 and 2016; SIVERINO BAVIO, 2013). In a 2016 article, Uberoi and Galli (2016) warned that the use of CO to deny women their sexual and reproductive health rights was increasing in Latin America, where few countries had regulations on the subject, which meant both an opportunity for abusing the right of conscience and a serious threat to reproductive health services such as emergency contraception and legal abortion.

All in all, acting through mass demonstrations or silent grassroots strategies to understand the conservative shift in Latin America is crucial in order to consider the capacity of anti-abortion movements to agglomerate, channel, and magnify their agendas at national, regional, and international levels, articulating different repertoires of social mobilization, including religious, institutional and civil society spaces (MORGAN, 2021b). Within this diverse repertoire, litigation gained prominence; we dedicate the next section to exploring experiences of anti-abortion legal mobilization in the region.

4. THE ANTI-ABORTION TURN TO LAW

There has been a historical presence of Catholic actors among jurists in Latin America, allowing Catholic values to permeate the countries' legal systems in several ways (ALMEIDA, 2017). However, strategic and systematic use of litigation by the anti-abortion field is emerging in the region. The increased use of legal mobilization and legal advocacy as key tools for anti-abortion movement is a trend identified by different studies (PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014; RUIBAL, 2014; PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2019; MACHADO and BRACARENSE, 2016; BERGALLO, JARAMILLO SIERRA, and VAGGIONE, 2018; VIEIRA and EFREM FILHO, 2020).

The wave of re-democratization and the promulgation of new constitutions in Latin America promoted new impetus for legal mobilization in the region. Strong charters of rights, public prosecutors, class, constitutional actions, and empowered Supreme or Constitutional Courts made litigation an important tool for progressive social movements in the first decades since the transition era (BRINKS and FORTBATH, 2014). Over the past decade the use of legal mobilization to resolve issues related to sexuality and reproduction has escalated (COOK, ERDMAN, and DICKENS, 2016; LEMAITRE, 2014). And, in many cases, the Judiciary has been used as a means to revert or block sexual and reproductive-related advancements in other arenas (PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014; MONTE and VAGGIONE, 2019). The intensification of anti-abortion litigation and the use of the language of rights – particularly human rights – is an important phenomenon to be observed in the field. It also has its roots in the aftermath of the UN Conferences.

After the victories of reproductive rights in the Conferences, one of the central themes that started being discussed and prioritized in public policies in different Latin American countries was the access to the morning-after pill (PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014). In response, starting in 1998, several conservative sectors set a mobilization in different countries (e.g., Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador) to prohibit access to these pharmaceuticals (DIDES CASTILLO, 2006; FLORES, 2008; PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2010). From this point forward, litigation became one of the key strategies of self-proclaimed pro-life groups in their battle against the morning-after pill (DIDES CASTILLO, 2006; BERGALLO, 2010). The background of these demands was always the same: the approval of the morning-after pill implied, in an underhanded way, the enabling of abortion.

While expanding their strategy, anti-abortion actors started to use the courts to challenge any attempt to legalize abortion on demand and any effort to make legal abortion services accessible and safe for women (MADRAZO LAJOUS and VELA BARBA, 2013; PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014; RUIBAL, 2014). In Brazil, a constitutional challenge arrived at the Federal Supreme Court to contest the constitutionality of the Biosafety Law approved in 2005, to regulate embryo research, claiming, among other points, a violation of the right to life (BRAZILIAN SUPREME COURT, 2008). In 2007, Mexico City decriminalized the first-trimester abortion within city limits. Conservative civil organizations asked the Supreme Court to overturn the law (MÉXICO, 2007). When ruling the case, the Supreme Court held six public hearings in which anti-abortion actors actively participated (ANSOLABEHERE, 2009). In 2012, Argentina's Supreme Court ruled that abortion is legal in case of rape (ARGENTINA, 2012). In its ruling, the court determined that access to abortion does not need to be contingent on any legal, administrative, or police procedure. In this scenario, litigation was once again a key strategy of anti-abortion actors, this time on the lower level: by using provincial courts, anti-abortion actors attempted to locally resist what had been established by the Supreme Court (MONTE, VAGGIONE, 2019). The total abortion ban in Chile was only overthrown after the 2017 legal reform that created three instances for legal abortion, a group of legislators filed a constitutional writ before the Constitutional Court right after the law's approval, claiming the recognition of institutional conscientious objection. As we mentioned before, such a position – eventually ratified by the Court – was defended by the Catholic Church during the legislative debate, aiming to exclude the enforceability of the law (MAIRA, CASAS, and VIVALDI, 2019). Finally, in 2021, after the law enabling abortion up to 14 weeks was voted in Argentina (ARGENTINA, 2021), litigation against it multiplied in the country. As of the date of this article, there have been more than 37 lawsuits filed against the law (AMNISTÍA INTERNACIONAL, 2021).

Abortion regulations in Latin America have proven to be an ebullient field, with regulations highly disputed in all arenas and subjected to constant transformations. The recent intervention of courts in the issue provoked important shifts in the balance of political opportunities. The constitutionalization of abortion is defined as the adjudication of abortion rights by

Constitutional or Supreme Courts (SIEGEL, 2012). If the decision of 1973 has once unveiled this process, it was possible to evidence a new wave of constitutional abortion cases worldwide, and Latin America seems fully inserted in such wave. The cases have been taken to courts by both pro and anti-abortion movements, and increased use of litigation by anti-abortion actors is new in many countries. Anti-abortion actors are not only proposing constitutional cases, but have been actively presenting *amici curiae*, speaking at public hearings, and formulating legal arguments to block advances via Courts (ANSOLABEHERE, 2009; RUIBAL, 2014; GIANELLA-MALCA, 2018). They have been strongly mobilized to participate in public hearings and advocacy in all important abortion constitutional cases in the region, as in recent Mexican (MENA and GARCÍA, 2021) and the Colombian Constitutional Court decisions.

The arena unveiled by the judiciary has become an important locus of visibility used by pro and anti-abortion social movements to make their positions resonate in the public debate. In this way, the court can function as a stage – staging area, in Kirchheimer’s expression (1961) – for the confrontation between different positions. It is an opportunity to win supporters, increase adherence to the cause, insert new elements into the political game, or pressure other arenas. We have had Court cases staging abortion disputes in the region since the end of the 1990s, with a visible intensification in the last decade, moved by the increase of litigation by anti-abortion forces. There are progressively new actors attending such events to publicly oppose sexual and reproductive rights. The use of Courts to disseminate anti-abortion legal arguments is essential not only because of the direct legal effects that litigation can have on sexual and reproductive rights but also because of its impact on those providing health or public services, who play an essential role in the implementation of such rights. In countries where issues such as abortion and adolescent sexuality still present a dense moral significance, conservative litigation might create a perception of legal uncertainty and open space for practices that reinforce traditional moral notions, thereby deepening the symbolic effects of litigation (PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2014; BENNETT, 2017; ARILHA and CITELI, 2010). One diffuse effect of litigation and the use of rights to justify anti-abortion practices is to breed conscientious objectors.

4.1. DISPUTING HUMAN RIGHTS

The technocratization of the anti-abortion discourse, mainly the use of legal language, has been pointed out as a resource of the anti-abortion movement to overcome the limits of religious power in some political spaces (MORGAN, 2014; GIANELLA-MALCA, 2018). Especially in secular arenas, like the judiciary, it is necessary to behave not as religious actors, but as technical experts. Thus, it is not a coincidence that secular discourses have increased simultaneously with the emergence of scientific and legal organizations in the anti-abortion field, such as bioethics institutes, think tanks, research institutes, associations of jurists, etc. Those actors tend to mobilize legal and scientific frameworks, by replacing (sometimes supplementing) religious ones, while still keeping particular moral undertones, interpretations

linked to natural law, and absolute understanding of the right to life (VAGGIONE, 2005; PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2010; MORGAN, 2014; MACHADO, in press).

Since the 1990s, the prioritization of the sexual agenda imposed by the Vatican, under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, has reinforced a discourse based on the “protection of life” from the moment of conception (VATICANO, 1995). This line of speech has provided the main tone for the actions aimed at influencing debates on sexuality, in which “life” is upheld as a key notion for conservative Catholic organizations in their resistance to policies advocating for greater sexual plurality and autonomy (ALDANA, 2008; VAGGIONE, 2012, PEÑAS DEFAGO and MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2013). Since then, the mobilization of the right to life by anti-abortion activists presented an ambiguous relationship with secularization, often mixing legal sources and religious documents, for example, the *Evangelium Vitae*, the gospel of life (BRAZIL, 2008a and 2008b).

Progressively, religious frameworks and references to religious sources tended to decline in some arenas. The defense of the right to life started to be associated more frequently with notions of human rights, or fundamental rights, than with religious arguments (MORGAN, 2014). Lemaitre (2014) calls it “the shift to reason,” a strategic process (VAGGIONE, 2005) linked to the structural transformation of the anti-abortion field. The participation of lawyers, doctors, scientists, and policymakers impacts the discursive sphere. These actors tend to build their arguments – and legitimate them – using technical arguments rather than religious faith logic, even if moral dogmas still exist and permeate their mindset.

Recent systematic analysis of the evolution of conservative arguments against abortion in Colombia in institutional arenas and the media made by Contreras and Escalante (2018) demonstrate that the conservative opposition to abortion strategically adopts secular ideas. However, they are still rooted in moral views and traditional values that surface when they compare abortion to murder or make references to the woman and the fetus as “mother,” “baby” or “innocent creature”. In the Artavia Murillo case ruled by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2012, Julieta Lemaitre Ripoll and Rachel Sieder (2017, p. 4) show “how neoconservative actors use in their arguments a wielded conservative Catholic argument aligned with the *Evangelium Vitae*, but precluding religious references”. In Brazil, during the public hearing of ADPF 442 (a proposal to decriminalize voluntary abortion), anti-abortion actors used a greater variety of legal arguments. Although the core of the argument was still the right to life from conception and human dignity, a considerable part of the manifestations of confessional or religious organizations adopted the legal debate: they did not base their arguments on moral-religious reasons or religious documents and were eager to support their arguments with legal sources – for example, the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, the right to life, dignity, and fundamental guarantees according to the Brazilian Federal Constitution, and the Civil Code as a ground to the recognition of legal personhood to the fetus (CADHU, *s.d.*).

While the “fundamental right to life” has been articulated by pro-life groups for quite a while, the use of human rights frameworks has been accentuated and expanded in recent years. Anti-abortion mobilization started to incorporate and reinterpret more aggressively several categories of the human rights grammar (one milestone, for example, is the dignity principle), and even started to dispute those that have been used predominantly by progressive groups, such as equality, anti-discrimination, religious freedom and conscience (MORGAN, 2014). In many cases, such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the discourses of some pro-life NGOs and religious leaders have strategically adapted themselves to associate abortion with crimes against humanity, drawing on the rhetoric of human rights policies of the 21st century in post-conflict contexts (MORGAN, 2014; CARBONELLI, MOSQUEIRA, and FELITTI, 2011; GUDIÑO-BESSONE, 2017; MACHADO and BRACARENSE, 2018). According to this line of thinking, abortion is framed as genocide, a crime against humanity, and a discriminatory practice against people with disabilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are often cited in those discourses (MACHADO and COOK, 2018; BIROLI and CAMINOTTI, 2020).⁷

Lynn Morgan (2014) shows how Latin America’s religious conservatives developed an alternative narrative of human rights to contest abortion rights, drawing on the US civil rights framework. The region’s human rights tradition is rooted in a sort of social Catholicism, praising a social justice project that has the traditional family at its core, and that includes family, natural and fetal rights. Social Catholicism has more elective affinities with social justice claims than with individual rights, such as choice, privacy, or autonomy of the body. This legal-cultural context buttresses new anti-abortion strategies that start to emphasize the protection of women among their aims. Such pro-life strategies have de-emphasized the criminalization of women in their discourses (although never taking it back) to adopt a discourse of “protection”: they talk about protecting “children’s rights” and protecting women from the suffering and the trauma of abortion. In Argentina, during the debate on the legalization of abortion in 2018, the campaign “salvemos las dos vidas” (“Let’s save both lives”) emerged (LÓPEZ and LOZA, 2021). Since then this campaign has been replicated throughout the region.

More recently, other liberal human rights values started being used against sexual and reproductive rights. Freedom of expression, conscience, and religion, allied to the protection

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7 In the US, disability rights advocates have a history of disagreement on the issue of abortion rights. Although they may be pro-choice or pro-life, many disability rights advocates agree that abortions should not be used to discriminate against children who may be born with disabilities and have concerns about abortion resulting in discrimination against persons with disabilities (SHAFFER, 2009, p. 271).

of the family and the right to raise children according to one's conscience and faith, have been often articulated in the anti-abortion, anti-sexual and reproductive rights field more broadly.⁸ While conscience claims have traditionally been used to promote pluralism and accommodate religious individual faith in general secular regulations or public policies, its new usage by neoconservatives, on the contrary, aims to block recently conquered minority rights, impose harm to third parties and undermine pluralism (NEJAIME and SIEGEL, 2020). For example, in Brazil, 2018, a lawsuit was filed by a catholic organization requesting the Brazilian chapter of the Catholics for the Right to Decide (CDD) to be legally compelled to suppress the word "Catholics" from its nomenclature, alleging violation of religious freedom. This request was granted by the Court of Justice of São Paulo, which imposed the removal of the term from the name of one of the most traditional pro-reproductive rights organizations (SÃO PAULO, 2020).

The intense use of legal tools and the reinterpretation of the human rights discourse show that anti-abortion actors are creatively adapting law and the rights discourse to their interests and disputing their meanings.⁹ Anti-abortion usage of human rights calls attention to the fact that human rights have an ambivalent and disputable nature (SIEGEL, 2012) in addition to being a disputable terrain today. The recent legal mobilization battles in the region show that anti-abortion forces are actively disputing the interpretation of the human rights paradigm aiming to drastically reshape the prevailing understandings and use of such language.

5. RE-DEFINING THE BORDERS OF THE FIELD: THE ANTI-GENDER MASTER FRAME

As shown in this article, abortion battles have been populistically captured in electoral politics and connected with the increased presence of Evangelical Churches in several countries across Latin America. The local political processes have been connected with transnational activism, with activists of both sides linking the national and international arenas. Each country's political process mutually affects others in the region – and abortion legislation has been in constant reform across different countries. The recent decisions in Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia are said to be inaugurating a pro-sexual and reproductive rights wave in the region, while Bolsonaro, in Brazil, reacted aggressively on Twitter against the legalization of abortion in Argentina (BOLSONARO, 2020). Such active mobilization,

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⁸ See, for example, the new pro-life doctrine published in Brazil by jurist Ives Gandra Martins *et al.* (2020).

⁹ Lynn Morgan (2021b) lists the constitutional amendment approved in 2021 in Honduras as part of a coordinated effort to fortify national constitutions and insulate them from international human rights law.

political visibility, and deep shifts happening in the field naturally impact the production of meaning and the framing processes.

Social movement actors are always engaged in the production of meaning. Activists and social movement organizations are always framing, amplifying, extending, and transforming their meanings (SNOW *et al.*, 1986). Under this perspective, observing the field of dispute around abortion also means observing the variation of frameworks over time, due to the type of organizations in operation, the interlocutors involved, the social and institutional norms governing the arena, and the characteristics of the observed event.

In the recent Latin American field, we observe more localized processes of creation of new anti-abortion frameworks or shifts in their interpretations (for example, the more intense use of scientific and legal frames); but there is an overarching process happening through the creation of a master frame.

Master frames have the same function as specific frames in a discursive organization and symbolic dimension but on a larger scale. They are more generic and tend to work more as an interpretative paradigm of various issues. They articulate many different movements as they offer a common ground to all of them (SNOW and BENFORD, 1992). The anti-gender ideology as a construct that threatens the traditional families is the master frame that seals the alliances between movements not only against abortion policies but also against same-sex marriage, sex education in schools, gender approach in public policies, as well as the entire LGBTQ+ agenda. However, the gender ideology discourse is also used as a master frame to label the demands of the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements as “cultural Marxism”, which is a new Marxism aimed no longer at transforming economic structures but culture, including the family structure, gender identities and sexuality (MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2019). Based on this idea, the discourse of “gender ideology” arises a series of moral panics associated with sexuality and gender, and even the specter of communism, in rhetoric that recalls the logic of the Cold War (MORÁN FAÚNDES and PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2020).

The means for this expansion had already been boosted in the 1990s by the Catholic Church. In the Cairo Conference (1994) and the Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the Holy See and its allies strategically opposed the inclusion of the term “gender” in the final documents because they argued that the “gender” perspective portrayed a model imposed by liberals against the traditional family (FRANCO, 1998). Under this view, “gender” was an artificial definition used as part of savage capitalism. Thus, through the frame of “gender ideology,” the Catholic hierarchy and its allies sought to denounce movements, such as the feminist and LGBTIQ+, that purportedly undermined the traditional family and thus weakened the moral foundations of nations. Coined by Catholic public intellectuals and popularized by Pope Benedict XVI, the “gender ideology” frame has been diffused and appropriated by the whole range of old and new actors in the movement (LEMAITRE, 2014; PATERNOTTE, 2015; MORÁN FAÚNDES, 2019).

The master frame allowed the anti-abortion movement to both broaden its battlefield and acquire new allies. It has become a central component among Catholic, Evangelical, and civil society actors alike in their mobilizations against sex education (GIANELLA-MALCA, MACHADO, and PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2017; CORRÊA, 2018). By denouncing “gender ideology,” these actors oppose feminist and LGBTQ+ demands due to their anti-family agenda, anti-nature standpoint, and colonizing/imperialist tendencies (CAREAGA-PÉREZ, 2016). In addition, the use and impact of the “gender ideology” frame in the last electoral campaign in Brazil by Jair Bolsonaro (STEFANONI, 2018), and in Costa Rica by Fabricio Alvarado, evidences how this framework is increasingly being used as a key signifier in the emergence of the neoconservative political agenda (PEÑAS DEFAGO *et al.*, 2018).

The case of sex education in schools is noteworthy. It has become an important political sticking point across the region in recent years. Previous attempts or programs to include sex education in the school curriculum have triggered broad countermobilizations in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, and even in Uruguay, considered to be the least secular country. Some of these actions have ended with the withdrawal of sex education and the exclusion of mentions of gender equality in school materials and curricula (GIANELLA-MALCA, MACHADO, and PEÑAS DEFAGO, 2017; CORRÊA, 2018). For the anti-gender movement, this debate is framed around the protection of the family and children, which is connected to parental authority, religious freedom, and freedom of conscience.

Gender ideology has potentialized the scope and alliances of anti-abortion forces with other conservative groups targeting sexual morality. In reality, this strategic framing shift has meant a redefinition of the contentious field itself. The transformation happened from a field organized around the regulation of abortion and closely related issues, such as contraceptives and morning-after pills, toward a more diversified and encompassing agenda. Anti-gender campaigns are mobilized against any public policy that aims to advance sexual and gender equality. The frames centered on anti-abortion and the protection of life has expanded to integrate a larger interpretative medium, with the potential to absorb a great number of causes towards a common goal: the protection of the traditional family from “gender ideology.”

CONCLUSION

For almost twenty years since the successive electoral victories of progressive governments across the region, Latin America is currently facing a fresh cycle of reconfiguration in its political arena with social mobilization at the center, although this time from the conservative side. The formation of new conservative blocks, alliances, and movements was set in motion to react to previous advances in gender, sexual equality, and reproductive rights policies.

Based on several examples of abortion disputes in Latin-American countries, this article called attention to a broader process of renovation of the anti-abortion field in the region. It

identified instances of expansions and mutations, stressing shared features to demonstrate the emergence of a significant turning point in the region. Anti-abortion actors are not only reorganizing their alliances and activism towards a broader field of anti-gender mobilization, but also enriching their strategies and frames, by emulating methods previously used by progressive social movements. Anti-abortion mobilization expanded its arenas of incidence, built alliances with official institutions, partnered with local political parties, and participated in pervasive networks of local, national, and transnational civil society organizations comprising religious, interreligious, and secular groups. They currently promote massive rallies, file lawsuits, and also participate in legal debates as *amici curiae*, resorting to typical political practices of progressive social movements. Moreover, their articulate interpretations of national constitutions, international treaties, and human rights discourses reveal that anti-abortion movements have been subjected to learning processes to neutralize their opponents. The expansion to the master frame of “gender ideology” conflated an array of topics and has strategically allowed the movement to enlarge the range of alliances and expand the scope of its incidence.

The characteristics of anti-abortion movements in other world regions indicate that these movements are transnationally connected (PEÑAS DEFAGO, MORÁN FAÚNDES, and VAGGIONE, 2018). We have described and analyzed instances that show clear signs of transformation in the field and commonalities among cases in different countries. Studies point to transnational diffusion processes in the anti-abortion field throughout the region, interacting with local conditions and impacting local disputes. It poses a series of tasks to researchers in the field. It is crucial to map the transnational networks and paths of diffusion, as well as the local processes used to internalize global repertoires. We also drew attention to the need for more empirical research to assess the regional dynamic of transnational actors. There is still a lot to be discovered and analyzed regarding forming a regional network, the internationalization of organizations, communication channels, and intermediates. A closer understanding of the dynamics of transnational trends, their local adaptations, and the interaction between national and international legal and political opportunities is crucial to comprehend the antithetical movement happening in the region, with country battles heading in opposing directions. In this sense, while we highlighted undeniable changes experienced by the anti-abortion field in the region, we also showed that more research is needed to map comparative dynamics of contention between national and regional politics, as well as to closely monitor how international diffusion interacts with the local balance of opportunities, guiding adaptations and reshaping each local setting.

Traditionally, scholars in Latin-America social movement studies have focused on progressive movements, which have capacity to gather and mobilize a wide range of lower-ranking or minority groups in response to and/or in rejection of forms of marginalization, dispossession, and inequality (MOTTA and NILSEN, 2011), including trade union or labor movements, consumer mobilizations, in addition to women, anti-globalization, environmental and Indigenous and Afro Latin American people’s movements. In each of these cases, social

movements have been generally regarded as “progressive actors” and not as forms of political action or as contention repertoires, historically available to be used by different actors to make claims in the public and political arenas. Although conservative and right-wing movements have increasingly gained political power and influence worldwide, there is still a lack of research and tools to understand this phenomenon. This article aims to draw attention to the complexity and richness of the changes happening in an important sector of the neoconservative alliance and to the need of broadening our understanding of those movements since they perform an important role in the democratic dynamics in the region. Understanding widespread anti-abortion/anti-gender mobilization in Latin America is also central to theorizing how the mobilization of traditional gender norms can powerfully shape political regimes and governance systems.

The lessons from Latin America could contribute to a better understanding of the broader debate on sexual and reproductive rights policies in comparative politics. If there is something to be learned from the region, it is that the battle against gender equality can be used by political groups aimed to gain or show political power, and that it has become more sophisticated and challenging to understand. However, to evaluate the urgent challenges for the feminist, LGBTQ+ and human rights movements in the region it is crucial to further investigate how anti-abortion and neoconservative actors, in general, are creatively adapting and using all instruments available in democratic political disputes, including the human rights paradigm, to pursue the dismantling of sexual and reproductive rights.

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Marta Rodriguez de Assis Machado

PHD AND MASTER IN PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY OF LAW FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO. ASSOCIATE DEAN OF THE ACADEMIC MASTER’S AND PHD PROGRAMS AT FGV DIREITO SP. PROFESSOR AT FGV SÃO PAULO LAW SCHOOL (FGV DIREITO SP) AND RESEARCHER AT THE BRAZILIAN CENTER OF ANALYSIS AND PLANNING (CENTRO BRASILEIRO DE ANÁLISE E PLANEJAMENTO, CEBRAP, BRAZIL). RESEARCHER AT THE CENTER ON LAW AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION, NORWAY.

marta.machado@fgv.br

María Angélica Peñas Defago

PHD IN LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES FROM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF CORDOBA, ARGENTINA. RESEARCHER AT NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL OF ARGENTINA (CONICET). PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF LAW AT NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF CORDOBA, ARGENTINA.

angelicapdefago@unc.edu.ar

Camila Gianella

PHD IN PSYCHOLOGY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN. ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE PERÚ (PUCP). RESEARCH FELLOW AT CENTRE ON LAW AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION, NORWAY.

gianella.c@pucp.edu.pe