



Challenging the Future:

Co-inspiring Change.
Attacks on democracy
in Europe
and Latin America.
Feminist Voices



ON
THE RIGHT TRACK

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Feminist Voices**

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Presentation

In the troubled world in which we are living, democracies as we have known them, are on the decline. One of the characteristics of this crisis in democracy taking place not only in Latin America and Europe but worldwide, is the rise and strengthening of far-right parties and political and religious fundamentalism in most countries across both regions. It is ironic that political positions that are essentially anti-democratic, are strengthening and expanding under the guise of democracy. Perhaps this is one of the consequences of exclusionary, predatory, capitalist democracies that deny rights to a large part of the population.

Morena Herrera and Sonia Correa spoke at one of the hundreds of workshops offered at the last Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) forum in September 2016. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff had just been impeached, and the panelists painted a clear picture of what was coming next. When the Brazilian opposition began to attack abortion laws and women's rights, Sonia Correa explained, it could have been anticipated that they would not stop there, that ultimately the opposition would remove the president and end democracy in the country. Morena Herrera said that sexual and reproductive rights, and the human rights of women in general, had become the new dividing line between political blocs which were previously split along the lines of capitalism versus communism.

This happened before Donald Trump's victory in the United States, before Jair Bolsonaro came to power in Brazil, before we began to really fear the strength of the far right in Europe and Latin America. By then, we had already witnessed the rise of religious fundamentalism and how it had begun to influence politics at the local and international level. In 2013, Spain's People's Party tried to change the recently-passed abortion law, which allows abortion on demand until the 14th week. In Poland, efforts to ban abortion began in 2015. In Nicaragua, abortion was completely prohibited in 2016; a clear indication of the government's authoritarian inclinations and the power of the churches in the country. After the coup in Honduras, the morning-after pill was banned. In Colombia, a 2016 campaign against sexuality education in schools contributed

to the outcome of a public referendum that overturned the peace agreement. It became apparent that there was a clear and urgent need to work jointly since despite the differences between the regions, the spread of fundamentalism demonstrated a coordinated strategy and similar types of actions.

For years, women's funds have been working on behalf of the feminist movement, fighting threats to women's rights, and spreading their voices and messages. The funds know with certainty that the feminist movement is a global player that is capable of enacting and defending its agenda, not only in international forums, but in every capital city, every town, every village, and every neighborhood in the world.

The first initiatives of coordination between the two regions began in 2017, when Fondo Alquimia, Fondo Lunaria, and Calala Women's Fund came together to investigate groups opposed to women's rights in our respective countries. At the 2018 EDGE Funders Alliance Annual Conference in New Orleans, a few weeks after the murder of Marielle Franco, we met with most of the European and Latin American funds, and agreed to establish a strategy to work together. We were very fortunate that our ally, Elisa Slattery from Open Society Foundations was there, and she gave us the green light to present a proposal.

This is how the project *On the Right Track* was born, with the conviction that the feminist movement is about making progress, realizing democracy and human rights, and that it is more important than ever to support that process. Although this is a hard time full of setbacks and threats, we are certain that feminism is leading the way toward a hopeful picture of a new society.

Since October 1, 2019, the 20 funds involved in this project have provided donations to more than 143 organizations, two national networks, and a regional network, in 23 countries. We have developed joint communications strategies to promote the defense of women's human rights and democracy at the local level, and we have put researchers and feminists in contact with grassroots activists.

The result of this collaboration is the study that we present here; coordinated by Diana Granados and Nuria Alabao, and produced with the participation of all the women's funds and activists that we support.

When we designed the study, we were clear that we wanted to contribute to the considerable body of knowledge that is being created by academics, feminist

organizations, and foundations. We wanted to give a voice to the local organizations and groups that the women's funds support. We decided to focus on how anti-gender and far-right groups are attacking feminist and LGBTIQ2+ activists, and we wanted to put a name and a face to those groups that are working at the local level. We wanted to show the tentacles of the global far-right network and the people involved. At the local level, they appear to be isolated, but we know that they have international coordination and funding and that in each country, they take on a different form.

In this study, we also wanted to express appreciation for the strategies that activists, movements, and funds are using to protect themselves, defend themselves, and advocate for women's rights in a context of extreme violence. These strategies include identifying and mapping local groups to share knowledge with grassroots movements; uniting organizations in the fields of sexual and reproductive rights, migrant women, LGBTIQ2+, and human rights; to plan joint strategies to protect rights and denounce violations; providing grassroots groups with secure digital tools to manage their information; training and advising them in strategic communications; offering and providing feminist legal aid to activists who have been harassed and denounced by anti-gender groups; coordinating a network with feminist journalists who are interested in reporting on these threats; making visible the seriousness of cyber violence against activists; and promoting self-care and collective care by organizations so that their work can survive over time.

But above all, by providing flexible funding to finance the organizations' daily operations without forcing them to undertake specific projects or invent proposals to secure the resources. As Nadia Dermendjieva of the Bulgarian Fund for Women says, providing operating resources to grassroots groups is the best way to counteract the spread of fundamentalist groups. For this reason, we thank all the organizations, groups, and activists from both regions, who generously shared their experiences and knowledge to enrich this project and make it a reality. There are many, and it would be impossible to mention them all, but without their contributions and commitment, it would have been impossible to build this together.

We also thank the teams at the Latin American and European funds that provided opportunities for discussion, reports, seminars, and talks (among other strategies) to allow the activists and women's funds to express themselves in

their own words and reflections which contributed to this study. Likewise, we thank the individuals with extensive experience in research and political activism on the subjects of gender-based attacks and political and religious fundamentalism who contributed to the forums for analysis and discussion hosted by the women's funds.

We must not forget to mention that during the past year and a half, the first pandemic of the 21st century paralyzed life as we knew it, and has forced us to engage all of our capacities for resilience and resistance. The pandemic has uncovered and deepened the existing social and economic inequalities in all our countries, demonstrating the profound shortcomings in our democracies to defend and uphold the rights of their people.

For our own peace of mind, and in keeping with our feminist tenets, before inviting you to read the results of the study, we want to detail why the rights of women and LGBTIQ2+ people are important for democracy and the welfare of society.

It is necessary to have:

Affective-sexuality education in schools so that children can learn about each other and know how to assert themselves freely as individuals, express their sexual preferences and build effective relationships - free of violence; which enables them to identify, and report abuse if necessary.

The right to abortion to create happy and harmonious families, and adults available to adults who are able to make decisions about their lives and their finances.

Legal and safe abortions so that women do not die on operating tables or go to jail for miscarriages.

Legal and safe abortions so that the world realizes that women are complete people who can make decisions about our own bodies.

The right to a life free of violence, and an end to the global militarist, racist, colonialist, classist, and capitalist system that dominates the world and subjugates people through institutional violence. Because violence against women justifies all other violence, leaves us vulnerable and makes it even more difficult to face the many challenges we experience everyday. Because women have the right to live, and should not die simply for being women.

Full rights and guarantees for life without discrimination and violence for people of different gender identities and sexual orientations. It is unacceptable that the life expectancy for trans women is 35 years in Latin America, and that their lives, in both Latin America and Europe, are systematically marked by abuse and violence, especially by state security forces.

The right to political participation and protest by feminists and social movements, with which the feminist movement has always been involved, because this is the best way to strengthen our weak and imperfect democracies. In short, a different kind of democracy is needed, one that is inclusive of all citizens, in which we can live in freedom, recognizing our differences and diversity.



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Introduction

The main objective of this study is to examine the characteristics of attacks on gender identity, human rights, and democratic principles in Latin America and Europe, from the point of view of feminist activists and LGBTIQ2+ people whose rights have been targeted. At the same time, we aim to identify proposals and narratives that combine the diverse lessons of feminist activism, trans feminism, and different types of social mobilization to build a world without fundamentalism, and with more just, democratic, and oppression-free political systems.

The approach used in this study is based on the tenets of feminist thinking for the construction of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1995). As such, we consider it important to address fundamentalist rhetoric by region, to understand its characteristics and impacts, as recounted by the activists and women's funds, organizations that are part of the feminist struggle, and the groups, collectives, and social organizations that are allies of women and LGBTIQ2+ people. This research therefore, is based on situated knowledge about the ecosystem of activism and the daily labors of the feminist struggle from an interconnected perspective; the experts and activists involved in many of the events mentioned in this document draw upon their own experiences in the public arena.

Addressing the subject by region, allowed us to investigate the different players who use anti-rights rhetoric, their strategies, and the types of attacks on feminist political activism in Latin America and Europe,¹ where women's funds have been working on strategies for the democratization of resources and providing support to grassroots groups.

Recounting how women's rights, people of different gender identities and sexual orientations, feminist struggles, and democratic principles have been attacked, prompted us to examine the specific contexts in which fundamentalism is unfolding and its effects. The intent is not to generalize the impact, but rather

¹ Throughout this document, we refer to Western Europe and Eastern Europe. The term Western Europe refers to the countries west of what was known as the Iron Curtain. Eastern Europe means the former Soviet republics as well as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Balkans, countries that were under Soviet influence in the 20th century.

to present a snapshot of the moment, based on the experiences of activists on both continents. Latin America is a region of contrasts. Although we do not aim to equate the way history has unfolded with the way nations were formed, in our opinion the countries of the region share characteristics in terms of how their democracies were established under the influence of complex colonial, racist, classist, and patriarchal processes. Europe is substantially different because of its political reality and historical processes; which are important to explore in order to understand fundamentalist narratives. Thus this study separates Europe into two regions: Western and Eastern.

The section on fundamentalism and gender-based attacks in Europe was based on 10 reports produced in October and November 2020 by the following funds: Bulgarian Fund for Women, Calala Women's Fund (Spain and Central America), Feminist Fund (Poland), filia die frauenstiftung (based in Germany, funding globally), Mama Cash (based in Netherlands, funding globally), Mediterranean Women's Fund (based in France, funding in all Mediterranean countries), Reconstruction Women's Fund (Serbia), Slovak-Czech Women's Fund, Ukraine Women's Fund, and Women's Fund in Georgia.

In Latin America, eight women's funds were involved: Fondo Alquimia (Chile); Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama); Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante (Colombia), Fondo ELAS (Brazil); Fondo Lunaria (Colombia, funding regionally); Fondo de Mujeres Apathapi Jopueti (Bolivia); Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (Uruguay, Paraguay, and Argentina); Fondo Semillas (Mexico). The funds' teams, in some cases in collaboration with consultants, produced eight documents examining gender-based attacks, and the strategies and experiences that the activists use to deal with a complex context of rights violations. A total of 151 people were involved in this project, the majority of them activists representing all varieties of sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, and regional identity, from 76 organizations in 18 countries² where the women's funds work. The

² Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Venezuela.

funds did 77 individual and collective interviews, and hosted at least 13 group forums to share reflections on what the interviews revealed about the research topics.

Likewise, this project has also been fed by conversations with researchers who lead important human rights projects, and advocate for the rights of women, and people of different gender identities and sexual orientations. This report is also based on the prolific research on the subject, available in both regions, as well as on the analysis of materials produced by anti-rights groups, which is available in print and on the internet.

Structure of the Document

The research is structured into four sections. In the first, we present an overview of political and religious fundamentalism in both regions; the groups that promote this; the strategies for spreading this rhetoric; and the types of attacks on the rights of women, people of different gender identities, sexual orientations, and democratic principles. In the second and third sections, we address the situation in Europe and Latin America. We provide an overview of the players and characteristics of the attacks sparked by political and religious fundamentalist rhetoric. In addition, we reveal some aspects about how fundamentalism has been used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, in the fourth section, we identify some strategies and actions by feminist, trans-feminist activists and others fighting against oppression, to strengthen their actions in favor of a world without fundamentalism.



CHAPTER 1

Two Sides of the Same Strategy

Latin America and Europe are hubs of fundamentalist religious and political rhetoric which has emerged as a specific strategy for attacking the rights of women; LGBTIQ2+ people; and feminist thinking, and more generally for attacking human rights, democratic principles, and secularism. As a backdrop to the use of this rhetoric and attacks, both regions have three aspects in common: first, the dangerous advance of right-wing and far-right governments that undermine democracy; second, the worsening of a greedy neoliberal model that is rapidly impoverishing most people and violently represses rights; and third, the presence of some governments that claim to be left-leaning, but have adopted fundamentalist policies towards the rights of women and people of different gender identities and sexual orientations.

We maintain that fundamentalist political and religious rhetoric constitutes a profound threat to the rights of women, LGBTIQ2+ people and, in general, the principles that support democratic systems and the separation of powers. In the words of feminist activists, this is “a threat to the democracy we have struggled to build, the democracy we want, where everyone has a place, where no lives are first or second class” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

We are living in a capitalist, patriarchal, classist, racist, and colonial system which increases inequality and injustice, while violently restricting individual and collective human rights and freedoms. In this context, ultraconservative powers defend their worldview and oppose longstanding proposals for freedom such as feminism, which defends rights and seeks to create a diverse world aligned with social, environmental, and gender justice.

Political and religious fundamentalism is taking place in different contexts at the local, regional, and international level. It is used to systematically attack human rights and the social and feminist organizations and activists that defend them. Conservative powers and rhetoric oppose any change that could affect their status quo, and implement strategies such as “exacerbating moral panic” and fabricating new enemies - migrants, feminists, and LGBTIQ2+ issues, and rights that have been achieved or are yet to be achieved, and even liberal democracy that is associated with the system that allows these rights to be upheld.

The need to address fundamentalism in two different geographical contexts (Latin America and Europe) arises in part from concern over the intensification

of the rhetoric and attacks on activists (underway since the 1990s at least) as well as the global ties of this phenomenon. In the last quarter century, at forums such as the 1995 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, we have witnessed the spread of fundamentalism, through strong Vatican policy which has influenced the discussion of sexual and reproductive rights and the concept of gender (Sonia Correa, interview, 2020). Gradually we have seen the catchall term “gender ideology” strategically incorporated into the language of academia, the law, political forums, and everyday life.

Gender ideology appears to be an “adaptable empty signifier,” a rhetorical figure that suggests the existence of an ideology that threatens the natural order of how to be men and women, and what constitutes a family (Correa, 2017). According to Arguedas (2020), the social groups that claim that a “gender ideology” exists have the objective of “taking [over]—by means of the electoral mechanisms of formal democracy – the state¹ and its institutions, and, from within, imposing their social and economic vision.” On the specific subject of gender issues, political and religious fundamentalists are opposed to all those who appear to challenge the heteronormative nuclear family as the model of social organization. They attack reproductive rights, question sexuality education, criticize a so-called “gender ideology,” reject same-sex marriage, and seek to re-install biologically understood binary gender differences (Dietze and Roth, 2020, p. 7).

The rhetoric has been on the rise in both regions, as general impoverishment is having its consequences and the middle class fears social decline. At the same time, it is the result of liberal democracies’ inability to put limits on the voracity of capitalism and its renewed offensive against human rights. In this context, rhetoric that reinforces the traditional family and fixed gender roles has become the fundamentalists’ narrative strategy to take and hold onto political, electoral, social, and economic power. Another of their strategies has been to use fear to gain power: “Staying in power, as they have done for centuries [and] generating fear so that there’s no progress on rights or knowledge about them,

¹ In this document we refer to the state with a small “s” as part of a political reflection that questions its power and consideration as an entity that is static and unchanging in time (González, Bolívar and Vásquez, 2003).

and fear generates control, and control is what keeps the population under a sole religion and sole misinformation” (Anais, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

In both regions, the capacity for feminist mobilization and its linkages with other social movements has been enormous. There was a massive feminist strike centered in Spain. Various sectors in Poland mobilized against bills to outlaw abortion. Argentina saw powerful mobilizations under the “Ni una Más, Ni una Menos” movement opposing violence against women and the monumental “green tide” mobilization in support of abortion rights. Feminists in Nicaragua fought an oppressive system. The Chilean group Las Tesis mounted a performance called “A Rapist in Your Path” that has resonated massively in various languages and has been adapted in different countries. These are just a few examples of the creative and powerful capacity of feminists to defend rights and reinvent themselves on the streets in wide-ranging and collective ways.

However, during the last decade these advances have been met with the intensification of political and religious fundamentalism and the exacerbation of gender-based attacks.

The Far Right

Democracies do not operate the same way in both regions. While keeping in mind the differences between the two regions, this research has revealed that the rise of right-leaning and far-right governments, in a context of serious economic crises and shortcomings in the states’ ability to guarantee people’s rights and well-being, has been an enormous breeding ground for the advancement of fundamentalism.

In both regions, worsening neoliberalism and the complex crises that have been ongoing since the 1990s, have been favorable for far-right ideas, which have had very serious consequences for the lives and rights of women, LGBTIQ2+ people, and migrants, among others. These groups are currently under attack; attacks which later spread to undermine the freedoms of all citizens, and erode the fundamental basis of democracy. On the one hand, we have the turbulent context of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics since the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s. On the other hand, we have the

consequences of the economic crisis under way in Western Europe since 2010 (Vega et al., 2019, p. 419). In Latin America, the region with the most inequality in the world, structural adjustment policies based on neoliberal thinking have led to an increase in poverty for most people, as right-leaning and far-right governments came into office in the 2010s, intensifying human rights violations and increasing militarization.

In Europe, far-right parties have been elected in some countries, such as Fidesz in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland. Members of these parties have been elected to the legislatures in all the Western European countries, except Ireland. As a result, their rhetoric has been gaining legitimacy and social acceptance. This has been taking place as people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with state institutions and the mistrust of representative democracy is growing in the region (López, 2020).

The far right has also been evident in Latin America, at least since 2009, with the military coup against President Zelaya in Honduras; the 2012 congressional coup in Paraguay; the election of racist, homophobic, and profoundly neoliberal governments, such as that of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil; the 2019 coup d'état in Bolivia by far-right Christian fundamentalist Janine Añez; the 2019 election of the far-right government of Iván Duque Márquez in Colombia; the 2019 election of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador; and the continuity of Sebastián Piñera's right-wing and neoliberal government in Chile. Some governments that claim to be left-leaning nonetheless have important ties with conservative Catholic and neo-Pentecostal groups and share their agenda, especially in opposition to the rights of women and LGBTIQ2+ people, as in the case of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and the Venezuelan Government's electoral and political ties to evangelical groups and prominent evangelical pastor Javier Bertucci (Guerrero, n.d.).

This shift towards the far right in many of the countries in both regions shows a strong tendency towards human rights violations and corrupt, illegitimate democracies where the military, business interests, and religious groups have considerable influence on political decisions.

The Players: Old and “New” Strategies

In both regions we have seen a diversification of the groups that use this rhetoric: journalists, legislators, non-governmental organizations, academics, and legal groups, among others (Vaggione, 2005). Various analyses mention “strategic secularism” in discussing this diversity in fundamentalist players. There are also players with political and economic power that operate at various levels of government and state organizations.

Many of the activists involved in this research project reported that governments are one of the greatest abusers of rights as they use their position of power to try to overturn existing rights, make public declarations against them, and uphold harmful ideological notions. The presence of conservative and fundamentalist political parties, as well as the promotion of anti-rights policies, is highly worrying because it reveals significant levels of public support. In fact, positions opposed to women’s and human rights tend to become “official state narratives” (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

In a context of increasing numbers of right-leaning and far-right governments, it is clear that the presence of political parties that defend these ideological notions has added to the capacity to spread hate and question the rights of women and LGBTIQ2+ people. They use lawsuits to challenge rights that have already been recognized. Fundamentally, they deny that violence can be gendered and attempt to argue that in cases of domestic violence for example, that both men and women can be perpetrators. Thus, the Vox Party in Spain has challenged the legislation on gender-based violence, and in Mexico, Plataforma Frente Nacional por la Familia has held demonstrations against the laws on access to justice for women.

In Latin America, waves of fundamentalist attacks have been gaining momentum since the 2000s. Mobilizations against sexuality education, equal marriage rights, and attempts to criminalize abortion or prevent debate on its legalization (as the case may be) are some of the strategies that these players use. Several countries have long-standing conservative parties, and gradually, parties founded by neo-Pentecostal religious groups are on the rise. Several studies have noted that their growing lobby, their increasing ability to get elected, and their capacity to unite, has broadened their issues and fields of interest (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2020). These players seek to influence regional forums where policies

and human rights are defined, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), as well as local and national governmental structures, such as congresses or parliaments (Moragas, 2020). Fundamentalist players unite strategically to lobby at events where regional policies are defined:

...last year (2019) there were many more anti-rights than civil society organizations. And, they shut us out of some thematic hearings at the Assembly of American States. And, these are the same anti-rights [groups] that are in the regions, which have deputies from different cities, but...there were people from the Church, pastors from all the churches. (Vanesa, interview 6, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020)

Also since the 2000s, anti-gender campaigns have been seen in Western Europe. Although anti-rights social movements led the protests, some elements from the Catholic Church and even some factions of political parties were involved (Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo, 2018). The 2005 protests against gay marriage in Spain could be considered a precedent to the 2013 protests in France after a similar law was passed. Although these protests did not manage to sway public opinion that was largely in favor of gay marriage, these were significant mobilizations. Furthermore, these protests took place before the far-right parties had achieved their current social relevance.

To secure social support, these parties have had to undergo a process of renewal. These countries went through the May 68 revolution with a strong push for women's rights and the right to sexuality and gender diversity; which resulted in profound changes in customs and entrenched certain rights. In France, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries, if a party wants to gain acceptance, it must renew its ideology or rhetoric by incorporating liberal ideas, at least in terms of upholding the equality of women, even if it does so as a mere formality. It cannot attack equality directly. Parties such as the National Rally, Alternative for Germany, and the Swedish Democrats are part of the new far right (Alabao, 2018). Even the parties in Western Europe that continue to oppose the right to abortion and support traditional gender roles, do so with new arguments that highlight freedom of choice or hide their conservative ideas under a cloak of liberalism (Akkerman, 2015). Breaking with models from the past or disguising

them as much as possible, is key to understanding how these parties have gained acceptance and electoral wins.

In Latin America, a notorious and intensive process has been taking place as Catholic and neo-Pentecostal religious groups and political groups have struck alliances in order to gain political-electoral ground. It is important to mention that although most of the countries in the region have constitutions that declare that the state is non-denominational, the long-standing influence of the Catholic religion has not disappeared from politics. In fact, Catholic doctrine is still considered part of the rhetoric on “national identity” (Apthapi Fund, 2020).

Political-religious alliances imply the construction and defense of a conservative agenda on the rights of women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations; likewise, opposition to abortion rights is a common trait. Many of these alliances have been seen in Central America, as evidenced by recent electoral races in countries such as Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). Alliances have occurred in various countries and to a large extent they have been successful. This was seen in Uruguay where President Lacalle Pou was elected in 2019 after forming an alliance with conservative religious sectors and high-ranking members of the military such as Guido Manini Ríos, commander-in-chief of the Uruguayan Army between 2015 and 2019, groups that are openly against women, migrants, and the LGBTIQ2+ community (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). Brazil is one of the epicenters of political-electoral escalation in this rhetoric and alliances as evidenced by the election of former military man Jair Bolsonaro, with his overtly racist, patriarchal, and xenophobic policies.

Another characteristic of Latin America are the alliances between companies, the military, and political groups to promote fundamentalist agendas. Activists from Peru reported that these racist and anti-rights alliances defend the business interests of those who support them.

Every time anti-rights groups speak about these issues, they give their opinion and label these [Indigenous] people terrorists, subversives. They’re concerned with watching over their economic interests, overseeing these internal deals between the company and the state. (Madres en Acción, Peru, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020)

In the part of Europe that belonged to the former Soviet bloc, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 created the conditions for a rebirth of prewar anti-communist, anti-feminist, authoritarian, and even overtly fascist nationalism (Vega et al., 2019). “Gender ideology” appeared as a central narrative strategy, particularly after Fidesz’s 2010 victory in Hungary. Since then, this concept has become the “symbolic glue” that has managed to unite diverse beliefs from the right and the far right, ranging from social and religious movements, to political parties, churches, and even different Christian denominations (Kováts and Pöim, 2015). The concept not only serves to attack women, but is also used against liberal democracy (Grzebalska et al., 2017). The new anti-gender nationalists use a strategy of participating in the structures of democracy and the rule of law to implement anti-liberal policies and challenge human rights at every opportunity (Vega et al., 2019, p. 405). In Latin America, it is also clear that the fundamentalist agenda goes beyond attacks on gender, and is heard in forums for the discussion of human rights and democracy (Mirta Moragas, interview, 2020; Laura Weinstein, interview, 2020).

Since 2012, widespread political and social mobilization has been unfolding in Europe. It has attracted diverse social groups, as it has resonated with existing sentiments related to gender, and also other issues such as migration. In some countries, anti-gender strategies have been remarkably effective: they have produced a political alliance between nationalists and religious fundamentalists that contributed to electoral wins for the right-wing, who have taken office in Hungary and Poland.

Since then, anti-gender positions have become part of government policy in these countries, and have served as justification for the dismantling of democratic institutions and attacks on sexuality education, activism by NGOs and feminists, abortion rights, legislation against gender-based violence, all of which are accused of destroying the traditional family based on “binary and natural gender roles.” In this way, these initially marginal and insignificant movements have managed to mobilize thousands of people in the region around issues that they present as an imminent danger to the family, children, and the nation (Feminist Fund, Poland, 2020).

This capacity for mobilization has also flourished in Latin America. For example, significant mobilizations have been seen with the campaign “Don’t Mess With My Children” in Peru; against the peace agreement in 2016, and sexuality education in Colombia (Fondo Lunaria, 2020); and against the passage of a law for trans people in Uruguay (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). To a considerable extent, these actions are related to the successful construction of international and cross-border alliances between fundamentalist players. For example, individuals such as Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez, authors of *The Black Book of the New Left*, have had influence in various countries of the region, and at international events on the family and rights.

As various studies have noted, this wave of attacks on gender, human rights, and democracy has been characterized by global alliances between members of the Catholic hierarchy and conservative branches from other faiths, such as neo-Pentecostal churches, the Russian Orthodox Church, and factions within Judaism and Islam, among others (Amador and Granados, 2018; Do Nascimento, 2020; Harth and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, 2016; Sexuality Policy Watch, 2020; Shameem, 2017). In Latin America, the enormous spread of neo-Pentecostalism has been significant, especially in social groups affected by poverty and different types of violence. This is also true of some Eastern European countries. Many of these tendencies, guided by doctrines such as prosperity theology, spiritual warfare, and dominion theology coincide with ultra-conservative Catholic positions that demand religious involvement in politics and attack the rights of women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Do Nascimento, 2020, pp. 17 and 18).

Since the 1980s, neo-Pentecostalism has been spreading at a faster rate in Latin America. To a considerable extent, it has spread mainly among low-income groups, in places where the welfare state has been practically non-existent. In fact, many of these churches have taken over the state’s responsibilities by providing certain social services (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

In both regions, the CitizenGo portal has been used systematically to spread this rhetoric. Since 2001, its campaigns against the rights of women and LGBTIQ2+ people has been one of the main methods for spreading these ideas. Fundamentalists have used the mass media strategically. In Bolivia for example,

activists reported that the fundamentalists use a two-level media strategy. One, they have created their own media outlets (web portals, YouTube channels, radio stations, among others); and two, they use social media to constantly troll the messages and events organized by feminist groups (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020). This was seen in both regions.

In Eastern Europe, networks of conservative Catholic organizations, such as Tradition, Family and Property, which originated in Brazil, defend ultraconservative social principles and promote extreme economic liberalism. In the same vein, we can mention the World Congress of Families, which has influence in Latin America and Europe. Founded in the United States in 1997, it serves to unite various players and spearhead attacks on gender.

The players are also linked through financing. For example US-based Protestant groups and Russian business and political associations send significant amounts of cash to organizations that uphold fundamentalist political and religious interests.

Attacks: Permanence, Intensity, and Some Differences

So-called “gender ideology” is a rhetorical figure that political and religious fundamentalists have used widely as one of the most effective strategies with considerable impact in both regions. Various studies have shown that policy statements by the Catholic hierarchy have started to use gender ideology language to oppose non-biological definitions of gender, women’s right to make decisions about their bodies, and the rights of people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. To a lesser extent, right-wing religious and political sectors have used “gender ideology” effectively as “symbolic glue,” resulting in important political-electoral benefits, as this study mentions (Moragas, 2020, p. 20).

Fundamentalist attacks have different thematic emphases in each region. For example, in Europe, anti-gender rhetoric and nationalist views are significant, in addition to strong anti-Islamic and anti-migrant sentiments. In Latin America, parents’ campaigns against sexuality education and attacks on the right to abortion have been common. In each region, legal protection for the right to gender diversity has been achieved to some extent. Nonetheless, the intensity and violence of attacks against people of diverse gender identities and sexual

orientations, especially trans people, is notable in both regions. In fact, in Eastern European countries, along with so-called “gender ideology,” fundamentalists use the term “LGBT ideology.” One of the most emblematic examples of the systematic attacks on people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, is the series of resolutions passed in Poland under the slogan “LGBT-free zone.”

In both regions, but especially in Eastern Europe and Latin America, fundamentalists have tried to promote “the rights of the family” and they have proclaimed themselves its defenders. This symbolic ploy has pushed the idea that there is only one type of family, the heterosexual family, ignoring the enormous diversity of possible unions and family ties.

In the same way, in both regions, the rhetoric has morphed “communism and feminism” into a complex relationship, which has been used to further their agenda. For example, in Latin America the phrase “Castro-Chavista and gender ideology” has been used to combine fears and exacerbate misgivings about sexuality education and leftist ideas.

In Europe, the reaction against communism and Russian imperialism has been channeled into nationalism. “Gender ideology” and “LGBT ideology” are portrayed as derivations of Marxism, and often compared to Stalinism, which sparks rejection in countries that associate communism with totalitarianism. In addition, in the former USSR countries, the West - including institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations - is seen as taking over from the Soviet Union in the role of “colonizer.” They allege that ideas about gender equality are being “imposed from above” by these institutions, upon conservative and traditional Eastern European societies that distinctly flaunt their conservatism as part of their national identity. In this way, gender ideology is considered part of the “ideology of human rights” and political correctness imposed by the West. This stance has been used to oppose the inclusion of gender perspectives in public policies (Feminist Fund, Poland, 2020).

With different slants, fundamentalist political and religious rhetoric is being heard in both regions. We present some key features of these attacks, based on the analysis done by the women’s funds and reports by the activists. In both regions, harsh attacks are being made against inclusive feminism, feminists and trans feminists, people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations and

their struggles. Racism and xenophobia are key elements in this rhetoric. We are very concerned about the way these struggles are being dangerously stigmatized. For example, in Colombia where a complex armed conflict has been under way for more than 60 years, comparisons have associated feminism with communism and armed groups, such as the guerrillas. In the case of Peru, feminists have been labeled as terrorists (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, interview; Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). Likewise, in Eastern European countries such as Ukraine, in an appeal to nationalist sentiments, feminists have been called “enemies of the Ukrainian nation,” “separatists,” and “left-wing bitches.”

Racism is a recurrent strategic thread within the complex fundamentalist rhetoric and logic. In both Europe and Latin America, groups and policies that attack gender also target racialized activists, as well as those who support them in their fight for rights. In Latin America, Black and Indigenous women and activists face discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and racialization. This rhetoric has sparked racist and xenophobic attacks, as was seen during the passage of the new migration law in Chile (Fondo Alquimia, 2020), attacks on Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, and Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020), and attacks on African-based community centers reveal racism in Brazil (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Meanwhile, in countries like France, where there is resurgent aversion to Islam, some right-leaning groups purport to defend women’s rights by superficially equating Islam with the oppression of women.

In both Eastern and Western Europe, a nuanced “racialization of sexual politics” has been unfolding. In the East, a clear example is the case of Serbia, where a complex policy has been implemented to judge women for having low birth rates, employing rhetoric replete with sexist, nationalist, and xenophobic notions. Similar types of speech have appeared in Spain, where the Vox Party has also referred to the demographic situation and has proposed implementing obstacles to abortion to improve “birth rates.”

In this rhetoric, there is a clearly racist tendency to blame migrants as being largely responsible for sexual assaults on women. As right-leaning governments have taken office and far-right parties have grown, they have fanned the flames

of anti-immigration sentiment; a long-standing issue that has gained considerable strength in European countries. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party's violent attacks on feminist centers that defend migrants' rights in Germany, clearly illustrate the connection between sexism, racism, and xenophobia, as elements of the same strategy.

In both regions, feminist and LGBTIQ2+ activists have been targeted with similar types of violence, such as direct attacks on their headquarters, harassment on social media, threats, assaults, attacks during demonstrations – particularly those related to abortion rights, doxing,² and lawsuits.

In both regions, another relevant feature of the attacks is related to the fundamentalist emphasis on sexuality and reproductive rights. Although the laws on this matter vary in terms of their comprehensiveness and scope, it is well known that fundamentalists seek to roll back legislation mainly in two areas: public policy on sexuality education, and abortion rights.

Regarding sexuality education, we have seen successful and unsuccessful attempts to amend the legislation. One such setback in Latin America took place in 2017 when the Paraguayan Ministry of Education and Science prohibited allusions to “gender ideology” in educational materials (Fondo de Mujeres del South, 2020). Another example comes from Colombia, where religious and political groups spurred a huge mobilization in 2016 against “gender ideology,” specifically against some sexuality education books which they argued, taught the “LGTBI lifestyle” (Fondo Lunaria, 2020). In Europe, evangelical and right-wing groups have attacked activists over bills on the protection of children's rights and sexuality education in Bulgaria. In Poland, the grassroots campaign “Stop Pedophilia” has claimed that teaching sexuality education is linked to pederasty.

Another strategy that has been used in both regions, especially in Spain and Mexico, to challenge sexuality education in the schools has been the proposal of a parental PIN, which would enable families to opt out of allowing their sons and daughters to attend activities related to sexuality education. This initiative originated in Spain, created by the far-right Vox Party, and it has spread to other

² This term refers to the action of disclosing personal information on the internet, with the purpose of “humiliating, threatening, intimidating, or punishing” (Douglas, 2016).

areas. In Mexico, for example, in the midst of the pandemic, the Frente Nacional por la Familia, in alliance with right-wing political parties, put this policy on their platform. Activists clearly see the connection:

... the parental PIN, well, I do believe there is a connection; that is, gender ideology paved the way and this Spanish initiative was suddenly adopted to enable parents to choose whether their children will take sexuality education classes. (Pauline, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

University education has also been under attack. In Europe, gender studies programs at universities in Serbia and Germany were targeted. Parties like the AfD have proposed withdrawing funding for gender studies at the university level. This type of attack has also been seen in Latin America. For example, in 2017, demonstrators in Brazil protested against a talk by renowned feminist Judith Butler, and in 2020, the fundamentalist CitizenGo platform mounted a campaign against the gender studies program at the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina. That program was the product of the Micaela Law, named in honor of murdered Argentine feminist activist Micaela García (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

In terms of abortion rights, there have been ups and downs. As we have mentioned, the laws vary considerably. In Eastern Europe and Central America, the laws on abortion are quite restrictive. The Catholic Church in Poland and neo-Pentecostal churches in Central America, in alliance with other political sectors, have been key players in upholding and calling for more restrictions on abortion. Activists in both regions mentioned being targeted in different attacks.

Fundamentalists have also mounted informal barriers to accessing abortion in several countries of Latin America and Eastern Europe. The fundamentalist repertoire includes anti-abortion propaganda and strategies that play upon emotions and manipulate public opinion, seeking to consolidate the idea that “abortion is murder.” The “40 Days for Life” campaign, which originated in Texas, United States, has been used in Latin America. In this campaign, religious groups hold vigils at medical centers and pressure women who want to access abortions. In countries where the right to abortion is recognized, such as France, heated public debates are taking place that attempt to frame the subject as a “moral” issue.

The legalization of abortion in Argentina at the end of 2020 was a boost and a positive indicator for the outlook on feminist issues in general, but at the same time, it sparked threats and actions of fierce opposition by conservative governments and religious groups.

It is worth emphasizing that feminist organizations in countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, and Poland have experienced violent and stigmatizing attacks as they defend themselves from the lawsuits that attempt to overturn the legislation that enshrines women's rights, such as the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention.

Activists in both regions mentioned impediments to exercising the right to freedom of expression, demonstration, and other rights. The anti-feminist, racist, and homophobic narratives spread by fundamentalists are becoming a reality. Activists in Eastern Europe, especially in countries where the right and far right have triumphed, are very concerned by the intensity of the attacks and the violence exercised against those who denounce these. For example, people leading the defense of LGBTIQ2+ rights, such as Margot Szutowicz of the Stop Bzdurrom collective in Poland, have been physically attacked and arrested. Likewise, we have received reports of actions by Abogados Cristianos against feminists activists in Spain. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the activist who was fined for the "procession of the Insubordinate Pussy," a protest against the Catholic Church's attacks on sexual and reproductive rights. Fundamentalist groups have also launched lawsuits in countries such as Peru, seeking to limit the actions of feminist groups such as the organization Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

In Latin America, as far-right governments took power in the 2010s, violent reactions and militarization intensified. In several countries, the police increasingly behave more like a military corps than a service for the protection of citizens. Social mobilizations in which feminist activists have participated jointly with other social sectors to reject policies of impoverishment and violations of human rights, have been harshly repressed in the last decade in Nicaragua, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, and Peru. Police brutality, interwoven with racist, sexist, classist, and patriarchal attitudes, fuels a complex context that limits and violates the right to protest in the region. The activists also reported being violently

attacked for engaging in public education or protest actions; for example being physically attacked or intimidating messages painted on walls to challenge and threaten their work or undermine the content of their messages.

Finally, one of the features that has marked the attacks, and which was reported in both regions to differing degrees, is the rise of a branch of feminism that questions the rights of trans women and their gender identity. Although this debate has existed for decades on a theoretical level, it has now moved into activist forums and has been publicized on social networks. Activists in both regions are concerned that the level of aggression and violence is preventing opportunities for dialogue and debate on the subject. They are also concerned about the fact that feminists who have expressed these beliefs aligns with the rhetoric of political and religious fundamentalists.

In some cases, the denial of trans rights embraced by some branches of feminism, has become part of the debate on progressive legislation, for example, in England and Spain. In Spain, some groups and political parties that call themselves progressive have not taken a strong stance against the arguments that disregard the rights of transgender people. Likewise, in Latin America we have seen how governments that describe themselves as left-leaning or progressive in nature, have defended conservative positions on sexual and reproductive rights, feminist issues, and sexual diversity. This is the case of Rafael Correa's government in Ecuador, from 2007 to 2017, and Daniel Ortega, president of Nicaragua since 2006.

Recognized feminists who are highly visible on social networks and the media in countries such as Colombia, England, Mexico and Spain have supported these discriminatory ideas. This debate has come to the forefront against a backdrop of deep disagreement within feminism regarding sex work; some factions call for it to be abolished while others demand labor rights for sex workers.

This situation concerns us as defenders of broad and inclusive feminism, because when a branch of feminism converges with fundamentalist rhetoric, it feeds structural transphobia and makes violations of rights and attacks on transgender people more likely. This discussion is especially complex in the context of the pandemic that we are currently experiencing because lockdown measures in several countries of both regions, particularly the gender-based segregation

measures that were implemented in Latin America, have resulted in serious violations of the rights of trans people.

COVID-19, Authoritarianism, and Fundamentalism

This research was designed and carried out in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to various reports, and in the activists' opinion, many of the government measures to manage the pandemic served as an excuse to fortify authoritarian regimes, implement anti-democratic measures, and consolidate the power of the elites.

Both regions saw an increase in gender-based violence, barriers to access to justice due to lockdown measures, and a reinforcement of the macho and sexist attitudes that persist in our societies. Many women and LGBTIQ2+ people were confined with their aggressors. Women experienced enormous barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive rights, especially abortion, even in places where it is legal. Likewise, trans people saw increased restrictions when attempting to access their right to healthcare.

Activists in both regions reported that public agencies received more complaints about gender-based violence, and that their community and feminist networks and organizations were overwhelmed trying to attend to countless cases of violence against women and LGBTIQ2+ people.

Similarly, the arrival of the pandemic and the way it was handled, as a matter of “security” rather than social rights, revealed the complex social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities that exist in Latin America and much of the European continent. Worsening unemployment hit women and young people hard. Domestic workers were among the most affected in both regions. This situation reveals the sexism and racism that permeate politics, as many women domestic workers in Latin America are Black, Indigenous, and/or from low - income rural and urban communities, while in Europe most are financially insecure migrants.

In Latin America and in Eastern European countries, militarization was the quintessential response to the virus, with the justification of controlling the population and ensuring compliance with lockdowns. In Latin America violence worsened, especially against trans women, as the result of discriminatory

gender-based measures to restrict mobility, and police violence against sex workers. In Eastern Europe paradoxically, debates on abortion, the Istanbul Convention, and LGBTIQ2+ rights were used as distractions to divert attention from the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Conservative religious groups touted narratives declaring that recognition of the right to abortion, and the rights of people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations were partly responsible for social decline and the emergence of the virus. In narratives contrary to the secular state, some Latin American governments “consecrated” their regions and countries to God to save them from the pandemic.

Fundamentalist groups joined forces during the pandemic to spread fake news and conspiracy theories. In Spain, France, and Germany, they called for mobilization and broadened their grassroots bases to challenge government measures.

By the same token, both regions witnessed the capacity and creativity of broad and diverse social mobilization, despite the complex situation. To mention some illustrative cases, mobilizations in defense of abortion rights continued in Poland and Argentina; the “Social Explosion” movement in Chile continued to mobilize and fight for constitutional reform and structural change, and young people in Peru mobilized against the recent coup d’état.

In both regions, thousands of feminist collectives and LGBTIQ2+ groups continue to work to defend their rights and those of the people, in wide-ranging networks of solidarity, autonomy, and mutual support. For them, authoritarianism, attacks on gender, human rights, and democratic principles are a matter of primary importance that demand attention and joint, fair, and unified action by one and all.



CHAPTER 2

Fundamentalism, Attacks on Gender and Democracy. An Overview of Europe (2019-2020)

Perpetrators of the Attacks

Description of the main perpetrators, identified by the funds involved in the research

Far from being a homogeneous group, the organizations that make up ultra-conservatism are many. Their heterogeneity allows them to operate at different levels: local or transnational, religious or secular, governmental or civil society (Peñas et al., 2018). In Europe, ultra-conservative organizations, especially religious ones fighting against the introduction of progressive legislation include community groups, influential media outlets, churches, or populist and far-right politicians.

The Catholic Church has played a fundamental role in spreading the rhetoric of so-called “gender ideology.”

In some places, factions of the military are responsible for the attacks, such as Ukraine’s Azov Special Operations Unit (Ukrainian Women’s Fund, 2020).

The majority of the most active civil society organizations receive funding from organizations in the US; usually from the World Congress of Families or the Alliance Defending Freedom but also from pro-Russian religious and political conservative groups (Bulgarian Fund for Women, 2020).

In general, these organizations are seen as relevant and receive support from the media - including the mainstream media - but they also maintain an active presence on social media, blogs, etc., where far-right opinions circulate and fake news and rumors are strategically broadcast.

Forces Operating Within Representative Democracy

In Western Europe, there are far-right or populist parties that sometimes oppose the rights of women and LGBTIQ2+ people. However, as some researchers have noted, those with the largest legislative blocs usually disguise these positions or tone them down, as is the case in the National Rally in France, the Freedom Party of Austria, or the Sweden Democrats.

In Eastern Europe, these organizations have gained even more power and anti-LGBTIQ2+ narratives and actions have overt support from some governments (Poland and Hungary) and even national presidents, such as Andrzej Duda in Poland. In Bulgaria, far-right nationalist parties belonging to the ruling coalition, the United Patriots, have spearheaded the attacks. In addition to ultra-nationalist governments, there are opposition parties that share these positions in the region. These parties represent a spectrum of positions that range from the most populist to the most radical, united at their extremes by neo-Nazi ideology. In Slovakia, in addition to the ruling conservative Ordinary People and Independent Personalities Party (OLaNO), there are other political organizations, such as the People's Party Our Slovakia whose leader, Marian Kotleba, was found guilty of spreading Nazism and sentenced to four years in prison.

Legislative committees, where different parties work together toward common goals, can also be used as anti-gender forums. This is the case of Poland's Stop Gender Ideology or the Russian Duma's Committee on the Family, Women and Children (Korolczuk, 2014). In the Ukrainian legislature, anti-rights politicians belong to the Values, Dignity, Family Caucus (Ukrainian Women's Fund, 2020).

Likewise, some courts have erected themselves as staunch defenders of social conservatism, such as the Constitutional Court of Bulgaria, which declared the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional in 2018. The acute politicization of some courts is also taking place in countries where democracy is under attack, such as Poland and Hungary, where authoritarian governments are enacting legal reforms that undermine the separation of powers (Feminist Fund, 2020).

Conservative National/Local NGOs

Across Europe, civil society groups that claim to defend family values are very active. Nearly 500 anti-rights movements and organizations have been identified in more than 30 countries. These movements, although diverse, are interconnected and are occasionally capable of coming together to carry out joint campaigns (Zacharenko, 2016). Some of these organizations have direct ties to certain churches but most consider themselves independent and are in charge of actively organizing protests: convening them, launching campaigns in the media

and online, collecting signatures, holding public forums, lobbying, and even hosting their own media sites.

In this category we could also include those of a more institutionalized character, associations, foundations, etc., as well as those that operate as movements. In Western Europe, they lead anti-rights protests and rhetoric, whereas in the East, ultra-conservative governments use them to stop progressive legislation or oppose rights. For example, in Bulgaria, the organization called Societies and Values or the Family March has been the main force behind the backlash against the Istanbul Convention and other similar attacks (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

Also, there are groups whose main objective is to oppose the rights of LGBTIQ2+ people, such as Ukraine's All Together movement or Love Against Homosexuality (Ukrainian Women's Fund). In France, Strike for Everyone (La Manif Pour Tous) is focused on opposing same-sex marriage and adoption (Mediterranean Women's Fund, 2020).

In Spain, Hazte Oír is the most visible anti-rights organization. It operates as a pressure group, with an emphasis on online activism. Founded in 2001, it has developed a network of national and international alliances that provides it with contacts and funding. Its international arm, CitizenGo, is very active in Latin America. It has also been linked to the underground Mexican far-right group El Yunque (El Confidencial, 2014).

In Eastern Europe, the Tradition, Family and Property network has been very active. Under this Brazilian-inspired umbrella group, conservative Catholic organizations, with many ties to far-right movements, work together to uphold social conservatism and hyper-economic liberalism (Datta, 2020).

Parents' associations are another relevant player. For example, those in the southern and western regions of Baden-Württemberg and Cologne, in Germany, have protested the government's proposal to introduce a new sexuality education curriculum; and parents' committees have opposed education on sex and gender equality in schools in many regions of Russia, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine (Korolczuk, 2014).

* Legal Organizations

Strategic litigation by legal organizations created expressly for this purpose is a political strategy that has proven very effective in promoting the anti-rights agenda. The Spanish Association of Christian Lawyers (Asociación Española de Abogados Cristianos) has actively opposed freedom of expression for feminists and LGBTIQ2+ activists, filing lawsuits against those they believe have offended “religious sensibilities” (Harth and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, 2016).

The European Centre for Law and Justice and the US-based Alliance Defending Freedom, which has been linked to the Trump administration, are two of the most influential legal organizations in Europe. They have been involved in dozens of European court cases over the last decade: opposing same-sex adoptions and defending doctors and companies that refuse to provide services to women and LGBTIQ2+ people. Moreover, in at least seven cases, they have presented legal arguments backing the Polish Government’s position before European courts. In Poland, the Ordo Iuris Institute¹ is dedicated to producing rhetoric against “LGBT ideology” (in to its own words) and “gender ideology,” which is then used by the authorities. It also employs strategic litigation, proposes new laws, and harasses NGOs and progressive activists by bringing legal charges against them (Feminist Fund).

* Lobbies

Lobbying has been done for years, by organizations created especially for this purpose and some that do so in addition to other activities. Lobbying, which has been on the rise in recent years, is done before national legislatures and European institutions. Churches and religious organizations have hosted more political meetings in Brussels than big companies such as Google or the tobacco company Philip Morris. The data reflect the preponderance of Christian (Catholic and Protestant) organizations whose capacity to influence is backed by solid economic support. Some of the leading lobbying organizations are CitizenGo,

¹ Ordo Iuris has ties to similar organizations in Europe and the United States. In Eastern Europe it has ties to the Center for Hope and Help-Cenap (Czech Republic), Slovakia Christiana (Slovakia), Human Dignity Center (Hungary), Vigilare Foundation (Croatia), On Behalf of the Family (Croatia), and Association for Life and Family (Slovakia) (VSquare, 2020).

the US-based Alliance Defending Freedom, and the European Centre for Law and Justice (El Diario, 2019b).

* Churches

Across the region, church leaders support anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ2+ narratives and policies, in the form of pastoral letters, public speeches, or statements during religious events (Feminist Fund).

The Catholic Church has particularly stood out in terms of its rhetoric: it coined the term “gender ideology” and Pope Francis himself has used the phrase “cultural colonization” to refer to gender issues. It has also been directly or indirectly involved in the demonstrations against marriage equality and abortion. The Catholic Church is structured hierarchically. The church’s bishops’ conferences organize the creation of local church groups in each country. For example, Spain’s Bishops’ Conference is one of the most powerful anti-gender pressure groups with the greatest capacity for mobilizing the public (Carmona et al., 2012). It also plays an important role at the international level.

Russia and its Orthodox Church have become key anti-gender players in Eastern Europe. After the end of the USSR, the new Russian Government sought to bolster its legitimacy through a strategic alliance between the state and the Orthodox Church. The current government gives this religious institution a considerable role as guarantor of the morality that shapes the contours of its domestic and international policies based on the defense of “traditional values” (Peñas et al., 2018). In Ukraine, for example, organizations directly connected with this creed, such as the Oleksandra Skliar religious union, the St. Olga sisterhood, and the religious community of the Emmanuel Church, play a key role (Ukrainian Women’s Fund).

* Media

All of the funds highlighted the importance of certain media outlets in driving gender-based attacks, including the publication of “fake news.” In Western Europe in general, the mainstream media are seen as more pluralistic in their outlook. However, fundamentalist or far-right media, which represent minority positions, have found room to maneuver and are growing thanks to social media. In

Eastern Europe, where certain countries such as Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria exhibit authoritarian leanings, media pluralism is limited as these countries continue to descend in the rankings of media freedom.²

* Internet and social media

Although it cannot be considered an actor by itself, the internet has long been not only a source for information but also a vehicle for political organization. Many of the attacks on feminist and LGBTIQ2+ activists occur in cyberspace. The funds have reported cases of doxing³ and cyber-bullying in almost every country.

A significant number of websites, online groups, and open platforms disseminate information in various formats and promote online campaigns that range from collecting signatures to organizing protests at the local and national level (Korolczuk, 2014). Some focus on a specific topic, such as Stop Gender and Stop Sexualization,⁴ and there are also platforms that promote campaigns on different issues, such as Citizengo.org.

* International Coordination

The funds point to growing concern over international organizations involved in the coordination of anti-gender trends, such as US-based fundamentalist Protestant groups⁵ that have joined forces with Russian business and political groups. At the same time, Russian organizations have been funding groups such as Hazte Oír in Spain, and other organizations that not only promote Christian values in public institutions, but have also been actively involved in institutional politics for a long time, attempting to remove presidents and install others, and providing

² See, for example, the Freedom House ranking (n.d.) which notes that the Orbán government controls 80 percent of the media in Hungary.

³ Doxing refers to the practice of disclosure on the internet of personal information (address, work, etc.) or private details (intimate photos, relationships, etc.) with the purpose of intimidating, humiliating or threatening.

⁴ <http://www.stopgender.pl> and <http://stop-seksualizacji.pl/>

⁵ These right-wing Christian groups, many of them linked to the Trump administration, have spent at least \$280 million on campaigns against women's and LGBTIQ2+ rights on five continents (openDemocracy, 2020).

support to certain parties (Alabao, 2020). In many cases, these anti-rights NGOs are backed by major US “pro-life” organizations and the Kremlin’s “Gayrope” propaganda, which aims to discredit the European Union as a place of moral decline (Hellam, 2016). For example, in Bulgaria, there is an odd partnership between the Prussian far-right and pro-American fundamentalist evangelicals (Bulgarian Fund for Women). Likewise, more than 100 of the leading national and transnational anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ2+ organizations in the region meet annually under the umbrella group Agenda Europe (Peñas et al., 2018).

International forums serve as an opportunity for far-right activists and institutions to strengthen their ties, and these events show their growing political influence in the world. These meetings enable them to share resources and develop joint strategies and rhetoric. The most prominent is the World Congress of Families. Founded in 1997 in the United States, the World Congress of Families is, like other fundamentalist Christian organizations, an active international force⁶ that tries to influence institutional politics. Its decision on venues to host its annual conference reflects this. In 2019, the meeting was held in Italy, as a demonstration of active support for Salvini and the Italian far right, while the previous three events were held in Georgia, Hungary and Moldova to endorse Russia’s “pro-family” geopolitical strategy as opposed to European influence (Montgomery, 2019).

6 Its activity intensified during the administration of Barack Obama (2009 to 2017). At this time, as promoting reproductive and LGBTIQ2+ rights became part of US foreign policy, conservative religious rhetoric on the family and “gender” went global. This entailed a great boost for the transnational campaign against “gender ideology” (Montgomery, 2019).

Attacks on Gender and Democracy

Attacks on Feminism, Feminists, LGBTIQ2+ People and Their Struggles

* Emergence and Escalation of Anti-gender Rhetoric

In several Western European countries, since the feminist mobilization of 2018-2019 (which was cut short by the pandemic in 2020), activists have faced an increase in conservative backlash. These two processes go hand in hand. On the one hand, public acceptance of feminist gains has grown and the media have adopted feminist language and perspectives in places where these mobilizations have been strong, such as France and Spain, which has resulted in governments declaring themselves feminist (Mediterranean Women's Fund and Calala Women's Fund). On the other hand, discriminatory, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTIQ2+ narratives have gained ground thanks to the backlash and increase in public support for far-right parties. In other words, an increase in social polarization on these issues is apparent. However, progress does not seem to have suffered significantly in most countries where a broad consensus on rights, such as equal marriage, abortion, and the social repudiation of sexual violence, has already been achieved.

In France, in recent decades some politicians and public opinion influencers not affiliated with the far right, have made racist statements, normalizing such talk in public. Many private mainstream media sources now give quite a bit of space to "controversial" figures. In the name of freedom of speech and debate they are free to go on misogynistic, racist, and homophobic rants mostly unchecked, despite being regularly criticized for it.

* Attacks on Activists

The fact that this anti-gender rhetoric is in the public eye, thanks to the rise of far-right parties, has intensified attacks on activists and cyber-harassment in Western Europe. According to an investigation conducted by Calala Women's Fund in Spain, 82.61 percent of feminist activists interviewed had experienced

cyber-violence (Hybridadas and Commons, 2020). According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, gender-based cyber-violence is a growing problem of global proportions and one that has dire consequences throughout the continent.⁷

In Spain, following the general election of November 10, 2019, graffiti appeared on offices and institutions that oppose gender violence in Fuenlabrada (Madrid) and Bilbao (Basque Country), insulting feminists and making references to the far-right party Vox. Activist and reporter Irantzu Varela and the writers at the feminist publication Pikara Magazine (Basque Country), both well established, received threats online and by phone, were doxed, and had their offices defaced with graffiti (Calala Women’s Fund). Another group of feminist activists supported by Calala Women’s Fund and Women Survivors (Seville), (organizations that address issues of violence from a community perspective) were also targeted in racist attacks that included graffiti, insults and face-to-face threats.

In Eastern Europe, the concepts of “gender ideology” and “LGBT ideology”⁸ are used in the rhetoric to attack feminists and LGBTIQ2+ activists. According to the funds in the region, discriminatory narratives used in policies and by politicians, the media, religious leaders, intellectuals, etc., has been commonplace since before and during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. Also, a conservative view of gender roles has prevailed in the context of stay-at-home and quarantine measures (Feminist Fund).

As a result of this rhetoric, attacks that include physical assault, harassment, and threats have been reported. Activists for girls’ rights and gender equality have reported verbal attacks, hate speech online, threats, negative comments in public, and even assaults. These occurrences have become so widespread that activists consider them unavoidable in their line of work (ALEG and Women’s Resource Center of Armenia, 2019).

⁷ The United Nations Human Rights Council itself approved a resolution in 2018 that analyzed the seriousness of the situation and demanded that states change the way they respond to this problem (Hybridadas and Commons, 2020).

⁸ Term used by the far right and religious fundamentalists.

Meanwhile, in some countries in the region, harassment has jeopardized activists' physical safety. On many occasions, anti-LGBTIQ2+ demonstrations in Poland and Russia have led to the use of physical force and harassment in various forms. In October 2020, demonstrators in Poland were attacked while protesting the Catholic Church's support for abortion restrictions (Feminist Fund). Jarosław Kaczyński, one of the leaders of the Law and Justice Party, called for the "defense of Poland and the Catholic churches." As a result, a far-right group physically confronted women who were demonstrating at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw. The group declared its intention to establish a "national guard" to protect the country's churches from demonstrations (Vice, 2020).

In Ukraine, different far-right groups and Christian fundamentalists are attacking activists. Feminist activists, researchers and human rights advocates are often the victims of accusations and slander, and are labeled as "enemies of the Ukrainian nation," "separatists," "accomplices of the occupiers," "sorosiatas" (Soros' servants) and "leftist bitches." The constant threats, loss of rights and physical violence perpetrated by anti-rights groups have become part of their daily existence (Ukrainian Women's Fund). Ukrainian activists say that they feel the negative impact of anti-gender groups and actions on their daily lives and even their jobs. As a result, they express fear when it comes to engaging in activist work. Constant demands that they be fired from their jobs - which sometimes happens and has led many to want to live abroad - is among their main concerns (Ukrainian Women's Fund).

Violence against activists is becoming commonplace in Serbia, where they have been subjected to death threats, harassment and doxing, as happened to a feminist illustrator who was singled out in a right-wing media outlet (Reconstruction Women's Fund). In southern Serbia, dead animals were left on the doorstep of an activist's house. As has been the case in other European countries, women's studies and gender studies programs in the universities are under the constant threat of being banned. In addition, the office of the pacifist organization Women in Black has been the target of countless physical attacks. In 2019, political scientist Slobodan Antonić targeted the Reconstruction Women's Fund, sparking violent attacks online (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

As in many places in Eastern Europe, social conservatism in Serbia pervades the public forum. The mainstream media continue to publish sensationalist and discriminatory reports on sensitive issues such as femicide, downplaying the responsibility of murderers and using narratives that victimize and dehumanize women and LGBTIQ2+ people. This helps to legitimize and justify the violence that they suffer in private as a reflection of what is going on in public (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

Because of these narratives, the public remains hostile towards progressive women. In addition to attacks on activists and NGOs, conspiracy theories, fake news, and disinformation campaigns - which are commonplace in other political and social spheres - are being used to promote an anti-gender agenda. In Eastern Europe, many dangerous myths and lies about gender politics are circulating. The most common of these lies accuses LGBTIQ2+ people of pedophilia (Reconstruction Women's Fund). Reports aimed at discrediting Western European countries by arguing that incest and pedophilia are legal in Scandinavia or that fondling is part of the German kindergarten curriculum are examples of this disinformation (Röhrborn and Giebel, 2014). This is how the anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ2+ agenda is implemented in much of Eastern Europe, by discrediting the European Union and the values it attempts to uphold.

* Social Legitimation and Anti-gender Policy

Anti-gender ideology rhetoric is gaining social legitimacy and allowing far-right and fundamentalist political parties to actively create their own political/cultural base. In Spain, Vox and the mostly right-wing party People's Party blamed demonstrations and International Women's Day events for spreading COVID-19 in 2020. They have even questioned the right to demonstrate. In an attempt to attack Spain's ruling left-wing coalition, these two parties brought a lawsuit against the decision to allow an International Women's Day rally in Madrid, which was attended by more than 120,000 people. Some of the rally's organizers were also called to testify, as part of a police investigation that was not ordered by any court. This is an example of how feminism and feminist mobilizations have been used politically in Spain to characterize a confrontation between left and right, and undermine their legitimacy (Calala Women's Fund).

In Eastern Europe, ruling parties and other institutional actors are often involved in attacks. In Romania, for example, an attempt was made in July 2020 to ban gender studies in schools and universities, following Hungary's⁹ lead. Launched to undermine progressive policies and their theoretical underpinnings, the claim of this attack has been seen everywhere: that gender is not a scientific theory and that feminist scholars aim to destroy the nuclear family, heterosexuality and traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, in December the Romanian Constitutional Court rejected this amendment as unconstitutional (Balkan Insight, 2020b). These measures have also occurred in Western Europe although on a smaller scale; for example Alternative for Germany proposed withdrawing funding for gender studies in universities (Apperly, 2019).

In Bulgaria, politicians have engaged in hate and homophobic speech, both in parliament and to the media. So far, and despite many lawsuits filed for this reason, no one has been convicted of hate speech. For some years, a relentless campaign has been waged against the Sofia Pride Parade, which celebrates all gender identities. LGBTIQ2+ forums have also been the target of attacks of various types, which have included physical violence in the case of the Rainbow Hub. Activists feel that the situation is worsening (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

In recent years, LGBTIQ2+ people and rights have been persecuted in Poland, which has included inflammatory rhetoric and the ruling party's active participation. This situation has escalated, fueling a climate of widespread violence against them (Feminist Fund).

From the first time the debate on "gender ideology" was raised in Poland, issues related to LGBTIQ2+ rights and sexuality education in schools have been at the center of the controversy. The ruling Law and Justice Party, and even President Andrzej Duda, overtly support anti-LGBTIQ2+ narratives and actions. This position is aggressively promoted on public television, which presents LGBTIQ2+ activists as extremist, aggressive individuals who use violence to gain

⁹ In Hungary, Viktor Orbán passed a law in 2017 with the express intent of closing down the University of Central Europe in Budapest, which was forced to move most of its gender studies to Vienna. The attack was launched directly against its founder, George Soros, whom the ruling party considers its adversary. Recently, a European court has declared this law to be illegal.

privileges (Feminist Fund). These issues were in the spotlight in the fall 2019 parliamentary election¹⁰ and the summer 2020 presidential election¹¹ in Poland. The Polish Catholic Church has long been a fierce supporter of the framework that allows discrimination against LGBTIQ2+ people (Feminist Fund).

In this environment, and with support and legitimacy coming from the fact that the ruling party upholds these positions, physical and symbolic violence, accompanied by police brutality and political persecution of activists, has intensified.

In March 2019, Świdnik became the first city to be declared an “LGBTI-free zone” in Poland, and the municipal council declared its mission of protecting children and families from “homosexual propaganda” and moral degeneracy. By the end of June 2020, approximately 100 Polish municipalities and four provinces had adopted similar resolutions. In addition, Świdnik’s politicians and policies pledged to refrain from supporting any action that could promote “tolerance towards LGBT people,” leading to the withdrawal of funding for organizations that promote equality and non-discrimination (Feminist Fund).

Attacks on sexual and reproductive rights

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right political forces in Eastern Europe are using a strategy of turning frustration and health concerns into a culture war, as well as exploiting public discontent with the handling of the crisis (Kováts and Zacharenko, 2020). Attacks on abortion rights in Slovakia and Poland and campaigns against sexuality education in the latter country are proof of this, as discussed below.

¹⁰ Poland’s parliamentary elections were held on October 13, 2019. During the campaign, ruling party leader Jarosław Kaczyński described LGBTIQ2+ rights as a “threat to Polish identity” and said that [LGBTIQ2 + people] “must get their hands off our children” (Feminist Fund).

¹¹ While campaigning for re-election, Polish President Andrzej Duda declared that “LGBTI are not people; they are an ideology,” an ideology even more destructive “than communism.” For his part, in August 2020, Education Minister Dariusz Piontkowski, of the Law and Justice Party, said that the “LGBTI virus” is even more dangerous for young people than COVID-19” (Feminist Fund).

* Court Challenges to Abortion Rights in Poland and Slovakia

On April 15, 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the Polish Parliament decided to reintroduce two grassroots legislative initiatives: one to limit legal access to abortion, known as Stop Abortion, and another to criminalize sexuality education, known as Stop Pedophilia. Although Poland already has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, the new bill would even outlaw abortion in the case of serious or fatal fetal anomalies, which account for 96 percent of legal abortions in the country. These bills had the backing of the ultra-conservative organizations Ordo Iuris and Pro Praworawo (Feminist Fund).

On October 22, in the middle of the second wave of the pandemic, the Constitutional Court declared that abortion was unconstitutional in the case of fetal abnormality. The opposition strongly questioned this decision by the court, as the ruling party had appointed some members of the court illegally; nonetheless, the ruling came into force in January 2021. According to Kováts and Zacharenko (2020), the government was not simply being opportunistic on this issue, but it was actively pushing its long-term conservative agenda, using the issue of reproductive rights as a weapon against the opposition during a political crisis.

Even amid the pandemic restrictions, massive demonstrations have been staged in defense of reproductive rights. In a country where women's organizations have been fighting for legal abortion for more than two decades, this wave of protests has mobilized the largest number of people. The feminist demonstrations have united the opposition at a time of discontent with the government, as the first signs of economic recession are looming. Some organizations formally joined the protests, such as taxi drivers, agricultural associations and labor unions; others joined in spontaneously, such as the union of urban bus and tram drivers (Grabowska, 2020). In this way, feminism is confirmed as the spearhead of opposition to the regime and the struggle for democracy in the country (Grabowska, 2020).

In addition to opposition within the country, the European Parliament issued a resolution condemning the “setback to women’s SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights)” in Poland. MEPs referred to the ruling as “yet another example of the political takeover of the judiciary and the systemic collapse of the

rule of law in Poland” (European Parliament, 2020). Precisely, in an effort to fan the flames of anti-European sentiment, the nationalist forces responded that actions of this type by international human rights watchdog organizations pose an attack on national sovereignty (Calala Women’s Fund).

Elsewhere, a bill was presented in Slovakia in October 2020, to restrict the right to abortion. The bill failed to pass by one vote. In fact, a relentless offensive has been under way over the past two years there, and 10 different bills have been presented to challenge this right. These legal challenges have proven to be effective tools for polarization and agitation, and conservative and far-right parties have used them in their quest for political power by tapping into a highly emotionally charged issue (Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund, 2020). Not only would the passage of this amendment directly affect women’s right to health and reproductive freedom but also, as the Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund explained, it would strengthen organizations that are promoting attacks on rights.

In Slovakia, protests to uphold the right to abortion have received support from all sectors of civil society as a woman’s freedom of choice is understood as part of a broader concept of social justice (Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund).

* Informal Barriers to Access to Reproductive Rights

In addition to the legal challenges, the “informal” barriers that hinder the exercise of these rights and that already played a role in earlier periods must be considered. The Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund stresses that prior to 2019, major barriers already existed in Slovakia to deny access to sexual and reproductive rights, and considers that cultural issues were to blame for this situation. The women who were polled reported attempts at emotional manipulation when they expressed their intention to terminate a pregnancy voluntarily, a procedure that is still perceived as a sin or moral failure in Slovak society and is taboo in rural areas. These social pressures are intensifying due to the growing influence of the anti-gender movement which upholds and promotes cultural barriers that prevent access to sexual and reproductive rights (Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund, 2020).

Other non-legal barriers include the actions of fundamentalists who pressure or intimidate professionals and medical institutions, which are worsened by anti-gender attacks. Fundamentalist groups seek to infiltrate or influence

hospital ethics committees and have managed to increase the rate of conscientious objections across Europe, especially in places where these attacks against women's rights are most virulent. Women's experiences reflect the real consequences of facing medical professionals who invoke conscientious objection clauses in places like Poland and Slovenia. In the latter country, they also report that objecting physicians often refuse to tell them where abortions can be performed even though they are legally bound to do so (Slovak-Czech Women's Fund, 2020; Feminist Fund, 2020).

Even in Western European countries, where this right is widely recognized, challenges are constantly occurring. For example, the subject continues to be widely debated in France, both in the medical field and the public sphere, with considerable media coverage (Mediterranean Women's Fund).

The debates in that country reemerged in October 2020, when a proposal was made to extend the legal timeframe for an abortion from 12 to 14 weeks. According to a parliamentary report, only 2.9 percent of general practitioners and gynecologists, and 3.5 percent of midwives, perform the procedure (Mediterranean Women's Fund).

In Spain, informal barriers have been in place for years, as fundamentalist organizations harshly criticize clinics that perform abortions. Legal organizations harass them with lawsuits, accusing them of all kinds of crimes, such as misleading advertising, tax fraud, information breaches, and even environmental crimes (Harth and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, 2016). These organizations also operate near abortion clinics to harass women going in to have the procedure.

* The Battle Against Sexuality Education in Schools

Sexuality education in schools has been at the heart of heated controversy. Misinformation campaigns and fake news have been used to oppose it. Not only do these campaigns promote an anti-gender agenda, but they also encourage attacks on activists and NGOs.

In Bulgaria, the draft version of the National Strategy for the Rights of the Child was presented in 2019, sparking bitter debate and a wave of protests. This strategy was intended to align Bulgaria's legislation with the Council of Europe's recommendations on child protection. Groups of parents launched an attack that

was taken over by far-right organizations and members of evangelical churches. For its part, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued an official statement declaring that parents have the right to spank their children as a form of discipline (Bulgarian Fund for Women). Hoaxes circulated widely stating that under this law, girls and boys could be taken away from their families for trivial reasons, such as the refusal to buy them a toy or ice cream, and that they would be “given or sold to Norwegian homosexual couples” for adoption (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

Subsequent attacks not only focused on issues related to the rights of children but, piggybacking on the moral panic the campaign aroused, they also targeted the entire child protection system, the activities of NGOs that work with children and, of course, sexuality education in schools. Once again, this issue served to attack NGOs, which were portrayed as enemies of the nation, destroyers of the Bulgarian family, lobbyists for gender policies, and allies of foreign interests represented by Soros. Ultimately, the Bulgarian Government did not defend the proposal or explain its content, and withdrew it after about 1,000 people demonstrated outside its headquarters (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

In the case of Poland, the attacks on sexuality education appeared in a private bill known as “Stop Pedophilia,” which was reactivated during the pandemic state of emergency. The bill sought to equate sexuality education with pedophilia and amend the Criminal Code to criminalize “any person who promotes or praises sexual relations or other sexual activity involving minors.” The bill would ban affective - sexuality education in schools and education centers, under the threat of a penalty of three months to five years in prison. If this bill were passed, it could be enforced against individuals, including teachers or medical personnel, and organizations that provide sexuality education or information on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The bill was put on hold, which means it could be submitted again later (Feminist Fund; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In Belarus, Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusievich was behind an open letter sent to President Alexander Lukashenko in January 2020, calling for a “law to prohibit public propaganda on homosexuality and other sexual perversions directed at minors.” The organization responsible for collecting the signatures (55,000 were collected) was a fundamentalist NGO called “Open Hearts” (Feminist Fund).

In Spain, sexuality education has been on and off the official curriculum corresponding to the different reforms promoted by subsequent governments. In general, it has been inadequate since no proposal has recommended that it be taught as a separate subject, and the handling of the subject has been left largely up to the centers and regions responsible for educational matters (El Diario, 2019).

Recently, a major campaign against sexuality education was unleashed through a proposal to implement a so-called “parental PIN.” This initiative illustrates how organizations can mobilize in the streets, implementing “activist” - type strategies and demanding measures that far-right parties then execute. As they are not publically elected, these organizations can be much more radical in their language and proposals than the political parties. Through actions of this type, they have managed to impose their agenda on the parties and attract media coverage (Calala Women’s Fund).

In the 2019 election campaign, the far-right party Vox proposed a measure that would require parents to expressly authorize all supplemental activities organized during school hours. This would allow them to keep their children from attending sexuality education or gender equality workshops, etc. The Family Forum, an ultra-conservative civil group that was unhappy with school activities on affective-sexual education and sexual diversity taught by LGBTIQ2+ organizations, was behind this proposal. Vox embraced the proposal and warned conservative local governments to adopt it in order to get its endorsement. This is how the proposal was approved in the Murcia region.

This sparked heated public debate in Spain even though, in practice, its implementation was almost impossible (El País, 2019). The Education Minister turned to the courts to challenge this requirement, but the case was not admitted.

Demonstrations to protest the measure were held in Murcia in February 2020, and in Madrid in January and March 2020. Some 2,000 people attended. Demonstrations were also held in the two cities to support the measure, denouncing what the organizers dubbed “classroom indoctrination.”

The organization Hazte Oír has been very active in this ideological battle. One of its strategies consisted of sending a kit labeled “My children, my decision” to more than 20,000 schools. The kits warned families about “gender indoctrination,” which would allegedly instruct students on “lesbian behaviors,”

abortion and what to do on Gay Pride Day (El País, 2019). The organization also launched a website (mishijosmidecision.org) encouraging people to denounce this type of school activity.

Legal Protection for Sexual Equality and Diversity

* Fighting the Istanbul Convention

The Istanbul Convention¹² is the most comprehensive international treaty on combating violence against women. It was adopted by the Council of Europe in 2014, and 34 countries have signed and ratified it. During its first years, six EU countries signed it (Bulgarian, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia) but their national legislatures have not yet ratified it. As of December 2020, the following 11 member states of the Council of Europe have not yet ratified the Convention: Armenia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Slovakia Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, legislative ratification does not entail the implementation of all its recommendations. However, it does provide activists with legal grounds for demanding progress on the matter.

In some Eastern European countries, the debate on “gender ideology” began shortly after the signing of the Istanbul Convention in 2014. Discussions have resumed on several occasions and the issue was raised once again during the pandemic. The European Parliament has been pressuring the EU member countries that have not yet approved it to do so. In response, far-right parties (in addition to other groups, such as religious fundamentalists) have used the Convention as an opportunity to coordinate and mobilize anti-gender actions, to spread misinformation and hoaxes, and to oppose feminist advances.

Bulgaria declared it unconstitutional in 2018. In 2020, Slovakia’s parliament voted on and rejected the Convention in February, and Hungary did the

¹² The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence entered into force in August 2014 and was signed by the EU in June 2017. It recognizes violence against women as a violation of rights human rights and proposes measures aimed at prevention, the protection of victims and the prosecution of perpetrators (Council of Europe, 2020).

same in May. Under pressure from the right, the Czech Government removed the vote on ratification from the summer's legislative agenda; it had been expected that Convention would have been ratified (IPS, 2020). The rationale was that the Convention represented foreign ideologies to attack local "family values and traditional roles." The Convention sparked rhetoric on sovereignty which has fueled antagonism within the EU.

In several countries, the Convention was declared incompatible with national laws, including the constitution, because the definition of gender is a "social construct." In Hungary, it was rejected for "facilitating illegal immigration" by encouraging the acceptance of asylum requests stemming from persecution based on gender or sexual orientation (Kafka Desk, 2020).

In that country, it was also argued that additional protection measures for women were not necessary.¹³ To prevent the Convention's ratification in Hungary, and to reverse it in Spain, the far right argued that equality between men and women is already enshrined in the constitution and the laws.

The Slovak Parliament rejected the Convention under the premise that it represents "left-wing ideology" that is contrary to societal norms (Kafka Desk, 2019). The country's far-right groups publicly spread the position that the Convention would pose a threat to the traditional family structure (Slovak-Czech Women's Fund).

Likewise, rumors were spread to disparage the Convention's content and its consequences. In Slovakia, it was branded unconstitutional because it allegedly encourages same-sex marriage, even though it does not contain any reference to this issue. In 2014, the Slovak Parliament amended its Constitution to define marriage as the union between a man and a woman. In Bulgaria, it was alleged that the Convention introduced the notion of a "third sex," which contradicted the national Constitution where only two biological sexes (male and female) are defined.

The campaign also targeted same-sex marriage. As the Bulgarian Fund for Women noted, same-sex marriage has been one of the most controversial topics

¹³ According to the Convention, countries should have one shelter spot for every 10,000 inhabitants, to protect victims of domestic violence, a basic requirement in the fight against gender violence. However, Hungary has only created 11 percent of that recommended capacity (European Data Journalism, 2018).

in recent decades and nationalists and populists constantly refer to it as a way to engage hardline conservative voters, especially before and during elections.

US-based religious and far-right groups, such as the World Congress of Families and the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), have been involved in all campaigns in the region, and so have conservative pro-Russian political and religious organizations, as well as neo-Nazi groups, among others (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

The case of Bulgaria illustrates how these attacks on gender, launched at the institutional level and driven by religious fundamentalists, eventually create the right climate for attacks that often target NGOs and their workers. Thus, the debate served as an excuse to oppose progressive NGOs that defend democracy and human rights - the main defenders of the Convention - whose representatives were the victims of personal attacks and smear campaigns in the media and on social media. Nationalist media outlet Alfa Attaka tried to break into the offices of the Bulgarian Fund for Women, the Gender Project for Bulgaria, and the Bulgarian Center for Gender Research. In addition, many women's organizations that run shelters for victims of domestic violence had their funding requests rejected and they were even evicted from properties owned by the municipality (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

Although Poland ratified the Convention in July 2020, the ruling Law and Justice Party said that it would withdraw from the Convention. In addition, it has launched diplomatic actions in neighboring countries to promote its Family Rights Convention (at the behest of ultra-conservative groups) as a regional challenge to the Istanbul Convention and the EU's attempts to promote rights for women and the LGBTIQ2+ community (Balkan Insight, 2020a).

Serbia ratified the Convention, however, this country exemplifies how anti-gender ideology is becoming part, even if surreptitiously, of the political and legal system. Discussions on these issues take place behind closed doors. Laws are not being changed as Serbia wants to join the European Union, therefore (unlike Hungary and Poland) it cannot openly enact anti-gender policies. In this context, growing conservatism encouraged by the regional situation, has materialized as a sort of abandonment, inaction to safeguard women's human rights. The feminist organizations that fight sexist violence in the country point to the

administration's reluctance to take measures to stop violence or to provide real support for women who experience violence. The supporting infrastructure is almost non-existent (budget cuts, lack of police training, etc.) and the laws continue to roll back what little exists (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

* **Attacks on the Rights of LGBTIQ2+ People**

The prevailing climate in Eastern Europe has brought LGBTIQ2+ people and their rights under siege. Widespread homophobia in public rhetoric and legislative changes in Poland confirm that conservative ideologies are forging ahead in the country. On June 10, 2020, President Duda signed a "Family Letter" outlining electoral proposals that began to materialize after the first round of elections, when the president proposed a constitutional amendment to ban adoption by same-sex couples. In December 2019, Poland's Supreme Court had already ruled that it will not legally recognize the birth certificate of a foreign boy or girl for same-sex parents.

Hungary has followed in Poland's footsteps and passed a constitutional amendment presented by Viktor Orbán's ultra-conservative government, which prevents same-sex couples from adopting. It also defined that a person's sex is what was recorded at birth, to prevent trans people from being recognized (La Vanguardia, 2020b).

* **Questioning Established Laws or Their Misrepresentation**

Sometimes attacks on gender also question or attempt to reverse established laws, as has been seen in Spain. In 2004, the Gender Violence Law was passed by agreement between the government and opposition parties, with consensus from all the parties involved and no challenges. In fact, the institutions appeared to be united in the fight against sex-based violence, at least on the surface. But members of the far-right Vox Party were elected to a regional legislature in 2018, and the national legislature in 2019. Since then, one of the party's main objectives has been to attack said law.

As the only party that criticizes this law, it can challenge the entire political spectrum in its role as a champion of "political incorrectness." Its strategy, therefore, is to rock the boat and build its own support base, which is extremely invested in these issues. Precisely, the most serious threat posed by these far-right

parties is the normalization of extremist rhetoric, which bulldozes common sense and questions women's rights that were hard-won over years of struggle (Calala Women's Fund).

Vox has called for repealing the law, which it considers discriminatory against men. Using the same logic that it employed to challenge the Istanbul Convention, Vox has said that violence "has no gender" and stated that this law, like feminism itself, seeks to "promote and finance the war of the sexes" (Vox, 2018). This is another example of the rhetoric spread by these political groups from one country to another. It also spreads fake news or rumors; for example, it has claimed that a higher percentage of reports of gender-based violence is false and encouraged by the law; whereas in actuality the percentage of false reports is not higher than false reporting of other crimes.¹⁴

Slovakia exemplifies a different strategy which seeks to twist the intent of existing laws. In October 2020, an amendment was proposed that would allow fundamentalist organizations to qualify for state grants by taking advantage of the law to promote gender equality (Slovak-Czech Women's Fund).

The Slovak Government is committed to "supporting families," to shore up the birthrate. The conservative faction of its coalition defines the family in the traditional patriarchal sense and makes no attempt to hide its anti-gender biases (Slovak-Czech Women's Fund). The passage of this amendment would allow the channeling of funds to promote equality between men and women to be channeled to churches and religious organizations. That is, these funds will be used for purposes contrary to equality, such as the promotion of the traditional family and therefore, the continuation of women's subordinate role in the family. This is a symbolic and practical measure meant to erase the gender equality agenda from national policies by replacing the concept of gender with concepts such

¹⁴ Vox has built on efforts by men's organizations who allege that false reports are being made. Many members of these organizations are separated men who are very active in opposing feminism and who claim to be the victims of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). This syndrome, with its scientific sounding name, has been cited in divorce proceedings and child custody disputes, to accuse mothers of having manipulated the child to reject the other parent. According to the World Psychiatric Association, and other organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), it is not recognized as a medical or psychiatric syndrome.

as “equality between women and men” or “equal opportunities” (Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund). This amendment would advance conservative ideologies and financially empower anti-gender and anti-choice religious groups and organizations while restricting resources for organizations that support gender equality. Furthermore, in practice this amendment would increase the power of the Catholic Church and its access to national budget funds.

Impediments to Exercising the Right to Expression, Protest, Assembly and Other Fundamental Rights, such as Access to Effective Justice

* Attacks on Freedom of Expression

Attacks might be perpetrated through cyberspace or traditional media outlets. These attacks seek to silence ideas that do not align with ultra-conservative ideals, and defending oneself from these attacks is meant to be costly. Some studies on freedom of the press in the region note that many women journalists are harassed, particularly online, which discourages them from participating in public affairs (Unesco, 2018).

Occasionally, very aggressive attacks are mounted over the publication of a book, the content of a few talks, or the everyday work of human rights NGOs. In Georgia, for example, the Education and Labor Association posted a sexuality education video on Facebook, providing information on the challenges of puberty. According to the Association, the video was made in accordance with the principles of UNESCO’s International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. As a result, one of the Association’s founders received threatening calls and disparaging notes, and said she was afraid to leave the house due to the constant threats of death and rape (Women’s Fund in Georgia, 2020).

According to the Georgia Women’s Fund, the main consequence of these forms of violence is that activism is perceived as a “dangerous” activity, which could make other NGOs or activists afraid to address these issues. Several organizations that keep quiet about their work on sexuality education, said they saw these aggressions as a warning. However, the activist who was threatened decided to participate in a campaign to tell her story to the media.

In the most serious cases, the government is the one threatening the right to freedom of expression. The incident in Bulgaria regarding a sexuality education book for girls, *Vagina Matters*, is a case in point. The far-right VMRO (Revolutionary Internal Organization of Macedonia) Party, which is a member of the coalition that supports the ruling United Patriots Party, launched the attacks. In a move that actually marked the beginning of its political campaign for the next election, VMRO warned that it would demand a criminal investigation into the book, and threatened to send its authors to prison. Defense Minister Krasimir Karakachanov participated in this attack (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

This is yet another example of how civil society organizations in that country have seen their influence significantly curtailed, and how extreme polarization has seriously hindered much needed debate on gender issues. There is a very clear line that divides the progressive and liberal minority from the conservative social majority. In this context, it is not surprising that the far-right rhetoric of Russia and Hungary is having an impact on Bulgaria. In fact, the United Patriots Party has presented a bill to ban NGOs from receiving foreign funding. In general, a clear trend toward desecularization is under way in Bulgaria, and both the European Commission and the European Council have warned that the country might follow the example of Poland, Hungary and other countries where the far right has taken power and democracy is in jeopardy (Bulgarian Fund for Women).

These attacks are occurring on a large scale in Eastern Europe, but this is not the only place where they are happening. France has become the stage of heated debates that have escalated in social networks and the media, turning the spotlight on certain activists regarded as “radicals” (Mediterranean Women’s Fund).

Alice Coffin, a lesbian, feminist journalist and activist, has been a member of the Paris City Council since 2020. In September 2020, she published a book entitled *Le génie lesbien* (The Lesbian Genius), which various media sources labeled as misandrist. Her radical position, which calls for not reading, seeing or listening to works by male authors, has sparked intense controversy. The publication received violent backlash from public figures and the media, and relentless harassment. The Catholic Institute of Paris, where she had taught since 2012, informed her that her contract would not be renewed. She was also placed

under police protection after becoming the target of cyberbullying and death and rape threats (Mediterranean Women’s Fund).

Cases of cyberbullying by Muslim fundamentalists have also been reported in France. In January 2020, a 16-year-old lesbian named Mila criticized Islam on her Instagram. She said that she hates all religions, but particularly Islam, prompting a rabid wave of misogynistic and anti-lesbian harassment, and death threats, both online and offline. For her safety, she stopped going to school and stayed at home. As time went on, this case gained national attention and prompted numerous political and media reactions, as this issue touches on many ongoing debates in French society on secularism (which has been a constitutional principle since 1905), blasphemy, and what may or may not be said about religions. The case gained momentum in November 2020, when the teenager posted a new video that sparked death threats once again (Mediterranean Women’s Fund).

In Spain, the crime of “offending religious sensibilities” is being used to restrict freedom of expression and the right to protest. The fundamentalist organization Spanish Association of Christian Lawyers is behind a strategy to harass activists through the courts. This organization claims to be dedicated to “the promotion of the Culture of Life, the defense of the family and religious freedom.” Its strategy consists of indiscriminately bringing lawsuits against anyone they consider to be against the Catholic religion (Calala Women’s Fund).

Christian Lawyers might have more than 50 ongoing cases against artists, journalists, feminists, LGBTIQ2+ activists, and others. It also uses legal challenges to prevent public institutions, such as city councils, from displaying the rainbow flag. It has also defended anti-gender activists who have been found guilty of harassing women outside abortion clinics. It has sued the Spanish Government over its handling of the pandemic, which confirms that in addition to gender issues, this group is actively involved in institutional politics (Calala Women’s Fund). In November 2020, an activist was fined for participating in the 2013 “procession of the Insubordinate Pussy,” in which women paraded a giant model of a vagina, simulating a religious procession, to protest the Catholic Church’s attacks on sexual and reproductive rights.

As one of the lawyers from this religious organization explained, their work seeks to dissuade: “People should know that if they are going to desecrate a

cathedral, or do business with abortions, they will have to deal with us. Thus, at least they will know that they will pay a price” (El Confidencial, 2019). For feminists and LGBTIQ2+ activists, legal cases of this sort can entail years before the courts, financial expenses, and the investment of considerable effort in organizing actions and demonstrations to raise support, funds, and so on. Anti-gender movements use court cases as punishment and they exploit the right of access to the courts to publicize themselves and destroy or restrict rights and freedoms that are legally recognized. They often allege crimes against religious rights to violate feminist activists’ right to freedom of expression (Calala Women’s Fund) (Ctxt, December 2020a).

In its latest attack, the group brought charges against LGBTIQ2+ activists who were outside the Cathedral of Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) on April 2, 2019, peacefully protesting against the bishop who promotes “therapies” aimed at “curing” homosexuality. The activists were accused of hate crimes and crimes against religious freedom over this incident, and the group called for sentences of up to four years in prison and a fine of 10,000 euros (Calala Women’s Fund).

* Freedom To Protest

Several European governments have used force, brought charges under different laws, and even imposed mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent or hinder feminist and LGBTIQ2+ protests.

For example, in addition to discriminatory narratives against LGBTIQ2+ people, the number of attacks in Poland has escalated to prevent the exercise of fundamental rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, protest and others, through repression or tolerance of physical violence by the far right. A 2020 European Parliament resolution condemned “excessive and disproportionate use of force and violence against protesters by law enforcement forces,” as well as far-right nationalist groups. As previously mentioned, social movements, and particularly feminist organizations, are focusing opposition to nationalist and authoritarian regimes in countries such as Hungary or Poland, both at the polls and on the streets. As the target of far-right groups, the feminist movement is seen as a main forum for joint political action against them, which has empowered the

feminist movement, even as attacks against it have doubled (Feminist Fund and Calala Women's Fund).

Queer activists, such as Margot Szutowicz, a member of the Stop Bullshit (Stop Bzdurom) collective, have been arrested. Szutowicz was arrested in August 2020 and charged with involvement in actions taken against a van covered in homophobic slurs, which was the property of the extremist right-to-life Pro Foundation. The next day 48 people were arrested for defending the detained activist,¹⁵ and were accused of hanging LGBTIQ2+ flags on statues in Warsaw and damaging a car. An investigation by the human rights ombudsman found that some of the people arrested were not even protesters, but merely bystanders, and that the police had also insulted and humiliated the LGBTIQ2+ detainees.

Moreover, it must be mentioned that in some parts of the region, counter-demonstrations by far-right groups are increasingly interfering with the right to protest. In both 2019 and 2020, far-right groups reacted violently to LGBTIQ2+ demonstrations and abortion-rights rallies held in Poland. For example, on July 20, 2019 approximately 1,000 participants in the first march for LGBTIQ2+ equality, had to cross the city of Białystok while police protected them from thousands of far-right nationalist football fans. The far-right mob threw stun grenades, rocks, bricks, and glass bottles at demonstrators. According to the police, more than 4,000 counter-protesters were involved in acts of violence. The marchers were also verbally assailed with homophobic and nationalist slogans ("God, honor and country," "Białystok free of perverts," and "Fuck off, fags!"). For some activists, this was a turning point in the country's recent history, as LGBTIQ2+ people now feel that their physical safety is threatened. Since then, other cases of far-right counter-protests have been held, such as the one in Lublin on September 28, 2019 (Feminist Fund).

¹⁵ In response, in August 2020 the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and its SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) Unit, called for Margot Petkiewicz's immediate release. The European Commission, including President Ursula von der Leyen, joined the pressure on Poland to free her (Feminist Fund).

* Violation of the Right to Effective Defense

In Serbia, members of the ruling party were involved in a harassment case in which the right to effective defense and the right to a fair trial with due process were not upheld.

Marija Lukić worked as a secretary for Milutin Jeličić Jutka, the mayor of the small town of Brus. She, as well as many of her colleagues, experienced sexual harassment while working for the mayor between 2018 and 2020, and she sued him. Although compelling evidence was presented against Jutka, the wait for a sentence was long. The trial lasted two years, with unjustified delays, and the mayor was sentenced to only three months in prison (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

This case, known as the "Serbian #Metoo," was significant because of the narrative that was built around it. It sent the message that those in power enjoy impunity, endeavoring to discourage women from making complaints by subjecting the victim to a long and painful proceeding in which her reputation was put on trial. According to Reconstruction Women's Fund, the derisory sentence that was handed down after an odyssey of more than two years, sent the following messages: complaints against those who commit sexual and gender-based violence are worthless; the system minimizes and permits crimes committed by those who hold power; women who dare to speak up will face scrutiny from the government-controlled media (almost all mainstream media); and those who dare to support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence will lose their jobs and receive threats. Finally, it confirmed that after making a few changes, the predator will keep his political position, which is exactly what happened to Jutka: after changing parties he retained his political power as a member of the local city council (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

The bottom line is that women and LGBTIQ2+ people are constantly denigrated in the public arena. In general, the mainstream media's reporting of sensitive issues such as femicide remains sensational and discriminatory, and downplays the responsibility of perpetrators (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

Conservative Feminism and Progressivism¹⁶

* Anti-trans Feminism

In recent years, a debate has surged in European feminist circles that oppose granting rights to trans and non-binary people. This debate dates back to at least the 1970s, but the arguments and language used today replicate those of the international far right and Christian fundamentalists that claim to fight against “gender ideology.” Although the debate began under the guise of a “theoretical discussion,” conservative feminists oppose the passage of laws recognizing the self-defined identity of trans people.

In the United Kingdom for example, the public’s attention was drawn to this issue in 2018, when the government launched a consultation to reform the current law and facilitate the recognition of gender identity for trans people, normalizing their identity and striking down barriers against them. Over the past three years, an anti-trans branch of feminists has voiced strong opposition which is likely to make the government ditch the reform (The Times, 2020).

Similarly to the United Kingdom, the same situation arose in Spain in late 2019, and is currently affecting the Gender Identity bill, which is expected to be introduced in 2021. The coalition government seems divided between the pro-law position expressed by United We Can, and the anti-trans rights feminist stance of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE). In June 2020, an internal document on the party’s position, which denies gender self-determination and trans people’s identity as women, was leaked (PSOE, 2020 in López, 2020). “If sex is denied, the inequality that is measured and built [on] the basis [of] this biological fact is denied,” the paper states, echoing a well-known argument by religious fundamentalists. The president of the anti-gender organization Hazte Oír said on Twitter that this argument supports their campaign, which features a bus displaying a transphobic message” (Arsuaga, 2020).

In addition to trying to curb rights, the language used in this debate which replicates the tone and argumentative style of “moral crisis” used by far-right groups around the world, is causing all kinds of attacks on trans and non-binary

¹⁶ Mediterranean Women’s Fund does not fully agree with the analysis in this chapter

people as well as supporters of their rights, in feminist networks and assemblies. For example, the sponsors of the law are referred to as “queer or LGBTI lobbies,” and the far right is suggesting that “queer theory” is a conspiracy and a threat, as it did with “gender ideology.” Following the example of Poland’s far right, the debate is steeped in fake news, fabrications, exaggerations, and claims linking trans-gender identities to pedophilia (La Vanguardia, 2020a). There is also the argument that other women would not be safe if trans women were to gain access to women’s prisons or public restrooms. Fundamentalist organizations such as Christian Lawyers (n.d.), whose official stance embraces all the arguments of reactionary feminism, echo this discourse. The way in which this debate is being conducted in social media and other forums, resembles a public lynching, which is affecting the feminist public arena (Calala Women’s Fund, 2020).

In Serbia it has been reported that these debates on trans rights are already taking place within the feminist movement, among left-leaning organizations, and even in universities.¹⁷ The feminist movement is divided on the trans rights issue, although the mainstream Serbian media is not covering it, nor is the general public debating it, as is the case in Spain and England. Even though the law is progressive in granting the right to identity cards and access to health-care, it is only a matter of time before these newly formed alliances between a faction of feminism and conservative forces undermine trans rights (Reconstruction Women’s Fund, 2020).

This debate has had a negative impact on trans women and their alliances, who report that they are under pressure, feeling distressed and increasingly isolated and furthermore contending with threats on and off the internet (Reconstruction Women’s Fund).

¹⁷ See, for example, the conference “Feminism and the Left,” held in November 2019 at the University of Belgrade, where members of the left-wing group Marx 21 tried to characterize trans women as perpetrators of violence. The debate led to an argument aimed at denying that trans women are women. Surprisingly, many feminists supported this position (Reconstruction Women’s Fund).

* Opposition to Sex Work

A similar trend has emerged among feminists over the issue of sex work. Although this issue has divided feminists for decades, today, when public debate is tainted by violence, many feminists have become reluctant to talk about the subject publicly for fear of repercussions, being shunned or even fired from their jobs. Sex workers are censored in public discussions and places, and they feel excluded from some aspects of the feminist movement (Calala Women's Fund).

In September 2019, under pressure from sex work abolitionists, the University of A Coruña cancelled a conference on sex work. An activist sex worker, members of NGOs, trade unions and university professors were scheduled to participate in the sessions. The most outspoken criticisms came from members of the ruling coalition (Mama Cash).

In Spain, general attitudes strongly oppose sex work. In 2018, the first official sex workers union (OTRAS) was declared illegal and the Spanish Government is currently refusing to legally register any organization for sex workers that proposes to fight for their rights. Furthermore, sex workers who participated in the preparatory meetings for International Women's Day in 2019 and 2020, said that they were not allowed to speak in the debates or raise their demands (Mama Cash and Calala Women's Fund).

Once again, social networks and the media have become an arena for verbal violence against other feminists and sex workers. Activists have endured slights and insults on social media, and in person during feminist events. This was the case in Seville in 2018, during the demonstration to mark the Day Against Gender-based Violence, where some protesters insulted and harassed sex workers. Reactionary cancellation from participation in debates hinders a nuanced discussion of a complex subject. For example, it prevents discussing how to fight human trafficking for forced sex work without criminalizing the victims, at a time when the movement could be marshalling its forces on this urgent issue (Calala Women's Fund).

At the institutional level, all left-wing parties in Spain have declared themselves sex-work abolitionists. United We Can, which currently heads the Ministry of Equality, is the only exception. At the end of 2020, the new Law on Sexual Freedom, which was supposed to address the issue of gender-based violence,

included an article that made renting property for sex work a criminal offense. Pro-rights activists have warned that this law might further criminalize sex work, which, while not illegal in Spain, is persecuted under municipal regulations and the Citizen Security Law that imposes fines for engaging in sex work in public (Calala Women's Fund).

Race and Gender (Racialization of Sexual Politics)

A characteristic of the new far right is that it often links gender issues to those of race and migration, two key components of labor market segmentation. This puts the spotlight on racialized feminist activists and those fighting for migrant rights.

In Western Europe, many attacks employ secular arguments that even echo feminist-femonationalist rhetoric (Farris, 2017), as seen in France. In the opinion of the Mediterranean Women's Fund, debate over "secularism" has been used to attack Muslim communities, particularly women, in a country where racism is on the rise. Attention has specifically focused on the hijab and how it "oppresses Muslim women" (Mediterranean Women's Fund). The far right uses the rhetoric of defending women's rights to attack Islam and Muslims. Today, large swathes of society, including President Emmanuel Macron, support these prohibitions which have been termed "LePenization" and reflect the growing strength of far-right values, both in the political classes and society (Ramírez, 2020).

Two controversies have emerged over this issue recently. On September 11, 2020, a young student named Imane, who wears a hijab, was interviewed on television about her Instagram account in which she talks about cooking. A journalist from one of the most important newspapers in France released a video of the interview, entitled "September 11," as well as other messages, arguing that the television program promotes the Islamic veil, and associating the student with terrorist attacks. The journalist was threatened on social media, which caused a wave of solidarity, with public figures voicing support for her. Neither the attacks on the journalist nor the harassment experienced by Imane - which led her to close her social media accounts - were addressed (Mediterranean Women's Fund).

A week later, Maryam Pougetoux, who is the vice president of the second largest student union and who has been criticized in recent years for wearing a

veil, addressed the National Assembly. Four members of Parliament, including a representative of the ruling party, walked out and accused Pougetoux of attacking secularism. The ensuing debate centered on the hijab and Islam, and how women who wear the hijab are “oppressed,” although it should have been about whether visitors to the National Assembly should be allowed to wear religious symbols (Mediterranean Women’s Fund).

* Population Replacement Narratives

Describing racialized people as dangerous for the reproduction of the local white national population, which some authors term “ethnosexism,” is among the strategies to marginalize them (Dietze and Roth, 2020). In these narratives, reproductive rights are associated with a low birth rate that would “endanger the nation.”

In Serbia, for example, media reports blaming women for this are increasingly commonplace. These “population substitution” narratives, such as the Great Replacement in France, suggest that people from Europe and the United States will become extinct because migrants from cultures that are different and “inferior to Western” culture are gradually replacing them (Plenel, 2015). For example, one of the major national dailies, *Politika*, published an article blaming women for negative population growth, alleging that they prefer to advance in their academic or professional careers or that they simply do not want to have children.

In this context, the leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church have been given leeway in the media to say things like “a woman’s duty is to give birth to little Serbs,” a statement that exemplifies sexism, nationalism, and xenophobia. Not long ago the government aired a campaign of highly offensive rhyming slogans designed to “encourage” women to give birth (and judging them if they failed to do so). These narratives are being touted, while policies on equality are being rolled back (Reconstruction Women’s Fund).

The far right often brings in sexism and racism as it points to Europe’s dwindling birth rates. In Spain, for example, Vox often refers to the low birth rate among Spanish women as the “demographic winter” (Vox, 2020), which it proposes to solve through measures such as making abortion more difficult. Vox talks about “giving women more options so that they do not have to abort” and changing the voluntary termination of pregnancy so that it is no longer free (Vox, 2020b).

This party is a perfect example of the racialization strategies of sexual politics, which is becoming increasingly common among the European far right. During a 2019 electoral debate, Vox Party leader Santiago Abascal said that “foreigners” are to blame for 70 percent of serial rapes in Spain. In this context, sexism is presented as a problem that pertains only to racialized migrant communities or those from non-European cultures. “We strongly reject the continued abuses and humiliating treatment of women in many non-Western countries where sex trafficking, forced marriage and ablation are systematic practices, which threaten the dignity and privacy of women,” Abascal said (Vox, 2019b). Vox has also called on the parties to “commit to fighting illegal immigration, which encourages human trafficking, sexual exploitation and increases crime in neighborhoods where, more and more, women do not feel safe” (Alabao, 2021). This conceptual framing allows them to affirm that gender equality is part of European culture, and even an example of cultural superiority, which would therefore be difficult or impossible to achieve in non-European cultures.

In Germany, as anti-immigrant positions have gained public support, attacks on migrants or activists who fight for their rights have also increased (flia die frauenstiftung, 2020). Far-right parties, primarily Alternative for Germany (AfD) which was founded in 2013 and is now the main opposition party, are fueling anti-immigration sentiments. AfD co-chair Alexander Gauland has spoken of fighting the “invasion of foreigners” and used Nazi rhetoric to argue that immigration and Islam pose a threat to German society. This has created a climate that has already caused several violent attacks. For example, in February 2020, a right-wing extremist in Hanau attacked two hookah lounges frequented by migrants. This was preceded by several other violent attacks by right-wing extremists, motivated by anti-migrant and racist politics. In October 2019, two people were killed outside a synagogue in Halle by a neo-Nazi extremist who justified this attack on the basis that feminism was leading to fewer births, resulting in mass immigration, and that Jewish people were to blame for this. In addition, in June 2019, a politician who advocated for refugees’ issues, Walter Lübcke, was assassinated by a right-wing extremist with a history of violence against ethnic and racial minorities in Germany (Mama Cash).

In January 2020, the “Orderly Return Law” was passed in Germany. According to human rights organizations, this law will increase the detention and incarceration of migrants by the German state. The law also grants fewer welfare and social benefits to migrants, and marks the beginning of the criminalization of the civil society organizations that help them, including feminist groups (Mama Cash).

The fund *filia die frauenstiftung* points to the attack on the Paula Panke Women’s Center in Berlin’s Pankow district, as an example of how far-right parties have set their sights on the social organizations that oppose them, and how they are using all of their institutional power¹⁸ to discredit these organizations. These institutional attacks can lead to other types of physical attacks.

The local branch of Alternative for Germany (AfD) announced an event to be held on May 1, 2018, a “festival of *volk* [people, nation] and the family,” to subvert a day that is politically significant for the left and advocates of migrant rights (*filia die frauenstiftung*). The Paula Panke Women’s Center and many other democratic organizations decided to respond to this provocation by disrupting the event. In response, the AfD issued a statement denigrating the Paula Panke Women’s Center, calling it “a dirty antifa center of the green left maintained with public funds.”

It also used its status as a party to try to discredit the group in the public eye. AfD called for three in-depth investigations by the city of Berlin’s House of Representatives and the local Pankow district council, to undermine the center’s legitimacy. They attacked the center’s work with refugee women, questioned its status as a not-for-profit organization, and demanded information about all its sources of funding and target groups (*filia die frauenstiftung*).

In the first half of 2020, during a brief period, three nighttime raids were done at the offices of the Paula Panke Women’s Center, causing considerable economic damage and dampening morale.

¹⁸ This attack began a year before the period covered in this research, but we mention it because its consequences are still being felt.

The COVID-19 Crisis

* Restriction of Rights

In March 2020, Europe saw the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented situation required extraordinary measures: curfews and restrictions on mobility and fundamental rights, such as the right to assemble or protest. These restrictions were unprecedented in times of peace in Western European countries. The lockdown decreed to deal with this situation had a negative impact on pre-existing situations of gender-based violence and for the lives of women and LGBTIQ2+ people (Calala Women's Fund).

Like all state of emergency situations, this pandemic gave authoritarian and autocratic regimes a justification to implement coercive measures and increase the concentration of power. Some authoritarian regimes, such as that of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, took advantage of the state of emergency to increase their power and govern by decree. In Hungary, the regime has long held this power through its control over the country's main institutions, including the judiciary (Hungarian Spectrum, 2020).

Political repression has increased during the pandemic in places where conflicts are already ongoing and civil society is particularly polarized, which coincides with the European countries where gender-based attacks are most widespread. Military and police forces took control of the streets and used force and sanctions during lockdowns. Measures to confront the pandemic are being described in military language, such as the "war on the virus," revealing the masculinization and militarization of society that lies at the center of anti-gender narratives (Reconstruction Women's Fund and Calala Women's Fund).

As has been seen, gender-based attacks did not stop during the pandemic, and rather intensified in several Eastern European countries. The revival of debates over subjects such as abortion, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, sexuality education, and LGBTIQ2+ rights, has proven a useful strategy to deflect discontent over the lockdowns and consequences of the ensuing economic crisis. In both Hungary and Poland - the most notorious authoritarian countries on the continent - the far-right governments have exacerbated polarization, drawing a dividing line between "the government and the opposition, "the majority and any

minority” and “common sense” and “liberals out of touch with reality”, which they achieved mainly by pushing gender-related issues (Kováts and Zacharenko, 2020).

In addition to the loss of rights and barriers to progress, this context has emboldened anti-gender rhetoric and resulted in an increase in attacks on LGBTIQ2+ people and violence against women, and attacks and harassment of activists. This situation also contributed to the institutional barriers and persecution faced by Eastern European NGOs, many of which are associated with the “Western enemy” (Feminist Fund).

Meanwhile, in Western Europe, far-right parties and their social following have been actively protesting the lockdowns and restrictions on rights. This has allowed them to oppose the government and appeal to the most extreme deniers and conspiracy theorists, as Vox has done in Spain (Calala Women’s Fund). In Germany, some far-right protests saw turnouts of more than 40,000 people and even attacked the parliament (Europa Press, 2020). In France, the Strike for Everyone anti-rights movement, which was created to oppose equal marriage in 2013 and is still active today, organized a protest in October 2020, during the lockdown when protests and gatherings were forbidden, to oppose a bill on assisted reproduction for lesbian couples and single women (Mediterranean Women’s Fund).

* Reproductive Rights

The pandemic has strained the healthcare system and many of the regular medical needs have gone unmet. Some specialized health services, such as obstetrics, gynecology, hormonal therapies or psychological support for trans people have not been available during the pandemic (Reconstruction Women’s Fund). Activists throughout Europe have warned that even in countries where abortion is legal, women have faced greater barriers to access during lockdown. During the pandemic, many organizations in the field of women’s reproductive rights have had to limit their activities. This occurred even though, as these organizations pointed out, the need to voluntarily terminate pregnancies increased during the lockdown (Calala Women’s Fund) (Public, 2020).

This has worsened the situation for unregistered migrants in countries such as Spain, where they must meet a series of requirements, including proof that they have been in the country for more than 90 days, a requirement that has

become more difficult to fulfill due to mobility restrictions. Police surveillance during the lockdown has further compounded this situation. Many private clinics denied this procedure to migrants because they did not have papers. Some of these pregnancies were the result of sexual violence that many women experience during their migration to Europe (Calala Women's Fund) (El Diario, 2020).

Poland, where abortion is allowed only under limited circumstances, is an example of the difficulties that women face to exercise the right to abortion. During the lockdowns, the organizations that help women get underground abortions were overwhelmed with requests. The Polish activist group Abortion Dream Team reported that the number of unwanted pregnancies increased and so did obstacles to getting an abortion; travelling abroad for an abortion was not allowed, shipments of abortion pills were delayed, overwhelmed medical services had to limit emergency contraception procedures, and underground healthcare facilities were charging higher prices (Feminist Fund).

* Increase in Gender-based Violence

During the lockdowns, an overall increase in violence against women and LGBTIQ2+ people was reported. On the one hand, people were shut in their homes, which increased the time spent together in risk situations. On the other hand, tensions grew because of rising unemployment and economic concerns, a lack of social interaction, and uncertainty about the future (UN, 2020).

Some places experienced problems of access to justice. In Poland, for example, women's organizations had warned that they were prepared to receive more phone calls reporting assaults, however these cases were generally not reported. One reason for this was that the Prosecutor's Office was closed even though, according to the Prosecutor's Office, a guard was on duty 24 hours a day. In addition, as the police force was in charge of implementing the new COVID-19 regulations - enforcing mobility restrictions, quarantines, and the use of masks - less attention was given to possible cases of domestic violence (Feminist Fund).

In Serbia, the Autonomous Center for Women reported a 30 percent increase in calls about domestic violence. However the number of women who reported violence to the police remained the same. According to the Center, the police seldom respond to calls and reports (a problem that predated the

pandemic) and in general, they are very lenient toward the perpetrators. According to reports from grassroots organizations, women in traditionally isolated communities (especially Roma women living with poor housing conditions) were particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of the lockdown, including gender-based violence (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

Discriminatory practices were also seen in the lack of access to medical care, as these communities are far from healthcare centers and public transport was not running. Ambulances did not go to Roma communities during the state of emergency (Reconstruction Women's Fund).

* Gender-based Jobs Without Rights

During the pandemic, women experienced significant setbacks in quality of life and working conditions, especially workers in informal jobs who do not have labor rights, such as sex workers, and those working in sectors where informal employment and limited labor rights are the norm, such as domestic and personal care workers. In the case of Spain, these associations¹⁹ reported that workers have been fired en masse during the lockdowns, and have little access to assistance due to their informal employment situation (Calala Women's Fund). They have also referred to the situation of live-in domestic workers, as many have been forced into lockdown with their employers and reported numerous abuses (BBC News, 2020). Domestic workers have had to create ad hoc support groups to help each other.

Sex workers, who have found it impossible to qualify for assistance throughout the continent, also had to organize ad hoc support groups in Spain (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2020). In some places, the situation is tragic. In Georgia, during a protest over the lack of assistance for sex workers during the pandemic, trans activist Madona Kiparoidze set herself on fire outside Tbilisi City Hall. The woman survived and managed to get media coverage for these workers' demands (Women's Fund in Georgia) (Thompson Reuters, 2020).

¹⁹ According to the European Commission, one in three women over the age of 15 in the European Union has been a victim of physical or sexual violence, more than 50 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment, and one in 20 has been raped (Domestic worker associations in Spain, 2020).



CHAPTER 3

Real Democracies, Feminist Diversity and a World Without Fundamentalism in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean 2019-2020

Overview of the Region

Latin America is a continent of enormous contrasts and, in general, most of its inhabitants are living under worsening conditions of economic, racial and gender inequality, and barriers to accessing rights. Although its nations have followed a diversity of paths historically, in general they are marked by “patriarchalism, latifundia and slavery” established under colonialism, as suggested by Do Nascimento (2020). In turn, this circumstance has reinforced the image of the “white man, the landowner, and racism” as factors that have shaped their societies and politics. Likewise, Latin American democracies (many of which came into existence following complex processes of formal and informal dictatorship in the second half of the 20th century) have been notorious for incubating alliances between the political, economic, religious, and military elites. They have perpetuated impunity and prevented reparations for serious human rights violations; specifically, terrorist practices carried out by the state to eradicate social groups identified as being in the “opposition” - which were politically weak groups that sought to defend the rights of “impoverished” majorities such as Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants (Do Nascimento, 2020: 19). Not only are these democracies corrupt, but whether they can even be considered constitutional in nature is also questionable. They lack legitimacy and have become places where military and business interests have considerable influence on political decisions.

To understand how religious and political fundamentalism has been used to attack women’s rights, gender identity, diverse sexual orientations, and democracy, we will use the analyses by Sexuality Policy Watch, which has identified the existence of “de-democratizing” processes marked by the complex “politicization of religious conservatism” (Brown, 2006, cited in Correa and Parker, 2020: 6) against the backdrop of an unfolding neoliberal economy, which is capable of undermining or operating without democratic institutions, while empowering the individualistic logic of consumption and economic survival.

This framework for reflection requires considering the following particularities of the Latin American context, as suggested by Correa and Parker (2020): the underdevelopment of the welfare state; the deep-seated connection between political and religious power, particularly that of the Catholic Church; the historical authoritarian characteristics of countries that have failed to transform themselves into constitutional political democracies; the presence of military power in the political sphere, the influence of armed conflict, and conflicts over land and natural assets; and the consequences and violence associated with drug trafficking.

This overview, which does not seek to offer a collective snapshot of the current state of the region, in addition to the characteristics mentioned above, must consider the political context of these turbulent times. A marked trend toward authoritarianism in an attempt to destabilize governments and seize power prevails, even though this has not led to military coups such as those that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Right-leaning and far-right groups, and religious fundamentalists, have reacted violently to major incidents of social upheaval and formed wildly diverse alliances in response to the emergence of progressive governments. Not only do these groups advocate minimal involvement by the state (Mantilla, 2008), but they also oppose the significant progress made in terms of multicultural and gender rights, and redistribution of wealth. Recent actions to destabilize democracies in Latin America have featured alliances involving three key players: the “moralistic right, defender of tradition, and property,” “transnational business interests,” and the “far right in favor of racism, machismo and homophobia” (Mantilla, 2019: 34).

The rise of right-leaning and far-right governments in several countries of the region has marked the past two decades. Even in cases where elected governments have voiced progressive views, their conservative positions and policies on women’s rights, as well as possible alliances with conservative neo-Pentecostal groups, are extremely worrisome. In Central America, one example of this complex situation was the military coup against President Zelaya in Honduras in 2009, which ushered in a new political climate in the region through a de facto coup that was not a conventional military coup. Another example was the election of Nayib Bukele as president of El Salvador in 2019, backed by a right-wing offshoot of the Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA (González, 2019),

which favored a populist president who maintains important relationships with evangelical groups close to Donald Trump and advocates of pro-Israel policies in Latin America (Nóchez, n.d.). Elsewhere, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, supported the 2006 passage of the bill to criminalize all forms of therapeutic abortion. Daniel Ortega, leader of the FSLN,¹ assumed the presidency of Nicaragua in November 2006. During his campaign he supported a total ban on abortion, bowing to the demands of Christian groups and the Catholic Church of Nicaragua (Amnesty International, 2009: 12).

A complex patchwork of alliances between right-wing and religious groups and the destabilization of democracies are also apparent in South America. The election of right-wing military leader Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil after impeachment² proceedings that ousted President Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party, and reinstated a profoundly undemocratic, racist and patriarchal government, which called an election after violating the democratic procedures to dismiss Rousseff,³ is a salient example.

The far right also took office in Colombia with the victory of Iván Duque Márquez, candidate of the Democratic Center, the party led by former President Álvaro Uribe, who is under investigation over corruption charges and faces multiple accusations, including the creation of paramilitary groups, crimes against humanity, and systematic human rights violations. After 15 years of leftist governments, Uruguay unexpectedly elected to power a “multicolored coalition” of the center right. In 2012, Paraguay was the scene of a political coup that ousted then-President Fernando Lugo and paved the way for the return of the Colorado Party, whose candidate and later President Horacio Cartes has repeatedly

1 The FSLN is a political party that evolved from a political-military organization that led a revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

2 The 2016 impeachment was highly controversial and created deep divides in Brazilian politics, in a complex context of accusations of corruption against members of the government. The impeachment was based on how government finances had been handled (Lissardy, 2016).

3 It is worth bearing in mind that the Rousseff government had important alliances with evangelical and Catholic groups, and her government made a series of political decisions to restrict sexuality education in Brazil, based on evident pressure from religious groups (Correa and Kalil, 2020).

opposed the rights of LGBTIQ2+ people and the legalization of abortion (Soto and Soto, 2020).

After a progressive government, but one with an entrenched anti-gender⁴ bias, Ecuador made a turn to the right under the presidency of Lenin Moreno. Similarly, Chile's Sebastián Piñera has led a right-wing, conservative, and neo-liberal government that breaks its own laws on gender⁵ and has responded to social protests in a violent and repressive manner. Although not properly at the hands of a military dictatorship, democracy in Bolivia suffered a blow when far-right Christian politician Janine Áñez proclaimed herself president and used legal charges to oust Evo Morales in 2019. At that time, Áñez stated: "Thanks to God who has allowed the Bible back into the Palace. May he bless and enlighten us" (El País, 2019).

In this context, we must consider the spread of neo-Pentecostal churches and groups of various denominations in the region since the 1980s. On the one hand, this increase coincides with the rise of neoliberalism and on the other hand, with these groups' deliberate participation in electoral politics. Do Nascimento (2020: 17 and 18) writes that the spread of neo-Pentecostalism and the rise of neoliberalism stem from beliefs such as the "theology of prosperity," "spiritual warfare," and "theology of dominance," all of which have made these movements more visible and influential in the continent despite representing a minority of the population. Neo-Pentecostalism has become widespread in Central America and the number of followers is significant: in Honduras, neo-Pentecostals make up 41 percent of the population; in El Salvador, 36 percent; and in Nicaragua, 33.2 percent (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). According to data from Latinobarometer (Bracke and Paternotte, 2017) compiled by Sexuality Policy Watch, there are relatively fewer neo-Pentecostals in South America: in Brazil, they make up 17.9 percent of the population; in Chile, 10.6 percent; in

4 According to Sonia Correa, one of the key moments was when former President Rafael Correa spoke out on television against "gender ideology" (Gutiérrez, 2018).

5 A legal challenge was brought against a booklet by the Superintendence of Education on the inclusion of transgender students, who were recognized by the Gender Identity Law, passed during Piñera's second term in office. Since he has been in office, government sectors have harshly questioned materials associated with sexuality education (Barrientos, 2020).

Argentina, 9.5 percent; in Uruguay, 4.2 percent; in Colombia, 3.5 percent; and in Paraguay, 3.5 percent. It is important to note that members of the low-income and middle classes have embraced neo-Pentecostalism, as the absence of a welfare state has hit these social groups the hardest. Furthermore, the neo-Pentecostal Church addresses issues that are relevant to these groups; for example, the “protection of the family and entrepreneurial spirit so as not to depend on bosses” (Do Nascimento, 2020: 28).

Alongside the spread of neo-Pentecostalism, the Catholic hierarchy has embraced, since the 1990s, a deeply conservative policy that has focused on attacking the concept of gender as a social and cultural construct. It has pursued this policy in coalitions with civil society groups and other churches to influence international forums where guiding principles and policies for states are defined (Amador and Granados, 2018; Bracke and Paternotte, 2018). Although the rise of neo-Pentecostalism has siphoned some believers away from Catholicism, the power of the Catholic Church in the states is undeniable, “especially because it acts as an ideological foundation” for the most powerful groups (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

The Fiction of the Secular State

The secular state is a fundamental and constitutive principle of democracy. Although this principle has been enshrined in the constitutions of various Latin American countries,⁶ the declarations seem to be empty words. Activists in several countries have cited countless events that demonstrate violations of the principle of secularism in Latin America. On the one hand, fundamentalist religious parties are involved in decision-making forums on public policy at different levels: local, national, and international. On the other hand, religious organizations use their influence and gatherings to encourage their followers to support political parties and candidates that represent fundamentalist religious positions (Fondo Semillas, 2020; Fondo Lunaria, 2020). In 2019, factions in Paraguay’s Chamber of Deputies and Senate declared themselves “pro-life” and

⁶ Costa Rica is an exception, having decreed a state religion.

“pro-family.” The Chamber proposed having Bible readings or prayers before starting its sessions (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

Transitions to democracy have not brought about real secularization. In Chile, the formal end of the dictatorship did not result in a redistribution of power, but rather, it led to an increase in the number and influence of right-wing and Catholic groups that defend the regime ideologically. In turn, the government has allowed them to accumulate wealth and political influence, and continue in “strategic roles in matters of education, health, social security and the media. Thirty-two years after Pinochet’s departure, most of these groups have increased their power and consolidated their influence during the post-dictatorship” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

Obviously, certain politically influential conservative religious groups continue to promote the notion that Christian and Catholic identity is essential to national identity and “the only one that can guarantee the success of the country at a social and political level” (Fondo Apthapi Jopueti, 2020). These groups seek to weave nationalism, class, and ethnic identity with religious affiliation under the guise of nation-building.

Although the secular state is a principle of democratic governments, the way that some political parties are defined and behave in several Latin American countries appears to contradict this notion. Some parties have historically professed religious principles. More recently, some parties have emerged that are openly aligned with Christian denominations, especially evangelicals. The latter have managed to combine a public policy agenda with social welfare strategies, which to some extent, seek to fill the gap in Latin America’s inadequate social programs. It is worth considering how these parties and religious fundamentalists use the principle of the secular state to defend their presence in public policy. They have redefined state secularism, declaring that “the secular state is not an atheist state” and maintaining that the principle of religious freedom is the foundation of secularism (Do Nascimento, 2020: 37). In this sense, the emergence of “religious freedom” policies in countries like Colombia has enabled religious fundamentalists to increase their presence in the state and in forums to discuss and define public policy (Sandra Mazo, interview, 2020).

Farther Right, Fewer Rights

Latin America is considered the region with the greatest inequality in the world (Mesa, 2019). In 2019, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) found that while the income of the top one percent of the population had continued to rise, aggregate poverty and extreme poverty in the region had been increasing since 2015. This was mainly because of structural adjustment policies that “affected the coverage and continuity of policies to combat poverty and for social and labor inclusion” (Abramo, Cecchini and Morales, 2019, cited in ECLAC, 2019: 17).⁷

These indicators must also be examined from an intersectional perspective, bearing in mind that poverty does not affect all groups in the same way. According to the aggregate analysis for the entire region, the poverty rate in 2017 “was higher for residents of rural areas, children and adolescents, women, indigenous persons people and Afrodescendants” (ECLAC, 2019: 18).

Persistent inequality and the little headway made toward income redistribution in the region worsened with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine of the region’s 20 economies experienced negative economic growth during the first three months of 2020 (ECLAC, 2020: 59). In addition employment rates, which were at a standstill in 2019, decreased dramatically due to the pandemic. For example, it is estimated that Brazil lost 7.7 million jobs between March and May 2020, compared with the previous quarter (ECLAC, 2020: 70). As a whole, the region lost 47 million jobs in the second quarter of 2020 compared with the previous year (ECLAC and ILO, 2020: 5).

An analysis of the employment situation reveals that the crisis hit women, young people, and migrants the hardest. Undoubtedly, the high rate of informal employment in the region made the situation worse for these population groups, as prior to the pandemic, for example, informal employment among young people reached 67.5 percent (ILO, 2019, cited in ECLAC and ILO, 2020: 39).

⁷ It is important to remember that the data refer to a regional average, which means that the trend was not the same in all countries. For example, as of 2017, Bolivia had reduced poverty from 60 percent to 35 percent (Open Democracy, 2020). In that same year, overall poverty increased considerably in Argentina (5.6 percent), whereas it had been decreasing in Mexico since 2016 (ECLAC, 2019: 101).

Furthermore, the sectors that primarily employ young people and women, such as domestic work, retail sales, and services were among the hardest hit by the crisis. Based on information from Chile, Colombia, and Brazil, ECLAC (2020) confirmed that domestic workers were hit the hardest. In Latin America, women make up 93 percent of domestic workers and approximately 77.5 percent are informally employed (UN Women, ECLAC and ILO, 2020).

Social Mobilization, Violence and Attacks on Social Protest

The current panorama shows a democratic crisis with weak or absent welfare states, and the rise of right-wing and far-right governments that have struck alliances with conservative business and religious groups. In response, waves of social mobilization have erupted in several countries of the region. Young people and feminist movements have played a key role in the massive and diverse social protests against the neoliberal model, authoritarianism, and the abuse of power by governments.

“Ni una más/Ni una menos” protests against gender-based violence have proliferated from Argentina to Mexico since 2015, sparking further mass rallies calling for abortion legalization in Argentina and Chile (Revilla, 2019). The Chilean performance piece “A Rapist in Your Path”⁸ resonated internationally, and exemplified the use of new strategies and content, inspiring recent rallies to be more creative and outspoken. The performance was part of the 2019-2020 Chilean protests known as El Estallido Social (The Social Outbreak), a series of mass demonstrations that rocked the country and rejected the harsh neoliberal model of racism, gender-based violence, poverty, xenophobia, and patriarchy. In 2020, these sentiments translated into votes that were overwhelmingly in favor of a new constitution. In November 2019, the streets of Colombia’s biggest cities, particularly Bogota, were blocked for several days. Creative slogans and actions were used to reject government policies. Massive and diverse participation, especially by young people, marked a fundamental change in social mobilization in Colombia (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

8 In 2019, this performance piece by Las Tesis collective from in Valparaíso, Chile, was performed worldwide and became a powerful symbol of feminist struggles (El País, 2020).

Ecuador also became the epicenter of mass protests against the neoliberal measures that Lenin Moreno implemented at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. The demonstrations succeeded in preventing the government from implementing some of the measures, such as increasing fuel prices. Central America has also been the site of intense protests. The deep socio-political crisis that has gripped Nicaragua since 2018 has posed major challenges to social movements, which have remained active despite the violent, anti-democratic, and neoliberal measures of Daniel Ortega's government. In Honduras, mass rallies took place in early 2019 to protest President Juan Orlando Hernández's nefarious privatization policies, and accuse him of committing fraud and being the worst president "since the democratic transition in 1980" (Nueva Sociedad, 2019).

In November 2020, Peruvians took to the streets over political instability. After Congress removed President Martín Vizcarra and appointed Manuel Merino as his replacement, a large percentage of the population voiced enormous discontent over these anti-democratic measures. Once again, young people known as millennials (Arroyo and Manetto, 2020) were the protagonists of the uprising that caused Merino to step down.

In Brazil, feminist and LGBTIQ2+ organizations have emerged as key players in the demonstrations. Particularly significant have been "the strategies led by Afro-Brazilian women's groups and organizations. Many of these groups are headed by Afro-Brazilians, young people and/or LBTs, who are leading wide-ranging initiatives and making the social movements aware of the urgent need to reinvent the content and strategies of their actions" (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Governments have responded with violence and repression to the intense social protests that are shaking the continent. This response exemplifies the authoritarian trends of this era. In Chile, it is estimated that at least 3,023 people were injured and 34 were killed in the wave of police violence during The Social Outbreak protests (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). In Bolivia, estimates point to at least 10 fatal victims during the most recent protests (Open Democracy, 2020). In Bogota (Colombia), riot troops killed young Dilan Cruz (BBC, 2019)⁹ during the

⁹ Dilan Cruz, 18-years-old, was killed by a member of the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (Esmad) on November 23, 2019. The Attorney General's Office and the Ombudsman's Office have begun investigations into this incident and other cases, alleging the use of excessive force by state agencies (BBC, November 25, 2019).

2019 protests. In 2020, during another protest in Colombia over the death of a citizen at the hands of police, 13 people were killed, most of them young people (Fondo Lunaria, 2020). That same year, 79 massacres were perpetrated in Colombia, leaving 340 people dead (Indepaz, 2020). According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the crisis that has been unfolding in Nicaragua since 2018 has resulted in 328 deaths, three disappearances, and 130 arrests (EFE, 2020). In Peru, two young people were killed, and hundreds were injured during the police response to pro-democracy rallies in November 2020 (BBC, 2020).

Renewed social unrest has come about in response to democratic destabilization, the rise of right-wing and far-right governments in several countries, alliances between political, business and religious sectors, the socio-political crisis of governments that had run progressive campaigns in the early 21st century, a lack of welfare policies, and the deep-seated conditions of inequality, racism, militarism, and sexism that governments and their policies perpetuate. All these elements characterize the complex Latin American situation in which fundamentalist religious and political rhetoric has emerged.

Activists on the Rise and Characteristics of Religious and Political Fundamentalism

This section looks at the characteristics of the groups that defend and use fundamentalist religious and political rhetoric, their agendas, and some features of their attacks. Human rights activists, in general, and advocates for women's rights and sexual diversity, in particular, share their reflections and discuss studies about fundamentalist attacks. In the first part, we concentrate on defining the characteristics of fundamentalist groups, and in the second, we describe five types of attacks: rhetoric against feminism and feminists, attacks on sexual and reproductive rights, attempts to change or overturn existing legislation, barriers to protesting and freedom of expression, and "progressive conservatism."

The Groups and Their Agendas

In this study, our starting point is that players that spread a fundamentalist religious and political rhetoric that targets gender and democracy share an ideological vision of society, which is based on an alleged “natural order” that stands against changes or transformations and asserts itself in different ways. Although issues associated with sexual and reproductive rights, sexuality and gender identity, sexuality education, the family, and the right to diversity have been central to their objections, other types of issues have emerged recently. In addition, these groups have become more active in local, national, and international political spheres, particularly those addressing human rights (Mirta Moragas, interview, 2020), meaning that currently “democratic forums are of interest to them” (Laura Weinstein, interview, 2020). As such, these groups have varying degrees of political, economic, and religious power which allows them to “buy media outlets [and] influence the passage of laws and the implementation of public policies through their companies,” and they even have decision-making power “in smaller forums such as regional bodies, universities, high schools, and schools” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

In this section and in keeping with other analyses, we maintain that a characteristic of these fundamentalist groups is their diversity and the variety of their arguments. They constitute a kind of “strategic secularism” (Vaggione, 2005) that appeals to beliefs that are not only religious. Nonetheless, their religious base remains strong and it is significant that actions by these groups, of different religious denominations, still exert considerable influence, even if they no longer appear to be exclusively religious (Sonia Correa, interview, 2020). We also assume that these groups do not represent a homogeneous bloc. However, they strategically choose to agree on certain positions when they have disagreements among themselves.

Governments as Main Neoconservative and Fundamentalist Players

Current governments have intensified their use of rhetoric and actions against human and women's rights, merging fundamentalist political and religious positions that, at times, become the "state's official position" (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). The number of groups endorsing these positions has increased at the local, national, and interregional levels.

In this regard, we make a distinction between long-standing conservative political parties, which oppose change, and new parties that profess ties to a religious denomination. The political presence or involvement of these parties, especially the new ones, may be observed in their local "activism," which reinforces them and, at the same time, precedes them. Activists in Argentina, Peru, and Colombia mentioned this phenomenon specifically.

This is something that happened over time; [they] came with the Virgin, rosaries, holy water, fetishes, as well as flags, slogans, and organized groups of activists. Then, we saw how this activism got into politics, using a strategy to ensure that specific representatives of their groups joined the provincial legislature and city councils. This strategy was used in 2015 and gained strength in the 2017 election, so that during 2018, 2019 and 2020, they were already pushing for aggressive actions within the legislature; acting as political beacons for those fundamentalist activist groups. Unlike feminist activist groups, which are still doing the same, the leaders of these conservative activist groups had already become political beacons. (María [Argentina], interview 2, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020)

In times of political crisis, deals and agreements between political and religious groups have become evident, as observed during the crises in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). Inter-party alliances with religious groups have increased to secure key positions in the echelons of power. When successful, these alliances provide opportunities and forums to implement fundamentalist agendas. Here are two examples: In 2019, President Lacalle Pou took power in Uruguay with a coalition of neo-conservative political and religious groups. During the election, one of the most conservative groups, the *Cabildo Abierto* party led by Guido Manini Ríos,

commander-in-chief of the Uruguayan Army between 2015 and 2019,¹⁰ promoted an agenda overtly against the rights of women, LGBTIQ2+ people and migrants.¹¹

Another example was the bill proposing the creation of a “pro-life” caucus, which was introduced in the Colombian Congress by the right-leaning and far-right parties that backed President Iván Duque Márquez in his bid for office. Although this bill was presented recently and has not yet passed, a de facto caucus exists and its spokespersons are active in positioning issues on the legislative agenda, such as the defense of the family and the criminalization of abortion under all circumstances (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

A different strategy has been seen in Venezuela, where activists have observed that fundamentalist groups have increased at the local and national level, but are keeping a low profile:

The anti-rights groups and fundamentalists work on two levels: At a micro-local level, low-level pastors contact local powerbrokers, and at a higher level, lobbies interact with the executive branch. They act as invisible hands that no one ever sees. They do not make the headlines or create public opinion... They know how to lobby silently, and that is their political tactic. It works very well for them because if they were doing this publicly, women would sound the alarm and mobilize in response to their attacks. In other words, the women’s movement in Venezuela, which is very big, would realize everything and organize to respond to their attacks. (Anonymous [Venezuela], interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020)

Fundamentalist Religious and Political Ties to Business Interests and the Military

In Paraguay, evangelist Juan Vera¹² is one of the main champions of religious fundamentalism. He is the head of the civil society organization known as

¹⁰ For more information, see Vasallo (2020).

¹¹ For more information, see *El Observador* (2019).

¹² In 2018, he made several statements calling for Paraguay to keep its Israeli embassy in Jerusalem.

Asociación de Usuarios y Consumidores del Paraguay (Asucop), which according to some activists in the region, constantly attacks trans people and people of different gender identities or sexual orientations (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). Although it is not easy to identify where fundamentalist groups get their funding, some activists believe that some banks in Paraguay are backing them.

Banks in the region have considerable economic power, as do mining and extraction companies. Activists have found that some persons in these industries, in collusion with state officials, display racist and colonialist views. This has been observed in Ecuador and Peru:

... anti-rights groups, every time they refer to these issues, they give opinions and label these people (Indigenous peoples) as terrorists, subversives. The interest in protecting their economic interests is apparent, pushing for internal agreements between the company and the state. That is why the state feels pressured by these anti-rights groups and why they support them when conflicts occur; they are defending their interests. (Madres en Acción [Peru], interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020)

Similarly, we find cases of complex alliances between fundamentalist evangelical groups, the business community, and politicians who defend agendas that greatly restrict the rights of the majority. For example, in Venezuela, evangelical preacher Javier Bertucci has been charged in connection with complex and corrupt business deals on several occasions. He has also been involved and has interfered significantly in electoral politics in Venezuela's recent history. This has taken place in a tumultuous political and humanitarian scenario, in which the neo-Pentecostal churches have been on the rise: "In the last 20 years, the promotion of public policies related to religious freedom and worship has been more evident. Puritanical liberalism has spread through the military and civil sectors with the acquiescence of high level religious and governmental officials who are sympathetic to these changes and evangelical doctrines" (Guerrero, n.d.).

The Reach of the Churches

Despite strategic secularism, many churches of different denominations continue to uphold and promote religious fundamentalist positions. To do so, they

have created and maintain alliances with other players to secure access to state institutions and civil society organizations. In this study, we would like to discuss four characteristics that activists have identified concerning the role and strategies that these churches use.

First, even though the Catholic Church has lost some influence in the past 40 years, and neo-Pentecostalism has been steadily spreading, it is undeniable that the Catholic Church continues to play a very relevant and influential role in state decisions in the region. For a number of years, it has wielded power at the local and institutional level on key issues of sexual and reproductive rights, such as abortion. Activists in Colombia have observed that representatives of the Catholic Church often take advantage of their position of influence in small towns and villages to spread messages that influence the public:

And in his columns and on different occasions, he (the regional bishop) has condemned progress for women's rights and for LGBT people and rights. And he blames the breakdown of the family and society on this progressive legislation and everything related to this, and refers to these topics as if they posed a danger. (Severa Flor, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

Second, some churches are still using violent rhetoric against women in Indigenous territories, where women have been fighting important battles, linking ethnic and gender issues. For example, activists in Chile mentioned attacks of this type by churches in some regions with a large Indigenous population:

This territory has been totally colonized and evangelized... and they have spent 300 years trying to dismantle the issue. For this reason, their attacks against us often revolve around the fact that they treat us as witches... meaning that they literally accused us of being witches in formal meetings. (Violeta, interview, Fondo Alquimia, 2020)

Activists in Venezuela mentioned that some evangelical churches are blaming women for the country's crisis, for refusing to play traditional gender roles, and "dedicating themselves to political participation instead of the home" (Anonymous [Venezuela], interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

The third aspect deals with the spread of neo-Pentecostalism in vulnerable areas, where it is filling significant gaps caused by the state's inability to ensure that rights are upheld. In Central America, churches provide education, serve as centers for community - based programs such as health brigades, and even act as "judges" to settle conflicts taking over "the state's responsibilities" (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

Fourth, neo-Pentecostal churches have cross-border presence and strategies,¹³ and are becoming more active in political-electoral spheres. Here are some illustrative cases that we would like to mention. For example, the Misión Vida church¹⁴ founded by Argentine Jorge Márquez, has influence in Paraguay and Uruguay. This church, which is one of the biggest churches in Uruguay, has been blamed for violent incidents in addiction treatment centers. The church's leaders, brothers Jorge and Hugo Márquez, are known for their fundamentalist views and ability to influence politics in this region of South American. In one of their speeches at the Second South American Congress for Life and Family, held in Punta del Este (Uruguay) in 2019, they stated:

We are not members of Cambiemos or Peronism. We do not support parties, but values. David (Schelereth) is a Cambiemos deputy, but the Neuquén Popular Movement (political rival to Cambiemos in Neuquén province) has now asked my daughter to run on its ticket. We are looking out for ourselves. They are using us and we are using them. We will go with any party that helps to put our people in Congress. (Leer y Difundir, May 11, 2019; cited in Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020)¹⁵

Mexican President López Obrador's Youth Building the Future program, is an example that illustrates the influence of evangelical churches on public policy. The evangelical churches involved in this program seek to indoctrinate the young people who are the program's beneficiaries. Although President López Obrador has denied that evangelicals are involved in the orienting program, the

¹³ Acting in a coordinated way in several countries, deploying the same strategies.

¹⁴ See the Misión Vida Para las Naciones website.

¹⁵ For more information, see Cariboni (2019).

Confraternidad Nacional de las Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas (Confraternice) has declared that they “would be involved, promoting values and the gospel with the young participants.”¹⁶ Furthermore, in some interviews, Confraternice has said that they have enrolled thousands of young people in this program and, that in addition to job training, they have provided them with moral instruction.¹⁷ According to activists, this action is extremely serious and shows once again, that political leaders still do not embrace the principle of secularism that should underpin the democratic system in our countries:

López Obrador has given evangelical groups a series of tasks—I don’t know if they are being paid or not, because that is more difficult to verify—but what we know is evident: that evangelical groups are training young people who participate in the Youth Building the Future program, which is a vast project involving hundreds of thousands of young people. (Gloria Careaga, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

President López Obrador has made a number of religious statements and he has praised the “Moral Primer,” which Confraternice is promoting. This document was written in 1940 with the purported intention of “moralizing society based on conservative norms, whether religious or not” (Careaga and Aranda, 2020: 24).

Fundamentalist Rhetoric in the Media and Social Networks

Activists also mentioned the fundamentalists’ relationship with and their presence in the media. In this regard, we look at two aspects: the first aspect focuses on media outlets as “channels for spreading rhetoric” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). Since the 1980s, neo-Pentecostals have mostly become visible thanks to the relation between “the media and political participation” Do Nascimento (2020: 17).

¹⁶ For more information, see López Ponce (2019).

¹⁷ In this subject, Confraternice said, “Currently, Confraternice has served some 7,000 young people in the Youth Building the Future program. We are instilling moral values in all of them, mainly through the “Moral Primer” (Cartilla Moral) and also Biblical passages” (Vera, 2019).

The second aspect addresses how these players have purchased media outlets (radio stations, local television channels, and websites) to spread their message and engage in tremendous online activism. Sometimes, they are private media outlets and in other cases, as in Honduras, activists indicated that public or state-run television channels have allocated airtime to evangelicals. In the case of private media outlets, activists in Panama and Guatemala commented the following:

... I think that one of the tools they mostly use is Twitter and Instagram, where they have several accounts. Another is radio to reach people. And on TV they have an evangelical channel, Hossana TV, and it is public. In addition, the traditional media outlets, TVN, RPC, have discriminatory content, in the jokes, and that incites violence.... When women's rights are discussed here, immediately [they are linked] to gender ideology; LGBTI issues, not so much. The treatment is more serious and harsh when it comes to the whole issue of abortion and feminists. (Samira Armengol, Coalición Internacional de Mujeres y Familias, interview cited in Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020)

They take advantage of all possible opportunities: radio, television, newer media such as Facebook, and newspaper interviews. Any outlet is possible (Rodrigo Arenas-Carter, Cuirpoétikas, interview Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

In fact, activists in several Central American countries have demonstrated that one characteristic of “emerging” fundamentalist groups is that they consist of “mainly young people who lend continuity to the legacy of the more traditional players, and present themselves as a new generation that makes much more use of social networks” (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

In Bolivia, activists indicated that fundamentalist groups have a two-level approach to the media: on the one hand, they create their own pages or websites and on the other hand, they harass feminist groups by commenting on their messages or campaigns. At the same time, “they own radio stations and media outlets that allow them to spread their message to different audiences” (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020).

This presence on social media, and the fact that young people and women are visible in fundamentalist groups may have different interpretations: As a strategy to spread their beliefs to different audiences (Mónica Roa, interview, 2020); as a way to draw attention to their clash with the feminist movement as women's participation as leaders and members of fundamentalist groups is meant to suggest that feminists do not represent all women and convey the message that women in their groups are "representatives of the true essence of womankind" (Mirta Moragas, interview, 2020).

International Ties in the Region

Fundamentalist groups have developed agendas to have an impact on international forums on regional and human rights policies. This is how these groups operate to influence organizations such as the OAS (Moragas, 2020). Activists have shown how fundamentalist groups infiltrate these forums to challenge policies on different issues: migrants and the rights of people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Their presence cannot be considered in isolation from what is taking place in local contexts. A Paraguayan activist remarked on this connection with local context, while considering what took place at the OAS Assembly held in the city of Medellin (Colombia) in 2019:

... Last year (2019) there were many more anti-rights groups than civil society organizations. Moreover, they kept us out of some thematic hearings at the Assembly of American States. Moreover, they are the same anti-rights players that are active in the regions, deputies from different cities, but... there were also people from the Church involved, pastors from all the churches. Moreover, the conference rooms were on the first floor of the hotel where we were staying in Medellin..., and the door of our room faced the door of the room where the anti-rights groups were.... We hid ourselves, covered the windows, and took turns to have someone on watch outside the door so that they would not come and listen to us, because they came to spy on us, they came to sit outside the door and listen to what we were saying (Vanessa, interview, 2020 in Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

As these groups join forces to implement certain strategies to influence international forums on regional policies, we see how some individuals who have emerged as spokespersons and spreaders of fundamentalist rhetoric, are

repeatedly invited to speak and present their positions in various countries and events. These events range from public conferences to local events in towns or small cities. In the latter, the impact on activists is quite strong, as many are exposed to higher levels of stigmatization when these people are present.

This is the case of Argentines Agustín Laje¹⁸ and Nicolás Márquez, authors of *The Black Book of the New Left*, who have toured several countries to promote their book, spread notions of gender ideology and stigmatize the left. Activists have mentioned that these individuals were in Paraguay in 2017 they alluded to Laje's statements on social media, recounting how the Paraguayan president accepted his book and declared himself "against gender ideology" (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).¹⁹

This is also the case of Sara Winter, a Brazilian national with ties to the far-right Alianza por Brasil party. She visited a region of Colombia, at the invitation of the group that leads the "40 Days for Life" campaign. At the event, attendees criticized and attacked trans activists who were present (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

Activists also mentioned Christian Rosas²⁰ in connection with the strategy of neoconservative leaders who visit different countries to spread their ideas. Rosas is the founder of the Peru-based movement and campaign "Con mis Hijos No

18 Laje is an important spokesperson from Argentina who is influential in the region on the subject of gender ideology. According to Campana (2020: 31), he is a representative of Libre, a conservative think tank located in Córdoba. He has opposed the human rights objections to the dictatorship, and he has spoken against abortion in Argentine congressional debates. He is the co-author of *The Black Book of the New Left: Gender ideology or cultural subversion*, "in which (among other things) they justify State terrorism, they consider that feminism is nothing more than the rhetorical device of 'gender ideology' and they associate homosexuality with pedophilia" (Márquez and Laje, 2016, cited in Campana, 2020).

19 For further information, see <https://twitter.com/agustinlaje/status/923689462319779840?lang=es>

20 Rosas is the founder of the campaign "Con mis Hijos No te Metas" (Don't Mess With my Children) that originated in Peru and has since spread to other countries. He is the son of Julio Rosas, an evangelical pastor who was a Member of Congress in 2006. "Con mis Hijos No te Metas" is associated with at least five evangelical churches with considerable resources. The campaign basically focuses on defending the traditional family, and denounces and attacks so-called "gender ideology." Its events have been characterized by the presence of religious and political leaders from various countries (Yáñez, 2020).

te Metas.” Rosas went to Uruguay to challenge the passage of the Comprehensive Law for Transgender People, as mentioned in one of the interviews with activists (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that as part of the same strategy, these individuals have created their own forums, with media presence and influence in various countries of the region. For example, Agustín Laje and Christian Rosas, among others, participated in the “Second South American Congress for Life and Family,” hosted by Jorge Márquez in Uruguay in 2019 (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).²¹

We can also mention the “Third Transatlantic Summit” organized by the Red Política por los Valores, held in Colombia in April 2019, which had the support of far-right Colombian legislators, such as former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. The issues addressed at this summit included the defense of the traditional family, and the fight against “gender ideology,” sexual diversity, and abortion. Fundamentalist and conservative politicians and academics from around the world, who are significant international leaders in the agenda of attacks on gender and democracy, attended this event.²²

More than 200 organizations and platforms for women, feminists and LGBTIQ2+ people from Colombia and other parts of the world, used the hashtag #ConMisDerechosNoTeMetas and #TodosLas-FamiliasSonFamilia to reject the summit because its agenda violated and was a setback to the rights “to sexual, gender and ethnic diversity, sexual and reproductive rights, academic freedom and sexuality education, and sought to impose a single way of forming a family, denying the wealth and diversity of human relations” (press release). Furthermore, the nature of its issues and the participation of legislators contravened the

²¹ The congress brought together religious, academic and political leaders from Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, among others.

²² Participants included “Saint Lucia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sarah Flood-Beaubrun; Hungarian Minister of State for Family and Youth, Katalin Novák; former presidential candidate and Mexican congressman, Juan Carlos Romero Hicks; former presidential candidate and expert in international law Rafael Nieto Loaiza; founder of the Movimiento Acción Republicana, deputy and former presidential candidate of Chile, José Antonio Kast; Canadian Member of Parliament Garnett Genuis; Argentine deputy Silvia Elías de Pérez; former presidential candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga (Colombia), and Colombian Senators such as Paola Holguín, Santiago Valencia, John Milton Rodríguez” (*El Espectador*, 2019).

principle of the secular state. The summit was held in the Colombian National Capitol, but the organizers had to remove the congressional logo from their advertisements, as women's and feminist organizations criticized their use of public resources for events of this type.

These ties show how religious and political fundamentalist groups have developed more joint strategies and created a collaborative network in Latin America, agreeing on criteria to halt progress in sexual health and the rights of LGBTIQ2+ people, as reported in an investigation by the portal La Mala Fe (Castro, n.d.).

Attacks

Narratives Against Feminism and Feminists

Black feminist bell hooks (2017) wrote that “constructive feminist contributions to the well-being of our communities and society are often appropriated by the dominant culture which then projects negative representations of feminism.” In this sense, she maintains that feminist knowledge is for everybody; therefore, there is a pressing need for feminist education to raise awareness against this form of stigma.

In the context of this study, activists from different countries observed the effect of the dominant culture mentioned by hooks. This underlines the importance of addressing the strategies and effects of the rhetoric used by religious and political fundamentalists. This is a subject that should continue to be explored in a more profound and systematic way. We believe that this rhetoric is based on statements that are sexist, racist, colonialist, and militaristic, and it affects specific populations. In this section, we examine how fundamentalist narratives stigmatize feminist activists and feminism. In our opinion, although this rhetoric is not the only reason for gender-based violence, we wish to point out that many activists argue that as religious and political fundamentalist rhetoric spreads, violence intensifies against all types of women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020; Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

* Censorship, Punishment and Stigmatization:

“Enemies, Terrorists, Abortionists and the Left”

The key role played by feminism in the social protests of recent decades - its diverse organizational forms, and its “ideological scope” - have turned it into a target for fundamentalists as it challenges the status quo that they uphold. Much of their rhetoric seeks to “punish” feminists not only because of their gender identity and sexual orientation, but also because of their wide-ranging activism which makes them “visible enemies”(Apthapi Jopueti, 2020; Fondo Alquimia, 2020). The content of fundamentalist messages and strategies seeks to “censor, stigmatize, and punish anything that challenges the status quo based on fundamentalist beliefs” (Fondo Semillas, 2020).

The narratives used to stigmatize feminist activism vary by country. For example, in Peru, a country where armed organizations have had significant presence, activists reported that fundamentalists have referred to feminists as “terrorists,” in addition to calling them “anti-life” and “communists” (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

An intense stigmatization of the “left” and grassroots social movements, which right-leaning and far-right governments have accused of being “infiltrators” or having close ties to the guerrillas, marks the political situation in Colombia. This stigmatization also serves to build an analogy between “feminists,” “the left,” and “armed groups,” placing feminist activists in jeopardy, depending on their location (and the degree of intensity of the armed conflict). Their activism is seen as dangerous:

There’s a very close relationship between the issues we promote and the work that is done here on human rights issues, and the activities of the leftists, and these two fears get lumped together. Sometimes, parents get very scared and scold the girls and tell them not to join our groups or activities. The parents don’t tell us directly, but the girls tell us (Adagio, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

Given the prevailing legislation that criminalizes abortion in Central American countries, the perception of “abortionists” as “criminals” is used to stigmatize feminists who advocate its legalization (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

The strategy of “Castro-Chavista” rhetoric has been used effectively in the region, as it serves to exacerbate “political fear” of communism (Sonia Correa, interview, 2020). In Colombia, far-right groups and religious fundamentalists used “Castro-Chavista” rhetoric as a strategy to turn public opinion against the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP guerrillas.

* “They Don’t Represent Us”

Fundamentalists also refer to feminists and people of different gender identities and sexual orientations as “minorities” who are trying to co-opt the “majorities” through their words (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). Similarly, fundamentalist rhetoric has sharply emphasized the notion that “feminists” do not represent all women. As we mentioned earlier in this report, this rhetoric is backed by a strong female presence in fundamentalist groups to show “their true essence” (Mirta Moragas, interview, 2020).

This rhetoric seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the feminist movement by casting doubt on “whom it represents.” In addition to trying to demonstrate that feminists do not represent all women, specifically those who do not support sexual and reproductive rights and diversity, it maintains that these feminists have been co-opted and manipulated:

... I’ve heard talk claiming that we feminists do not realize that international organizations are using us to destroy and decimate the population. There are rumors and theories out there and they feel super critical (Colectivo Viraje and Aquelarre, Laboratorio de diseño visual, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

* “Them and Us”

Other narratives promote opposition to discredit feminism and political activism. In other words, “they” are the decent people - the pacifists, the composed and principled ones - whereas “we” are the crazy ones (Colectivo Viraje and Aquelarre, Laboratorio de diseño visual, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020). We went from being well regarded as “grassroots feminists” to being treated as if “we have gone crazy,” an activist from Venezuela said (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). Activists are concerned that,

in addition to being mocked, they are being put at risk of violent attacks. For example, the term “feminazi” is meant to suggest aggressive and violent feminism:

Sometimes, they tend to be quite aggressive. Other times, they stick to calling us names like dirty hippie—a term that’s not from here but is imported, just as feminazi—uneducated, irrational. They’re always looking for ways to mock our work. (Caribenxs, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

This juxtaposition of *them* as the “good guys” and *us* as “the dangerous ones” plays out in different contexts. According to some feminists, sexuality education is one of the main ones. In forums to debate access to sexuality education or its content, opposition is often based on claims that feminists and their proposals entail a “loss of values” (Sandra Mazo, interview, 2020), which alarms parents who are concerned with decency and values. These claims set off moral panic when it comes to the “rights of boys and girls,” which, according to some fundamentalists, are threatened by the sexuality education endorsed by feminists.

* Overtly Racist Narratives

Several activists reported overtly racist content in some of the attacks against them. In areas with Indigenous populations in Chile, activists said that they are socially excluded under the pretext of being “witches” and discriminated because of their way of dressing: “Even wearing our traditional clothing is frowned upon by people” (Violeta, interview, Fondo Alchemy, 2020). Afro-Colombian activists also experience racism, saying that the Catholic Church stigmatizes Black religious practices:

I believe that the Catholic Church, particularly, has always demonized the spiritual practices of Black women. Obviously, all individual and collective healing rituals involving the use of herbs, drinks, or beverages are demonized and misunderstood.... And, of course, one may come across people who are members of the Catholic Church, [who] often say that everything we do is witchcraft.... (Jembe Afram, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

In the Dominican Republic, Black feminists face racist attacks and the Haitian population and activists face xenophobic attacks, which are marked by

police abuse and incited by fundamentalist groups (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). In Bolivia, activists have also observed the racist aspect of this rhetoric. In fact, they suggest that there has been a resurgence of “racial violence” in the rhetoric of political and religious fundamentalists (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020). In Bolivia’s sociopolitical crisis of 2019, the concept of “gender ideology” took on an explicitly ethnic-racial discrimination slant “in order to build social support to allow them to take economic and political power” (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020).

The recent murder of Indigenous Mayan scholar Domingo Choc²³ in Guatemala revealed the racist and colonialist underpinnings of fundamentalist rhetoric and practices. Activists in that country declared, “the existence of a state religion is bringing us closer to the social practices of the Middle Ages” (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

Fundamentalist views have a racist dimension that, depending on the situation in each country, may have considerable impact. This is the case in Brazil: “On a daily basis, some people in this country are inciting and perpetrating hate actions through street attacks on the Afro-descendant population, the Indigenous population, women, and LBTQIA+ people. Also, attacks on places of worship with African roots, the normalization of gender-based violence, [and] the criminalization of women and LBTQIA+ people are becoming increasingly commonplace. Militarization and incarceration are practices associated with this situation” (Fondo Elas, 2020). It is worth mentioning that fundamentalist sectors are behind Brazil’s current climate of religious intolerance because of their attitude toward spiritual beliefs and practices of African origin. In fact, “complaints of religious intolerance increased by 56 percent in 2019”²⁴ (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Attempts To Discredit Feminist Intellectual Production

Another strategy used by fundamentalists for purposes of stigmatization is to disparage feminist theoretical and intellectual production. The rhetoric of “gender

²³ The June 2020 murder of this Mayan scholar included elements of racism, religious fanaticism, and social conflict, against the backdrop of a complex armed conflict.

²⁴ See Duarte de Souza (2020).

ideology” has been one of the most effective strategies to challenge and belittle knowledge produced by feminist theory on gender, sex, and sexuality (Fondo Semillas, 2020). This strategy seeks to create “confusion” by misrepresenting and taking feminist arguments out of context, claiming that activists have made statements they never made (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

Fundamentalist groups actively use social media. Activists have been attacked and sabotaged on social media, and fake accounts have been created using their names. Actions of this type forced an organization in Ecuador to reduce its online presence out of fear (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). These attempts to discredit are often very aggressive and sometimes involve threats. An activist organization in Peru has recounted that a report was published in a media outlet, giving the names and personal information of its members and their children, jeopardizing their safety (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Although this strategy seems to be more common in Europe, it is on the rise in Latin America (Sonia Correa, interview, 2020). The 2017 attacks on philosopher Judith Butler in Brazil are an outstanding case, which various theorists have analyzed (Correa and Kalil, 2020: 77). Recently, the “CitizenGo” platform²⁵ launched a campaign against gender education at the University of Buenos Aires, where a gender awareness course had been created for students and teachers, within the framework of what is known as the Micaela Law.²⁶

Use and Appropriation of the Feminist Movement’s Strategies

Religious fundamentalist groups have appropriated the strategies of the feminist and human rights movements (Mirta Moragas, interview, 2020), including their alliances at the local, national, and international levels, and in different

²⁵ #AdoctrinamientoEnLaUBA appeared on September 30, 2020. At the time this report, was written, it had 1,280 signatures. For more information, see <https://donate.citizenngo.org/es-ar/182541-doctrinamientoenlauba>

²⁶ The law was passed in 2019 and its name commemorates Micaela García, a 21-year-old activist from the “Ni Una Menos” movement, who was the victim of femicide (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

spheres for political advocacy. According to many activists, they are clearly trying to appropriate the symbols of the movement. For example, the light blue handkerchiefs of religious fundamentalist groups mimic the green and purple handkerchiefs of the struggle to legalize abortion (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). Other activists have noted that these groups often follow them on social media. In this regard, an activist from Peru said:

It's clear to us that fundamentalist groups are following us all the time, monitoring our work and to some extent, copying our strategies. We, young feminists who work mainly in online settings, are evaluating how they have been harassing and threatening us. By proposing new narratives, they're always trying to copy [us], using the same strategies to reach other young people. (Chola Contravizual, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020)

Attacks on Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Sexuality Education

Despite the diversity of issues that religious and political fundamentalist groups have on their agenda, violence against women, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive rights, sexuality education, and especially abortion are at the forefront. Chilean activists mentioned various types of “sexist, racist and misogynistic” statements by political leaders, including the president, who made a chauvinistic statement in 2020 following the passage of the Law on Femicide²⁷: “Sometimes it is not only the will of men to abuse, but also the position of women to be abused” (Montes, 2020).

* Anti-abortion Propaganda

The actions of pro-choice activists have been the target of constant and very aggressive attacks. In Chile in 2018, “a self-identified group of ‘patriots’ posted a banner in the vicinity of the Catholic University that read ‘Free sterilization for feminazis.’” In addition, they dumped blood and animal entrails all over La

²⁷ Known as “Gabriela’s Law”, it defines the gender-motivated murder of women as femicide (*El País*, 2020).

Alameda, one of Santiago's main avenues (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). Symbolic elements are often used to draw a graphic analogy between abortion and murder. In a similar vein, a group in Colombia mentioned a campaign against abortion launched by a small-town church:

They filled the entire atrium with photos of women with dead babies in their hands, photos of fetuses, bits of babies all over the place, so many things. And when someone went and asked them: 'what is this', 'what is this lack of respect', 'how can you put this up?'; they immediately responded with very anti-women and anti-choice tirades, saying that women are murderers. (Prisma, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

The attacks on activist groups and organizations that support abortion rights or its legalization "include legal charges,²⁸ attacks on social media, and physical attacks at their homes and/or their organizations' headquarters" (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). In addition to constant allegations that "abortion is murder," fundamentalists operate simultaneously on several fronts. For example, they operate in the legal sphere, proposing laws or amendments to prevent the legalization of abortion, in each country's jurisdiction. At the same time, they use the media to publicize their narratives, taking advantage of local cases. In 2020, the case of an abortion request by a seven-month pregnant woman in Colombia, received ample coverage on social media and local and national media outlets not only to emphasize the idea that "abortion is murder," but also to defend the "right to fatherhood," which would be denied if the right to abortion were upheld (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

During a recent debate on the legalization of abortion in Argentina's Chamber of Deputies, anti-rights groups mounted a campaign of "blue protests,"²⁹ alluding to one of their most popular symbols, the blue handkerchief. This campaign sought to use threats and intimidation to challenge the deputies and get

²⁸ In particular, activists in both Argentina and Uruguay mentioned that the charges were linked to actions related to publicly defending the legal interruption of pregnancy and/or telephone helplines on the use of misoprostol.

²⁹ It is worth mentioning that these attacks took place during the discussion of the Abortion Decriminalization Law, which was finally passed on December 30, 2020.

them to reverse their position in favor of the abortion legalization bill (Menegazzi, 2020).

The “40 Days for Life”³⁰ anti-abortion campaign has been used in many places to prevent access to voluntary termination of pregnancy. Very disparate groups have used this strategy in different geographic regions (Fondo Semillas, 2020). Not only does the campaign’s message challenge the right to abortion and refer to abortion as “someone’s murder,” reiterating the narrative mentioned above, but it also depicts itself as a campaign by “families” whose values oppose the “murder of people.” In Colombia, activists observed that children were brought to several sit-ins, making the situation even more emotionally charged. The campaign has continued unfettered, despite the lockdowns and mobility restrictions imposed by several governments in response to COVID-19. An activist in Colombia recounted: “They’re doing it outside the hospital and they’re also doing it online because of health and safety measures, and many people are indeed joining in and doing it together” (Prisma, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

Attacks on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Depending on the country, the intensity and types of attacks on issues, such as same-sex marriage and adoption, has varied. In some cases, opposition is overt, while in others, greater legislative progress has been made. Based on conversations with several activists, we may infer that diverse gender identities and sexual orientations continue to be a battlefield everyday.

Activists from the Dominican Republic reported that the evangelical churches are constantly making accusations and discriminating against people of different gender identities and sexual orientations. These incidents “have a greater impact on the most impoverished and racialized families, who often have to turn to evangelical religious centers in search of support,” or guidance in dealing with a non-heterosexual member of their nuclear family (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

³⁰ This campaign, which originated in Texas, organizes 40-day vigils at health centers that perform abortions, to pressure them to stop. The 40 days are a symbolic reference to Lent (Amador and Granados, 2018).

They are also known for targeting events organized by trans people, events that even have institutional support, in keeping with policies and laws that uphold diversity. An activist from Colombia reported: painted over and damaged the crosswalk that they had made and wrote ‘society is rotting’. They also painted graffiti on the flag there. They began to attack the mayor; the people pushed up to him, accusing him of encouraging children and the citizens to become gay” (El Cuarto Mosquetero, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

Fundamentalist rhetoric and actions that identify heterosexuality as a cornerstone of the “natural order,” have intensified during the pandemic, and they often target trans people. Activists in Peru and the Dominican Republic reported a climate in which “attacks and hate crimes against trans people are intensifying and increasing,” (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020) including barriers to changing their names and accessing rights such as healthcare, education, and work.

According to a 2019 report by the Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transsexuais (Antra), at least 124 trans people, including transitioned and cross-dressing women and men, were murdered in Brazil in transphobic incidents.³¹ Between January and April 2020, there was a 48 percent increase in murders of trans people, compared with the previous year’s figures³² (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Activists in Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic have reported transfemicides. According to activists from Ecuador and Paraguay, violence against trans persons is fueled by rhetoric such as the campaign “Don’t Mess With my Children,” in particular, and by religious fundamentalism, in general, a situation that merits further review and investigation. An activist in Paraguay stated:

Many complaints were made as a result of this [increase in neoconservative actions in Paraguay] because, as you know, there’s a center where we receive sexual complaints and (we do so every day). After that, we made a comparative chart, which showed an increase in violence and attacks against those women, always

³¹ Benevides and Nogueira (2020).

³² <https://antrabrasil.org/category/violencia/>

on the streets where sex work takes place and so on. What's more, some colleagues were recently shot. In other words, anti-rights rhetoric in Paraguay has led to several incidents. (Vanesa, interview, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020)

Police violence against trans sex workers, in places where religious fundamentalist rhetoric is pervasive, is another key aspect of attacks of this type. In places where the government is right-leaning, police attacks on trans women have become more systematic. We see this violence in various forms. For example, it is very common for police officers to physically and verbally attack trans women, to a point where many feel that they are being treated as “nonpersons,” and they are being forced from their workplaces to areas where they may face a greater risk. An activist from a trans organization in Colombia reported:

In general, I feel very [bad] around police officers, because they do not treat us as they should - as people. And since we are sex workers (because some of us are sex workers), they also want to, I don't know, remove us from the area and send us somewhere else, where we won't be able to work; where we are actually going to face more danger, get killed or attacked. (Red Trans del Eje Cafetero, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

Violence against trans women worsens when discrimination based on gender identity and ethnicity is combined with the sexist and racist views held by police officers and some sectors of the population. A trans-feminist activist from an organization in Colombia related this:

... most are Black women, so there is double discrimination, as this girl put it: Black, queer and a whore. So this situation entails intense discrimination against the girls, because not only are they sex workers, but they are also Black. And the police came and began to hand out flyers to owners of restaurants, shops, cafes, saying that if they let us in, their businesses would be shut down, and [so] they banned “the chocolates”³³ from entering. (Femidiversxs, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

33 Discriminatory term referring to Black or Afro-Colombian women.

* Barriers to Access to Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Some attacks are meant to block access to sexual and reproductive rights, particularly women's access to these rights, and specifically their access to abortion. For example, medical personnel might refuse to guarantee access to abortion, claiming conscientious objection due to religious principles. In addition, religious activists sometimes gather outside hospitals to harass and intimidate women who want to make use of this right. This strategy closely reflects the way "40 Days for Life" operates, as religious fundamentalists have access to hospitals:

...When a case arises of a girl's access to voluntary interruption of pregnancy, and given that religious people are usually allowed to enter, the nuns would tell them that they are committing a sin and give them holy cards and the like, before this option is presented as a right. (Corporación 8 de marzo, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

A case from Brazil illustrates the connection between increased barriers to accessing abortion - even in cases in when it is legally permitted - and religious fundamentalist views. In August 2020, a 10-year-old girl requested the termination of a rape-related pregnancy. Fundamentalist religious groups that oppose this procedure, staged constant protests and revealed private information about the girl and her family. Local and federal politicians participated in the protests. Despite the enforceability and legality of this right, the hospital refused to perform the procedure (Fondo Elas, 2020).

* Attacks on Sexuality Education

We wish to address two specific situations on the subject of sexuality education. The first deals with the influence of religious fundamentalist groups involved in religious activities in schools, distorting the notion of secular education. The second deals with members of churches, local political officials, and even some organizations that oppose efforts by feminist groups to promote sexuality education.

Religious groups have steadily implemented and ramped up academic activities to promote their agenda in schools. A case in El Salvador illustrates this situation: "They've held forums at educational institutions, private schools, public schools, using hate speech, messages that reflect gender ideology, [and]

training students on how to be a woman and a man, and stressing that anything that does not conform to these two roles is wrong” (Bianka Rodríguez, Comcavis Trans, interview, Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

Campaigns that oppose sexuality education in schools and challenge different types of gender identity and sexual orientation have led to an increase in violence: “In Ecuador, cases of sexual abuse and intimidation of trans people, including transfemicides, have been reported, and are intensifying in tandem with the rise of campaigns such as ‘Don’t Mess With my Children’ and ‘I Educate My Children,’ as mentioned by activists” (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

In Colombia, we have encountered situations in which educational authorities used religious fundamentalist precepts to stigmatize activists who had led sexuality education campaigns: “We were at a meeting with school principals, and they accused us of encouraging youths to engage in sexual experimentation and become sexually active because we give workshops on sexual rights, gender perspective, and sexual diversity issues” (Prisma, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

In other countries, such as Brazil and Paraguay, attacks on sexuality education have occurred, in addition to policies and legislative amendments, such as the “non-partisan school,” in the former country, and legislative amendments and fundamentalist resolutions on sexuality education in the latter country.

Attempts To Amend or Overturn Existing Laws

Changing or attempting to amend laws is a typical attack strategy, particularly on key agenda issues: access to abortion activism, sexuality education with an emphasis on children’s rights, trans rights, and gender identity (Mirta Moragas, interview, 2020; Sonia Correa, interview, 2020). These issues have been in the public eye and the legal arena at different times in the region.

Actions by fundamentalist groups include challenging legislation, proposing new laws, and calling for budget cuts, especially at the local level, to prevent the application of laws, especially those on gender-based violence and gender identity recognition.

* Legislation on Sexuality Education

Campaigns under way in Paraguay since 2017, resulted in a Ministry of Education and Science resolution³⁴ banning “the dissemination and use of print and digital materials referring to gender theory and/or ideology, in educational institutions operating under the umbrella of this ministry” (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). The conservative position behind this resolution is still in effect today, and religious leaders such as evangelical pastor Eduardo Petta,³⁵ hold key positions in the ministry. Without a doubt, activists have felt the dire effects of these legislative changes, as one activist in Paraguay commented:

During three years of the progressive government that I’m telling you about, guidelines for sex education were established. When that government fell, they got rid of them and all manuals about sexuality. The Ministry of Education has issued a resolution banning all teachers and schools from addressing issues of gender identity or sex education, based on so-called gender ideology. (Pedro, interview, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020)

At the legislative level, fundamentalist groups continue to attack and oppose secular and progressive policies on this subject. For example, neoconservative groups in Uruguay opposed a proposal by the Uruguayan National Council for Preschool and Primary Education to include comprehensive sexuality education in schools (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

In Mexico, attempts have also been made to propose and amend legislation on sexuality education. Since 2000, there have been vehement campaigns against the subject. Recently, the proposal of establishing a “parental PIN” has taken hold. The “parental PIN” was invented by the far-right Vox Party³⁶ in Spain. It

³⁴ See, basis for Ministry Resolution No. 29664. <https://www.mec.gov.py/cms/?ref=298357-mec-resuelve-prohibicion-y-difusion-de-materiales-sobre-ideologia-de-genero>

³⁵ See Petta’s declarations in *Última Hora* (November 16, 2018).

³⁶ Vox, considered to be a “right-leaning” party, formed in 2013 as a split from the People’s Party. It has embraced nationalist proposals against rights for migrants and has sought to repeal laws on gender violence and historical reconciliation. The inroads it has made into regions that were considered to be strongholds of the PSOE and political progressives,

gives parents the power to veto the sexuality education classes offered at school. The center-right Partido Encuentro Social (PES), the right-leaning Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and Plataforma del Frente Nacional por la Familia have been promoting the “parental PIN” in some Mexican states. The approval of this policy would entail making substantial educational reforms. The debate on the “parental PIN” has gained traction in Mexico thanks to the pandemic and “homeschooling” proposals. Homeschooling has been proposed as an alternative to the shortcomings of the education system, but alarmingly conservatives also defend homeschooling as a pretext to limit sexuality education. An activist made the following observation:

... the parental PIN, well, I do believe there is a connection; that is, gender ideology paved the way and this Spanish initiative was suddenly adopted to enable parents to choose whether their children will take sex education classes. (Pauline, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

* Abortion Legislation and Gender-based Violence

In some cases, we have seen fundamentalists make statements about legal access to abortion. This is the case of Mexico, where activists warned that fundamentalist groups are interfering with legislation that provides guarantees on access to abortion, such as the Official Mexican Norm on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Violence against Women:

...the Frente Nacional por la Familia met with the health secretary to make two requests: first, that Law 046 not be enforced and second, that the sale of misoprostol³⁷ be banned in pharmacies. To date, misoprostol is sold in pharmacies only with a prescription, as requested by the Frente Nacional por la Familia, isn't it? (Sofía Regalado, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

have drawn attention to it as an electoral political force. In the 2019 elections in Spain, Vox took 24 seats in Congress, representing 10.26 percent, approximately 2.6 million votes (Altares, 2019).

³⁷ A drug used to induce abortions during the first trimester of pregnancy, with an effectiveness of 75-85 percent.

As we mentioned earlier, abortion legislation in Colombia has also been the target of intense attacks in the past two years. Lawsuits seeking to criminalize abortion in the three cases where it has been recognized as a right, is among the legal strategies used with the endorsement and support of conservative, religious, and far-right political parties. So far, the Constitutional Court has rejected those legal actions (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

In 2018, after the law on the voluntary termination of pregnancy did not pass, Argentine anti-abortion fundamentalists, among which evangelical churches play a leading role, intensified their attacks on the existing legislation. Local activists reported that “the neoconservatives, including those who had publicly supported comprehensive sexuality education as an alternative to abortion, took to the streets and attacked it in the media.” They noted that the Alianza Cristiana de Iglesias Evangélicas de la República Argentina has played a prominent role (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).³⁸

In Uruguay, fundamentalist groups have harshly criticized the laws on gender identity rights, referring constantly to “gender ideology” in their attacks on the 2018 Integral Law for Trans People (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). Again in 2019, a political and religious alliance promoted and “held a pre-referendum to overturn that law.”³⁹ Pastor Márquez played a key role in that endeavor.

Activists in Ecuador mentioned the flyer circulated by pro-life groups and written by the “Ecuadorian Bishop’s Conference against the legal recognition of gender-based violence against LGBTIQPA+ people” (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

In Dominican Republic:

...the current government, the first in Latin America⁴⁰ to take office during the pandemic, appointed religious women to the Ministry of Education’s Gender Department. It censored a tweet that supported abortion, which had been posted on the Ministry of Women’s social media account, ‘shut down the account’ on

³⁸ For more information, see *El Fuego* (September 18, 2018).

³⁹ For more information, see Carrasco (August 2, 2019).

⁴⁰ Lima (July 6, 2020).

Twitter and then got rid of the post (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Fundamentalist groups in Ecuador opposed the amendments to the Health Code to ban the so-called “conversion therapy clinics.” According to activists, “to date, none of those responsible have been punished, and none of the victims have ever received any compensation or had their rights restored” (Cayetana. Taller de Comunicación Mujer, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Finally, in this section, we would like to draw attention to the attempts to pass amendments or present legislation based on fundamentalist beliefs and directed at diverse aspects of human rights (Mirta Monagas, interview, 2020). This review indicates that the subjects that concern fundamentalist groups have diversified, and their repeated challenges of democratic systems and broad recognition for human rights.

In this regard, activists in Uruguay called attention to the 2020 passage of the Urgent Consideration Law (LUC), “which seriously affected issues such as safety, housing, education, access to productive land, [by] criminalizing the right to strike, social protest, among others” (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).⁴¹ Also, the budget bill in that country is cutting funds for areas associated with rights and social welfare and “increasing funding for areas connected with the executive branch, the Interior and Foreign Ministries, all of which has been accompanied by a strong pro-militarization rhetoric.” In this context, it has been reported that that not only have outsourcing policies been promoted, but also financing policies “to enable religious organizations to carry out social work and/or health policies” (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). Most legislative bills of this type are steps toward the privatization of the state and they ensure that religious fundamentalist organizations will have an influential role.

Similarly, the rights of migrants have been the target of legislative attacks. This was reported by Black activists who migrated to Chile, in reference to the discussion of “the new immigration law.” “Racism, discrimination mark this law,

⁴¹ For more information, see Latfem (July 15, 2020).

which is bent on denying migrants' rights" (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). According to migrant activists, depending on the geographic location (at the border or elsewhere), police actions are clearly very violent toward women and people of diverse sexual and gender identities, even those who have been sexually assaulted.

Similarly, migrants are being targeted in attacks with increased elements of racism. Activists in Dominican Republic reported that the police have attacked Haitian female migrants, incited by fundamentalist groups (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). Activists in Ecuador also mentioned similar attacks against Venezuelan female migrants.

Obstacles to Exercising the Rights to Free Speech, Protest, Free Assembly, and Other Fundamental Rights

* Violent Military Repression of Protests

The violent military repression of protests has prevailed in the region during this period. Fundamentalist religious and political rhetoric is often the driving force behind actions to repress the activities and protests of grassroots organizations, which not only increases the danger faced by human rights advocates and activists, but also fuels a political climate marked by hate, violence, and discrimination. Protests are always seen as "suspicious" rather than a right that constitutes a pillar in any democratic system.

Those who participated in Chile's "social explosion" faced violent attacks at the hands of the carabiniers, which operate as a militarized police force: "Between October 18, 2019 and March 18, 2020, there were 3,023 victims of human rights violations, including 163 people who sustained eye injuries and more than 2,000 who were imprisoned" (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).⁴² In their study, Chilean activists clearly noted that violence was used "particularly against gender and sexual dissidents." Not only did the violence seek to limit the "right to freedom of expression and protest," but also "to diminish their role in society by attacking their bodies

⁴² For more information, see the social crisis statistical reports on the website of the Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos.

and their dignity as people.” In fact, “66 cases of attacks of this type were recorded between October 18, 2019 and March 11, 2020” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).⁴³

In November 2020, the UN urged the Mexican Government to protect the rights of women and their supporters at a feminist demonstration in Cancun to protest femicide, which was viciously repressed by police gunfire. Two journalists were hit by gunfire (Varela, 2020).

In September 2020, the police killed 13 people, mostly youths, during protests over police abuse in Bogota. Following these incidents, groups of artists painted an Action Command Post⁴⁴ with a mural depicting the face of Julieth Ramírez, an 18-year-old girl who was killed during the protests. The police censored and erased the mural (Forero, 2020).

Likewise, militarization and violent repression of protests have increased in Brazil. Increased military presence in government since Bolsonaro took office is part of this plan:

Currently, some of our ministries are more militarized than they were during the dictatorship. While 10 of Bolsonaro’s 22 ministers (approximately 45 percent) come from the military, the previous administrations compare as follows: Itamar Franco, 3 out of 21 (14 percent); Fernando Henrique Cardoso, 3 out of 23 (13 percent); Luiz Inacio da Silva, 0 out of 24 (0 percent); Dilma Rousseff, 0 out of 25 (0 percent); Michel Temer, 1 out of 26 (4 percent). When Bolsonaro took office, his cabinet had 7 military out of 22 (32 percent), a number that has already nearly doubled in a year and a half. (Fondo Elas, 2020)

The social and political crisis in Bolivia in late 2019 and the takeover by conservative and religious fundamentalist groups led to the creation of civilian shock groups that attacked demonstrations and protests (see section on the groups and their agendas). These groups “exercised violence against women, the Indigenous population, and LGBTIQ+ people with the support and complicity of government authorities” (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020).

⁴³ Autonomous anti-racist, lesbian, trans, LGBTIQ2+ and feminist activists, collectives and organizations (2020).

⁴⁴ Unit of Colombia’s National Police.

Considering the complex and ultra-conservative anti-abortion legislation in Central America, the work of abortion-rights activists is also being threatened through less overt, but equally harmful strategies. In this regard, “low-intensity attacks through censorship, spying, intervention and institutional harassment, which are state-led,” have been seen (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). These actions reflect a strong principle of the religious and political fundamentalists: “resistance to change.”

* **Public, Legal and Economic Strategies To Limit Protests**

Similarly, we have seen that civil society organizations that uphold religious and political fundamentalist principles also engage in acts of censorship that undermine activists’ right to freedom of expression. A lesbian-feminist activist from Chile reported on this: “They are invading public areas with nationalist and anti-feminist graffiti and messages. They deface our signs and posters. They also attack us on our website and social media. Some men send us pictures of their penis with messages about corrective rape” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). Legal attacks seeking to prevent the exercise of freedom of expression and some strategies to limit access to the resources that are available to grassroots organizations are also common.

Lawsuits have been filed against feminist organizations in several Latin American countries. For example, the case filed against *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* in Peru:

It is not a coincidence that the lawyer for *Padres en Acción* also happens to be the president of *Asociación Centro Jurídico Tomás Moro*, which launched legal attacks directly against feminist organizations, specifically a lawsuit against *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir*. And it applied to register the name of the organization *Madres en Acción* as a trademark. (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020)

Prior to these legal attacks, members of the organizations are often followed or harassed at public events, and targeted with other type of actions. Activists from Peru mentioned “incidents of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by members of anti-rights groups against activists who were staging a sit-in to defend gender perspective. On that occasion, the police were present and did

nothing to stop the aggressors” (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Finally, we want to mention some strategies that seek to limit access to the resources that are available to grassroots organizations. In Paraguay, a bank refused to receive funds for an organization backed by the Fondo de Mujeres del Sur and after this incident, other banks followed suit (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

“Progressive Conservatism” and Attacks from Inside the Feminist Movement

Activists mentioned several cases in which groups in the feminist movement and political sectors that call themselves “progressive” have used arguments that coincide with religious fundamentalist beliefs to oppose diverse gender identities and sexual orientations and therefore, rights, especially those of trans people.

Several activists, particularly in Mexico, Colombia, and Dominican Republic, referred to conflicts regarding the rights of trans women, and occasions when positions appeared to agree and even led to alliances.

We wish to highlight that during this period, conflicts have increased between the position that defines sex and gender as biological concepts, and the position that recognizes sex and gender as social and cultural constructs. These conflicts have even led to attacks and hate talk that hinder debate and cause activist burnout. This trend, which already existed in the feminist movement, is gaining ground, and is no longer considered a side issue (Sonia Correa, interview, 2020). Feminists who defend the biological facts of sex and gender and therefore question the identity of “trans women,” are known as gender-critical feminists:

... this is not actually about typical anti-rights groups, but has to do with transphobic feminists who are indeed turning into fundamentalists... For instance, the acronym TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), is being called a misogynistic insult and so on and so forth, so that it is becoming harder to use. Nevertheless, I do use it because it’s useful to describe their ideology and practices... At times, I’ve found myself wondering if using this acronym is a good idea because I know that if I publicly accuse a woman of this, and it turns out that she is not a TERF, having been accused will make her completely reject my positions. (Sofia P, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

Discriminatory rhetoric against trans people reinforces biological notions over the experience of being women and men, which ultimately coincides with arguments found in religious fundamentalist rhetoric. For some activists, it is worrisome that many feminists who are beginning to voice those views had been upholding and working for trans people's rights:

...trans women are no longer only being attacked by conservative or religious groups, but also by those who were, at some point, their allies, and they are using the same arguments, which are no longer based on the Bible or a lie, but... on a fallacy and a feminist theory or a distortion of feminist theories. Ultimately, their arguments are the same biological ones, which define that a woman is only a woman because of her biology, the reproductive organs with which she is born, rather than her identity. (Polari, focus group, Fondo Lunaria, 2020)

In Dominican Republic, activists mentioned these conflicts concerning views on sex work rather than gender identity. On this subject, differing views in the feminist movement have also led to the discrimination of trans activists:

They often want to use us to fill up mass events. Then, drawing power is the main consideration, and they ask us for support, because we have drawing power.... But when they hold activities at a higher level of leadership, they don't invite us; we learn about these on social media. (Otrasex, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020)

Meanwhile, there are other conflicts inside the movement concerning positions on abortion. According to some activists, these conflicts arise from "fundamentalist beliefs, internalized and accepted within the feminist movement," which is better addressed through education policies rather than estrangement. A Chilean feminist activist put it as follows: "Raising awareness on these issues is part of our work with people. We cannot exclude them because they do not share our views. Our activism also consists of educating ourselves and opening the minds of other women" (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

Finally, without referring to specific cases, some activists stated that in certain contexts, groups that identify as "progressive" or left-leaning often have conservative stances on feminist agendas, particularly on abortion rights, and recognition and rights for people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

COVID-19 and What Was Already Obvious: Inequality, Violence and Authoritarianism

This section contains several reflections on how the fundamentalist agenda has operated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that the measures adopted by the governments in the region worsened situations of discrimination and violence against women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, which in turn, had an impact on feminist activism.

As we emphasized earlier (see the section: Overview of the Region), the pandemic heightened conditions of inequality, authoritarianism, racism, sexism, and militarism which were already part of the region's historical circumstances. With concern, we observed an increase in the precariousness of living conditions in general, and for activists in particular (Fondo Alquimia, 2020; Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). This overview must be considered in the context of the social mobilization processes in the different countries where the feminist activists are working. In this context, religious and political fundamentalists are also trying to forge ahead and fight for the issues on their agendas, with different levels of intensity.

Political and Religious Agenda

Political and religious fundamentalist groups continued their actions, intensified their work on social media, and launched specific attacks in certain settings. Some of the issues from the religious fundamentalist agenda received media coverage during the pandemic. For instance, one activist reported that during this period, these groups stepped up the pressure to approve the “parental PIN” in several Mexican states (see the section on attacks):

...the pro-life groups caught us off guard in Aguascalientes, and while we were trying to survive the COVID-19 crisis - looking after others, cooking, doing household chores - they were lobbying for and managed to pass the parental PIN law. We didn't find out until the news was published in the media. When we saw it, we wondered, “darn it, when [did this happen]?” We never knew, because we were busy surviving the COVID-19 crisis (Dahlia, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020).

Even though Brazil was among those countries with the highest numbers of cases, President Jair Bolsonaro exempted churches and worship services from the list of institutions closed and activities suspended under lockdown measures. This was despite calls by the health agencies to implement lockdown measures without any exceptions (Agencia de Periodismo Investigativo, 2020). In several countries, religious groups notoriously used the “pandemic” to pursue their agenda: “Fundamentalist groups have taken advantage of the pandemic... they have portrayed the pandemic as some sort of evil event and so, they’ve tried to persuade us of the need for atonement and conversion” (Felipe, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020).

Similarly, some activists in Peru reported that several religious spokespersons made statements connecting the pandemic to “immoral deeds,” such as abortions and homosexuality. Furthermore, a leader of the campaign “Don’t Mess With My Children” publicly called on “true Christians” to forgo wearing masks, go to church, and not fear death” (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Activists in Central America observed government officials putting on “religious performances,” such as flying icons of Catholic saints over cities, singing evangelical hymns, and declaring a “national prayer” day (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). Activists in Colombia also reported that “during the lockdowns, amid the COVID-19 crisis, some politicians prayed to the Virgin to protect their departments” (Yukasa, interview, Fondo Lunaria, 2020). To some extent, this shows how religious symbolism has been used in institutional settings during the pandemic, casting doubt, once again, on the principle of a secular state.

Institutional statements often used rhetoric that was “militaristic, pro-free market, and conservative on gender roles, reinforcing the latter with messages about the ‘importance’ of women as caregivers of their families, communities, and so on” (Andrea and María; Nadia [Argentina], interview, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). In Peru, activists reported that traditional gender roles were reinforced during the gender-based lockdown measure *pico y género*. For example, supermarket lines were longer on the shopping days for women. Furthermore, “there was an increase in hate speech against women, as they were blamed for ‘trying to buy a week’s worth of supplies,’ referring to the many things they

were buying to meet their families' needs" (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Widespread Precarity with a Dose of Authoritarianism

During this period, measures were implemented to undo progress and delay "issues pending" from the 2019 social protests. An activist in Ecuador reported:

There is no common thread, but the repressive thinking of the COVID-19 situation helped to undo the social momentum gained in October 2019... So I believe it's not a coincidence that xenophobic and hate speech are being used to dampen social momentum the same way. What was not accomplished in October, was done in the context of COVID-19. For instance, a humanitarian law was passed that dealt a blow to workers' rights in all sectors (Taller de Comunicación Mujer, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Several countries adopted stay-at-home or lockdown measures without considering the social wellbeing of the population. Informal workers were hit the hardest. People working in domestic service were laid off from their precarious jobs (see the section: Overview of the Region). Activists from Peru, Brazil, and Chile specifically mentioned this situation. For example, in Brazil, "the first fatal victim of COVID-19 in the state of Rio de Janeiro was a domestic worker⁴⁵ who became infected in her workplace. Her employer had returned from a trip to Italy, which had the highest number of cases at the time, and ignored the order to self-quarantine; thus exposing the worker" (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Mobility restrictions and social discrimination particularly impacted sex workers. A Mexican activist recounted: "Fellow trans women, fellow trans sex workers, were evicted from the hotels in Mexico City where they lived, to turn these buildings into hospitals. This situation sucks" (Estefanía, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020).

⁴⁵ De Melo (March 19, 2020).

Militarization

Governments adopted militaristic COVID-19 response measures, which increased situations of human rights violations. The results are extremely negative because in many regions we see that the police have become militarized and act as a force that attacks and violates the rights of the citizens instead of protecting them, especially during protests. This is the case of the state of exception in Peru, which authorized the military forces and police to enforce lockdown measures. Chile also declared a state of exception under the same pretext; that is, “to provide security” through military presence in Latin America (BBC, 2020). In fact, the military forces were tasked with running COVID-19 campaigns and providing care (DW, 2020).

The same happened in El Salvador, where the government has implemented several populist measures (subsidies), during a state of exception with a strong militarization component (DW, 2020). The UN has issued a statement on this issue, urging states to keep measures to deal with the COVID-19 emergency, such as states of exception, within legal bounds so that minority groups and the work of human rights advocates is not affected (OHCHR, 2020).

In Bolivia, the Indigenous population saw “an increase in cases of harassment, discrimination, and attacks, especially concerning access to healthcare services, but also at the hands of law enforcement officers, whose presence in public areas has increased, as well as because of the state’s consent to curtail the freedoms and rights of the population in general” (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020). These “law enforcement” agents have acted violently and they generally had the legal authority to do so because of the crisis and authoritarian climate under the far-right presidency of Janine Áñez. This situation has been incubating since the creation of the so-called “youth resistance” groups and “departmental civic committees,” which “carried out violent attacks on women, the Indigenous population, and LGBTIQ+ people, with the support and complicity of state officials” during the 2019 political crisis (Apthapi Jopueti, 2020). According to the analysis by Apthapi Jopueti, “the religious, conservative, and racist inclinations of the new government [led by Janine Áñez] paved the way for these civilian groups to avail themselves of power and privileges to perpetrate these actions.”

Activist organizations from Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay stated that they experienced an increase in police abuse during the pandemic. This was common in all three countries, even though the “quarantine” measures that were imposed in Argentina and Paraguay were not mandatory in Uruguay. In Ecuador, the activists observed an increase in the use of security devices, such as surveillance cameras for social control, implemented during the state of exception, and actions such as curfews (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). Cases of police abuse were reported in Dominican Republic: “These violent actions became socially normalized and justified. In this country, “the police killed a 23-year-old man because he was walking outside a little after the curfew. They shot him and killed him” (Teatro Maleducadas, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Militarization in Brazil had increased significantly even before the pandemic. As the people’s wellbeing is declining, military presence is increasing: “In many territories, the only state presence that exists is through military presence. These are areas without schools, healthcare services, and often without basic sanitation. However, the military forces are there on behalf of the state” (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Central America also saw militarization to “contain the virus.” The result was not only an increase in physical attacks, but also a shift in the region’s views and attitudes, “which were set back 40 years with the reappearance of the specters of authoritarianism, fascism, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests, among other social phenomena that occurred during that period” (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

People in Mexican states felt the actions of the local police forces and militarization more intensely than those in the capital city. Activists noted that, unlike other sectors, the military did not face budget cuts (Fondo Semillas, 2020). Violence increased around the extractive industries, and heavy military presence was seen in racialized and ethnic communities, such as in Peru and Ecuador. Activists emphasized that the actions of “the military forces benefited the extraction companies, who did not halt their projects and took advantage of the pandemic to expand” (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Barriers to Sexual, Reproductive Rights and Pleasure

Most of the region's healthcare systems are in a precarious state and were not prepared to deal with the crisis unleashed by COVID-19, which left them overwhelmed. Across the board, barriers to service became even more pronounced for people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, and for access to abortion. As activists in Chile put it: "No hormone treatments or HIV triple therapy antiretrovirals were delivered. Also, access to abortion procedures and emergency contraceptive pills was extremely restricted" (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

Depending on the country, the greatest obstacles were seen in access to abortion, revealing how challenging it is for women to access this right when the law is restrictive. This is the case in Mexico, where activists reported greater obstacles to access abortion procedures, especially outside the capital, because of legal restrictions in their states (Fondo Semillas, 2020). In Argentina and Paraguay, some activists observed difficulties accessing sexual and reproductive health services, especially at the beginning of the pandemic when budgets were channeled to deal with the crisis (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). In Dominican Republic, "sex workers faced greater obstacles to access health services, and they were denied hygiene kits and had to fight for them. Similarly, in Venezuela, "free sexual and reproductive health services became unavailable" (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). The situation in Brazil was one of the most challenging, in terms of providing healthcare services. During the pandemic, the country had three health ministers. The country's mortality rate confirms that the system's response to the crisis was inadequate (Fondo Elas, 2020).

Lockdown orders affected relationships and intimacy in many homes. In addition, the taboos that still surround sex and sexual relations, meant that many young women saw their right to affective-sexual encounters restricted (Fondo Semillas, 2020) The prevalence of discriminatory views and attitudes meant that many activists were not safe to communicate freely or continue to pursue their agendas at home: "At Balance, we also host events with homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, pansexual women and so on, and we use video conference calls. Several participants told us... 'I can't use my microphone. I'll participate through chat because I'm not in a safe environment to speak freely'" (Sofia, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020).

Increase in Violence Against Women and Gender-based Violence

The lockdowns revealed the prevalence of gender stereotypes through an excessive increase in incidents of gender-based violence and widespread inequality in domestic chores.

We found two situations that aggravated violence: On one hand, there was an increase in domestic chores, which were not redistributed, along with domestic conflicts in households where chauvinist and sexist views prevail. On the other hand, there were violent incidents in public places, especially in countries that implemented gender-based mobility restrictions, known as *pico y género*.

Regarding the first aspect, several activists investigated the increase in gender-based violence complaints, as the institutional resources to handle these were overwhelmed: “In times of isolation, it is known that gender-based violence increased significantly, because complaints to the 800-help line, which offers telephone support for victims, also increased, as opposed to those filed with the police or judicial authorities” (Fabiana [Uruguay], interview, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020).

In Brazil, an increase in incidents of gender-based violence was also obvious: “The growing exposure of women and girls to aggressors, on a more frequent and daily basis, led to an increase in reported cases of domestic violence”⁴⁶ (Fondo Elas, 2020).

People of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities were victims of domestic violence. According to the activists, many victims had to leave their homes because the additional time spent living together intensified homophobic and transphobic views and attitudes. The activists consider that it is important to investigate if suicides during the pandemic were related to discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity:

We are even trying to identify the suicide cases of young people that are being reported in the country because we were only recording the crimes, the murders of LGBT+ people, but now we have realized that there are disappearances, suicide

⁴⁶ <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/direitos-humanos/noticia/2020-06/casos-de-feminicidio-crescem-22-em-12-estados-durante-pandemia>

cases that are related to intra-family homophobia. (Gloria, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

Activists from Mexico, Paraguay, and Argentina all referred to this situation.

Grassroots groups had to simultaneously strengthen their networks and proposals to provide support and deal with cases of violence. This happened in several countries, where feminist solidarity and support groups for abortion rights saw the need to diversify and increase their support.

As for the second aspect, public violence, it is important to mention that the measures adopted to deal with the COVID-19 crisis allowed authoritarian regimes to justify or expand coercive policies, in which sex and gender are key elements for exerting control, and may be used as criteria for “population segregation” (Correa, 2020).

According to activists in Central America, where “binary mobility” restrictions were implemented, the lack of socioeconomic measures to ease the population’s precarious situation significantly increased and exacerbated cases of gender-based violence (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

Panama and Peru were the first countries to implement gender-based mobility restrictions, followed by Colombia, although these only applied to several cities. In Peru, these measures were used to reinforce gender stereotypes. For instance, when the women went out, they were accused of hoarding and causing long lines at the supermarkets (Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020). Also, women were not allowed to bring their daughters to the shopping centers, which affected single mothers. Several activists said that these “measures reflect the state’s heteronormative view, which is solely concerned with the heterosexual family (Madres en Acción, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

In Peru, religious fundamentalist groups issued public statements calling for the defense of sex and gender from a biological perspective to justify *pico y género* measures. For instance, Christian Rosas, the leader of “Don’t Mess With My Children,” spoke in favor of defending “the truth about respecting a person’s biological sex” (Madres en Acción, interview, Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020) and arresting trans people

while the *pico y sexo* [sic] policy was in effect. This climate of stigmatization affected trans people the most, as police forces accosted them in both Peru and Colombia, under the pretext of the *pico y género* measures.

Finally, based on these analyses, we want to mention that the pandemic is being handled as a matter of “national security” rather than a public health issue, which demands that governments adopt socioeconomic welfare measures for the entire population:

This is a health issue that we seldom saw handled as such. Rather, it was dealt with as a matter of national security, in which the police, the military forces, and not health concerns, play a prominent role. I believe this must be recognized. How can this issue being handled? How can a health issue be managed through the police? This is an aspect that must be considered carefully because I believe there was indeed abuse of authority, police abuse, military presence on the streets to deal with a health issue, which caused many problems, even over the use of masks. (Aidé, interview, Fondo Semillas, 2020)

The militarization, the increase in violent attacks on women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, and the repression of protests, as well as the lack of social welfare measures, are creating a complex atmosphere of authoritarianism, compounded by social inequality, which will deepen with the region’s growing economic crisis.



CHAPTER 4

Strategies and Actions To Counter Anti-gender Forces

This research project aims to serve as an opportunity for collective reflection on how to act and develop strategies against political and religious fundamentalists who attack the rights of women, people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, and democratic principles. These attacks take different forms, but they can be countered by using all of our political imagination and all the tools (legal, political, communication, artistic, etc.) at our disposal. What the women's funds understand clearly is that financing grassroots organizations, with flexible funds for ordinary day-to-day operations, is the best strategy to counter fundamentalist and far-right forces, which find a clear opponent in feminism. As Nadia Dermendjieva of the Bulgarian Fund for Women says, giving operating funds to grassroots groups is the best way to counter the advance of fundamentalist groups.

Feminism provides tools to analyze the world and, above all, transform it. In recent years, massive and diverse protests and social resistance have occurred (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). To counter the current political era of authoritarianism, we must bet on diverse, encompassing feminism that recognizes the relationships between the systems of oppression based on sex, gender, class, and race. Anti-gender groups make it very clear that when they talk about "gender," their enemies are the rights of women and LGBTIQ2+ people, and even the mere existence of these people. Therefore, it is essential for these two axes of struggle to forge close alliances (Fondo Semillas, 2020). Women's funds have shown that providing funding to functionally diverse organizations made up of women who are rural, Roma, Indigenous, Black, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, etc., is the best way to strengthen the feminist movement.

Finally, as evidenced by the fact that attacks on gender are coupled with attacks on democracy, the response will be more effective if it is undertaken and coordinated jointly with those who work to spread democracy and safeguard the civil rights and freedoms that give us greater capacity to act.

Sorority and Support for Activists

The conservative reaction by far-right movements, parties, and media has led to an escalation of attacks on feminist/LGBTIQ2+ activists, which include media campaigns and harassment on social networks, threats of death or rape, attempts to fire activists from their jobs, and even physical assaults. The women's funds have provided support to protect activists: emergency aid to evacuate women from high-risk areas, legal defense in court cases, protection and support so that activists can receive psychological help, and measures for collective care and to recover from trauma.

This is not simply a matter of responding, but of creating networks that serve as protection for activists. It is important to view the members of these collectives, groups, organizations, and networks as critical players in the movement and, therefore, providing funding for their mental health and physical safety should be a priority. It is necessary to continue promoting and providing resources that allow activists and leaders to take a break, recover and recharge to guarantee the sustainability of the movements (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

When these attacks happen, they can cause fear and force certain issues out of the public spotlight. Therefore, responses must express collective strength and enable the attacked activists to feel safe and supported. For example, in Georgia, an organization that works on sexuality education received a series of serious threats, which other activists took as a warning to all. The activist who was targeted decided to handle this situation by going public with the story. She organized a campaign and appeared on media outlets, including TV. This brought considerable publicity to the issue of the need for sexuality education, an issue that otherwise would not have received media coverage. In this case, the attack was used as an opportunity to publicize the issue (Women's Fund in Georgia, 2020). Furthermore, anti-gender activists often claim that they are the ones being victimized. Therefore, when this type of aggression occurs, it is necessary to turn the narrative around and delegitimize them, pointing out all the violence that they use to defend their positions.

These attacks can also serve to highlight the political aspects of an issue that is already under discussion. For example, a manifesto and a petition were circulated to draw attention to the attempt to censor a conference on sex work at a Spanish university. These actions also managed to get media coverage as an “attack on freedom of expression” and the “illegitimacy of the attempt to prevent sex workers from speaking.” Subsequently, numerous universities offered to host conferences on this issue and much more publicity was received than would have been achieved without the attack (Mama Cash, 2020; Calala Fondo de Mujeres, 2020).

As has been mentioned, it is difficult to identify general principles on when to respond, or not, to an attack. If threats are received and they are not widely known, publicizing them could be counterproductive, as that might intimidate other activists. If the threats are already sufficiently in the public eye, it is probably better to denounce them forcefully and publicly support the attacked activists. It is beneficial to respond when it is certain that the reaction will be an expression of strength. In this sense, solidarity is essential to protect activism and enable it to unfold in conditions of “well-being and joy” (Fondo Alquimia, 2020 and Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, 2020).

Protection from Cyberviolence

Having a presence in social media is increasingly important for activism because one aspect of political participation consists of developing rhetoric and influencing public opinion. In many of the attacks that were reported, harassment through social media was a determining factor. Therefore, it could be useful to prepare before attacks take place, so that activists and organizations are not caught off guard. Protocols can be developed in the event of physical or cyberattacks, to respond to the most likely scenarios, but also the most extreme ones (Calala Fondo de Mujeres, 2020; Fondo Alquimia, 2020). In this sense, it is necessary to

be attentive and alert to which women in our circles might be experiencing this violence so that, when these incidents happen, we have reaction and protocols. These include formal protocols in which everyone knows what to do, and we have mechanisms to raise our voices, knowing what the targeted woman needs, and how to protect her privacy so as not to expose her more. (Pikara, 2020)

Digital security is a key issue to bear in mind. This is related to general security for the organizations' people, although not everyone recognizes that this issue is important. Many funds and organizations already have security protocols and mechanisms in place, for example, how to respond to slander on social media, how to maintain a public image, managing social networks and media outlets, such as community radio stations, and protection of personal and organizational information (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). It is also important to be able to create new practical knowledge, developed in conjunction with the organizations, and to publicize it at the local and transnational level (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

Digital violence is sexist violence. It violates fundamental rights and affects political participation by women/LGBTIQ2+ people (Píkara, 2020). According to the report by Calala Women's Fund, the law and the state must ensure that the internet operates as an effective public forum. It should be noted that laws by themselves are not enough. Solutions must include various technical and political strategies. The latter are very diverse: from public campaigns against gender-based violence online (aimed especially at the male population) to supporting the creation of online feminist networks, and digital security strategies for women and other vulnerable groups (Hybridas and Commons, 2020). In this sense, the targeted activists must receive social support. When these attacks occur, it is important to respond through collective and personal networks, even creating ad hoc support campaigns.

Women's funds in Europe and Latin America are financing multiple feminist initiatives for the use of social networks, and participating in the creation of networks to mutually support activists who are being attacked.

Confluences and Fronts

Regional and Transnational Action

As mentioned, anti-rights forces are strengthening their ties at the international level and coordinating their speeches and strategies. Feminists and LGBTIQ2+

activists are also working on responses at the regional and international level, and the existing transnational feminist networks are being reinforced and developing closer ties. Women’s funds play a key role in facilitating international linkages of grassroots groups. The Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, for example, has experience in facilitating meetings between activists and groups from Latin America and Europe. It considers that creating opportunities for organizations from different locations to share their strategies can contribute to building bonds of mutual support.

Improving the safety of people who work on gender equality issues requires regional and international efforts to denounce and discourage intimidating practices, and to demand that the authorities punish these. Therefore, legal strategies should not be ruled out when the resources are available. Likewise, calls should be made to investigate anti-democratic, illegal, or wrongful acts by anti-gender players.

In addition, international petitions or letters of support for activists in critical situations can have a strong empowering effect and impact at the local level (ALEG and Women’s Resource Center, interview, 2019). For example, the European Commission itself added its voice to the international campaign for the release of queer Polish activist Margot Szutowicz (Feminist Fund-Poland, 2020). In another example, some Polish municipalities had declared themselves “LGTB-free zones,” but they had to backtrack when their “twinning” communities in Western Europe said they wanted to cut off relations with them after this declaration¹ (Feminist Fund, Poland, 2020).

Creating and Strengthening Activist Networks

One of the best strategies to confront fundamentalism is by promoting linkages and ties between different organizations as well as between the feminist movement and other diverse social movements (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). We can use attacks as opportunities for collective collaboration that lead to putting aside differences to work together as a united front. The collective response to attacks can

¹ Twinning links towns or cities in different geographic and political areas to promote human contact and cultural exchange. It is a policy supported by the European Union.

be a show of force and an opportunity to make our alliances visible. In this sense, it can be useful for different types of groups, both political and civil society, to form a common front (filia, Germany, 2020; Mama Cash, 2020). In Spain, for example, far-right graffiti and threats against feminist media and activists were countered by holding press conferences, demonstrations, and support actions that had far-reaching social resonance (Calala Women's Fund, 2020).

In Germany, the funds reported that as attacks on migrants intensified, alliances and networking between groups grew. In particular queer, feminist, and anti-racism groups united to oppose homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny. The movements understand that these struggles are interrelated and that the increase in ethno-nationalism poses a threat to everyone (filia, Germany, 2020; Mama Cash, 2020). For example, within 24-hours of the attacks on bars frequented by migrants in Hanau, several anti-racist groups organized a demonstration by 5,000 people in the heart of Neukölln, Berlin's immigrant district (Mama Cash, 2020). If it is possible to get other players to add their support when the stakes are high, then networks that will persist over time can be created. A clear example is the Women of Pankow multiparty alliance that opposes the far right. This alliance was formed in response to the attack on the Paula Panke Women's Center in Berlin and it is still very active today (filia, Germany, 2020).

According to Mama Cash, the racism problem in Germany, which directly impacts social norms, is an issue that is too big for a single group to tackle, but it can be addressed through continuous and close cooperation among various players in a network. Therefore, investing in these networks is an integral part of the funds' work. This entails undertaking public activities which include demonstrations, petitions, and others (Mama Cash, 2020). The Bulgarian Fund for Women reports the same thing (2020). Some of the groups it supports host activities with people and organizations from a very wide range of liberal values: intellectuals, public figures, academics, ambassadors, business leaders, artists, etc. In this way, they actively contribute to building a movement.

Since 2018, the Bulgarian Fund for Women has also been working on building an intersectional coalition that brings together 30 NGOs in order to come up with joint responses, given the limited opportunities for progressive political action. It is worthwhile to focus efforts on strengthening intersectional alliances

between NGOs at the local, national, and international level. NGOs tend to create coalitions that focus on a single issue or ideology: gender equality, education, young people, human rights, etc.; however, intersectional associations that bring together organizations from different fields are very important for strengthening the voice and long-term impact of activism (ALEG and Women's Resource Center, interview, 2019).

Feminism Converges with the Defense of Democracy and Civil Rights

Throughout this study, it has been demonstrated that attacks on gender and attacks on democracy and human rights are related. In Latin America, for example, many feminist activists are fighting the extractive industries. They have observed sexist reactions to their opposition, as part of a continuum that foments sexist violence, which can make it very difficult to fight these attacks. The murder of Mariele Franco, and of so many activists, is evidence of this. It is abundantly clear that civil and legal rights must be upheld so that feminism and the fight for sexual and gender dissidence can continue to advance.

With the COVID-19 crisis, impediments have increased when it comes to exercising fundamental rights. Therefore, it is essential that feminist/LGBTIQ2+ activists embrace the objectives of defending and spreading democracy as part of their own agenda. This would make it possible to forge new alliances with diverse groups that would not necessarily be natural allies. Thus, feminists could be involved in defending the rights to freedom of expression, demonstration, assembly, or access to effective justice. In Spain, for example, alleging the crime of offending religious sensibilities has been used to violate feminist activists' right to freedom of expression (Calala Fondo de Mujeres, 2020). Therefore, repealing this type of legislation should be considered a key objective.

The women's funds have also begun to make strategic alliances with local and international human rights organizations, so that feminist activists are included in their monitoring and protection actions, and to bring a feminist perspective to their work; responding to the specific needs of women human rights advocates (Calala Fondo de Mujeres, 2020).

Multiplication of Political/Communications Tools

Restrictions on civil rights due to COVID-19 have implied restructuring work strategies and ways of mobilizing in order to remain active. Some European governments have used the pandemic to call off or hinder feminist and LGBTQ2+ protests. Poland provides us with an example of how movements have come up with innovative ways to protest, even under very adverse conditions such as mobility restrictions.

Protests against restrictions on legal access to abortion did not disappear from the streets. Alternative types of protest were invented: demonstrations in cars, people who appeared to be in a shopping queue stood with placards in front of the Parliament, and there were even protests from balconies. The streets were also occupied when necessary. In fact, despite the restrictions, this wave of protests has been one of the largest in the country's recent history.

To counter attacks, or even anticipate them, multiple strategies must be used and no tool should be ruled out. Of course, social networks and the media should be used, but without forsaking street activism and all possible forms of communications and intervention. For example, the Bulgarian Fund for Women (2020) explained that, in addition to creating a network of collectives and like-minded people, they carry out diverse activities: marches, events, campaigns, and fundraising. Advocacy is also being done, including with the private sector, holding information events, art for social change, etc. They also use the social networks, where they try to maintain a strong presence and be recognizable in order to reach people who still do not have very firm positions on some issues and are wavering in their point of view (Bulgarian Fund for Women, 2020). In this regard, Fondo Lunaria proposes deconstructing the forums that the fundamentalists monopolize, through art (songs, performances, etc.), as a pedagogical strategy to communicate like-minded views. No one should be given up for lost; it is just a matter of adjusting the message according to the channel and the audience. The women's funds offer training in strategic communications for grassroots feminist organizations (Calala Fondo de Mujeres, 2020).

Art and communications activism is one of the strategies to help break through hermetic barriers and send the right messages. The challenge is to bring the pro-rights message and agenda to broad swaths of the population, which implies making use of aesthetics and narratives developed by diverse branches of feminism and activism. An example of this type of action would be the 2019 performance in Chile, “A Rapist in Your Path,” by Las Tesis, which had an incredible international reception and has been performed in many countries around the world. This performance, which portrays the spread of gender-based violence in a very powerful way, could be easily and massively replicated as it is possible to learn the lyrics and steps from videos online.

Media Activism

Throughout the study, it has been shown how the media has spread anti-gender messages. Many of the attacks are accompanied by hoaxes and fake news. To counteract this, it is necessary to produce our own narratives and appear in the mainstream media, work closely with and support media that are sympathetic to us, and even create our own media (Calala Fondo de Mujeres, 2020). It is essential to decentralize the discourse and break away from the hegemonic viewpoint of the local mainstream media which reflects conservative ideas (Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). It is important to ensure that communication tools and knowledge can be adapted to different contexts and opportunities. It is also necessary to acquire the know-how to be able to “study” the different messages of fundamentalist groups, in order to understand what is behind those messages, analyze them, and identify how and why these messages sway people (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020).

It is necessary to develop a long-term media strategy with operational, tactical, and strategic objectives. Media campaigns are effective when they understand the target audiences and their aspirations (Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, 2020). To do so, a comprehensive study is needed to identify the targets of media campaigns, the audiences, to develop recommendations on how to work with them, and create an effective mechanism to identify them in the future. Furthermore, it would be advisable to create a “gender dictionary” for use by media outlets, and distribute it at the national level (Ukraine Women’s Fund

et al., 2020, p. 39). The challenge is to develop, in alliance with other organizations, campaigns that serve to position new narratives “with the aim of creating empathy, adherence, and public support for the causes of full democracy, feminism, and respect for human rights”(Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

Regarding the content, and given that anti-gender narratives are shared internationally, and especially regionally, it would be useful to analyze these discourses in order to think about strategies before attacks take place. In this way, counter-narratives, based on local knowledge, can be presented and convincing arguments made, and the political context in which these debates take place can even be influenced. In this sense, when the Bulgarian Fund for Women mounted the campaign “My Destiny, My Choice,” they tried to anticipate anti-abortion backlash by the anti-gender movements in the region. To prepare, they made a list of these movements’ arguments. They identified some arguments related to demographic decline and low birth rates, others about the “immoral” behavior of young people allegedly encouraged by sexuality education, and so on. To counter these narratives, they commissioned a nationwide survey on attitudes towards abortion. Despite the existence of these arguments, the survey revealed very positive results: 89.5% of Bulgarians supported the right to abortion. It also showed that the majority also thought that banning it would have negative consequences for women’s health or that it would increase child abandonment.

Based on this survey, a campaign was launched in social networks and the media to debunk abortion myths and the most common arguments against it. In this way, information was produced to refute anti-rights groups when the issue appeared on the agenda. In other words, they managed to introduce a vaccine into the public debate: “the positions of abortion opponents are extremely unpopular” (Bulgarian Fund for Women, 2020).

Women’s funds do not usually lead communications campaigns, as political advocacy is not their usual role. Rather, they provide funding to the groups that do advocacy and mount campaigns. However in some countries, women’s funds are the main feminist players, and all the funds have access to international forums which are difficult for grassroots organizations to reach. This is why many funds are rethinking their responsibilities regarding communications, and are even launching their own campaigns, sometimes in association with other organizations.

Dialogue with Diverse Players and Counternarratives

A debate that arises when considering discursive counterstrategies is the question of the extent to which it is possible to exert influence in certain areas, such as the “defense of the family” or religion. In this sense, some funds highlighted that rights narratives can be enriched by delving, from a pluralist perspective, into issues that religious and political fundamentalists groups often claim as their banners (Fondo Semillas, 2020). Fondo Lunaria, for its part, proposes creating opportunities for debate that make it possible to question collective views on religion and spirituality.

Although no possibility should be ruled out, strategies should be rooted in the local context. Thus, in Western Europe, where there is more leeway to act and broader social consensus on women’s and LGBTIQ2+ rights, it is probably not useful to challenge fundamentalist thinking. Instead we should move forward in pushing for change and demanding more rights and advances for women and LGBTIQ2+ people. While in other places, for example in more religious societies, opposing fundamentalist narratives first might be the best strategy. The question is, how to do this without neglecting our aspirations for change and our demands? Again, the answer will have to come from the local context.

A good example of the above was Polish leftist presidential candidate and former LGBTIQ2+ activist Robert Biedroń’s action in July 2020. His initiative was seen as a reaction to the presidential signing of the Charter for the Family, which contained anti-LGBTIQ2+ proposals. Biedroń organized a press conference in front of the Presidential Palace attended by the mothers of gay and lesbian people; including his own mother. In this way, he managed to resist the tactic of dehumanizing LGBTIQ2+ people who are often portrayed as a threat to the family by instead showing them as part of the family and the community (Feminist Fund, Poland, 2020).

In Latin America, there is the example of the Familias Ahora platform, run by the Bridges organization. Different Latin American social organizations belong to this platform that advocates the “well-being of families through human rights.”

Some funds in the region have found that it is essential to uphold diversity and challenge anti-gender groups that have laid claim to being family advocates.

The Search for Unexpected Allies

It would be beneficial, whenever possible, to strengthen alliances and strategies with progressive religious groups that have a broad vision of democracy and secularism, and that defend the rights of women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. An example of this would be to establish contact with Catholic feminist organizations, and those of other religions, to help publicize their efforts to transform religious institutions. In this way, it is possible to make progress with religious groups, which are not always anti-gender, and gain footing in that terrain. At the same time, it is necessary to have deep discussions about the secular state and how fundamentalist groups attack that principle.

A study by the Ukraine Women’s Fund (2020) recommended engaging in dialogue with some religious organizations from the Greek Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Catholic Church, as well as with organizations that promote “traditional family values” to try to demonstrate that there does not have to be contradiction between their point of view and gender perspective on public issues.

Some of these organizations are not anti-gender by nature. They often use slogans or narratives that have served them as the situation requires. Communicating with these organizations will significantly reduce their “level” of anti-gender rhetoric and social extremism concerning manipulative views on gender. (Ukraine Women’s Fund et al., 2020, p. 30)

Most activists interviewed during the study said that they believe that dialogue with the attackers is impossible. Nonetheless, many of them suggested not demonising all conservatives or religious sectors of the population. To change society, one must look for ways that transcend the war of positions and allow dialogue. “It is important to use the values-based approach to identify the needs and interests of the conservative segments of society, to find possible common ground and make the transition from the category of ‘other’ to the category of ‘different, but close’” (Ukraine Women’s Fund et al. 2020, p. 37).

Various studies also recommend dialoguing with players who at first, may seem hostile, such as parent groups organized around educational issues (ALEG and Women’s Resource Center, interview, 2019). In fact, involving men in initiatives on gender equality, to establish alliances that mobilize as many people as possible, could be a useful strategy to stop attacks. To this end, it would be fitting to focus on how feminism can also improve men’s lives and why this issue affects them. The Ukraine experience revealed that the problem of sexual identity and trans rights is not considered a priority in that country: “It is important to show that gender equality is for everyone and to highlight the issues that unite people, such as discrimination in the labor market and violence against women and children” (Ukraine Women’s Fund et al. 2020, p. 38).

It is necessary to stop creating messages for ourselves - messaging targeted at feminist audiences or those who are already convinced - in order to connect with broader audiences that, although they may be undecided, are likely to be persuaded by our messages (Fondo Semillas Fund, 2020). In the same way, communicate with hope and try to produce positive messages about what is being upheld, rather than what is rejected (Fondo Lunaria, 2020).

Producing and Publicizing Knowledge

Finally, all the funds agree that it is necessary to continue producing situated knowledge about these attacks; studying anti-gender tendencies and how they arise, how they are organized, how they operate, and analyzing their rhetoric. We must continue to work on research, documentation, analysis, and strategic action. All of this, as has been mentioned, should include the involvement of people from different spheres, to contribute to the collective construction of alternatives: grassroots groups, legal organizations, the scientific community, progressive religious groups, and academics, among others.

The commitment to produce knowledge collectively contributes to the strengthening of feminist, women’s, and transgender movements at the global level (Fondo de Acción Urgente de América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante,

2020). For example, several funds reported how the meetings held as part of this research served to socialize experiences, emotions, and reflections on the impact that fundamentalism has had on the lives of activists, as well as to establish links and alliances between the funds and the organizations (Fondo Alquimia, 2020). This research project, and other similar ones, are also seen as a starting point for designing actions and strategies to respond to and resist anti-rights groups (Fondo Apthapi Jopueti, 2020; Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, 2020). Naming and making visible the activists' lived experience is extremely relevant for thinking about new ways of relating (Fondo Alquimia, 2020).

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