

“No one wants to go to hospital” – Moral Grammars and Abortion Networks among Women in Brazil

“Ninguém Quer Ir para o Hospital” – Gramáticas Morais e Redes de Abortamento entre Mulheres no Brasil

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Abstract

This text aims to understand moral grammars through abortion networks built by and between women in the Brazilian context. Our aim is to understand how the organization between these social actors is architected through the omissions of the State and the insufficiencies of public policies. To do this, we carried out empirical research in networks (on and offline), looking at the influx of information on social media platforms and websites, analyzing leaflets and information materials, as well as conducting interviews with activists working with women who want an abortion. We noticed that networks led by women reconfigure moral grammars around the notion of victim, as well as highlighting a porous border between legality and clandestinity, since activists occupy gaps concerning legal abortions, education in reproductive health and legal security, and the promotion of non-vulnerable gender relations.

Keywords: abortion; social networks; state; public policies; activism.

Resumo

Este texto tem como objetivo compreender as gramáticas morais por meio das redes de abortamento construídas por e entre mulheres no contexto brasileiro. Nosso intuito é analisar como a organização entre essas atrizes sociais é arquitetada nas omissões do Estado e nas insuficiências das políticas públicas. Para tanto, realizamos uma pesquisa empírica em rede (*on* e *offline*), considerando o fluxo de informações em plataformas de redes sociais e *sites*, a análise de cartilhas e materiais informativos e entrevistas com ativistas que atuam no atendimento de mulheres que desejam abortar. Notamos que as redes conduzidas por mulheres reconfiguram gramáticas morais em torno da noção de vítima, assim como evidenciam uma fronteira porosa entre

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legalidades e clandestinidades, uma vez que ocupam lacunas da realização de abortos legais, da educação em saúde reprodutiva e segurança jurídica, e da promoção de relações de gênero não vulnerabilizantes.

Palavras-chave: aborto; redes sociais; Estado; políticas públicas; ativismos.

Introduction

The phrase that provides the title to this text was taken from an interview with a feminist activist who has been providing assistance for almost ten years to women in the Brazilian state of Paraná wishing to terminate a pregnancy. The statement – “nobody wants to go to hospital” – is developed into a reflection on the difficulties encountered by women seeking illegal abortion services in hospitals in the Curitiba region. According to her, there are numerous cases of women who, even in those exceptional cases protected by the law⁴, prefer to undergo clandestine abortions.

In our lengthy conversation, we were able to map a series of impediments to women feeling welcomed and supported by hospitals: the use of conscientious objection by health professionals as grounds for refusing to perform an abortion; the ensnarement of women by a network of bureaucracies that slow down the process, provoking fear and creating impassable obstacles; the dread of public exposure and the breaking of doctor-patient confidentiality; negotiations over the length of gestation; and moral conflicts within the doctor-patient relationship or with the nursing team. As a result, even women who may legally have an abortion in the country frequently opt for clandestine solutions instead, blurring the boundaries between seeking legal and clandestine abortion in Brazil.

In the city of Curitiba – where the original research was based – we discovered, through an information pamphlet produced by a group of institutions, that legal abortion during the Covid-19 pandemic was linked to the Forensic Medical Institute (*Instituto Médico Legal*: IML). This fact by itself illustrates the difficulty faced by the Paraná capital – economically one of the most developed state capitals in the country – in creating suitable environments for this kind of care (Mesmo [...], 2022).⁵ Connecting abortion to death through a space like the IML, normally responsible for autopsies and postmortem forensic reports, is typical to the mindset and discourses of anti-abortion movements, which insist on the absolute necessity to keep the embryo alive until birth.

These configurations lead women on a journey that runs parallel to the hospital, involving a network of activists, militants, health professionals, educators and other interested people. The need to terminate the pregnancy, whether in cases permitted under Brazilian law, or in other cases immersed in the dynamics of clandestinity, entangles these subjects, who act in the spaces left by the omissions and fragilities of the State and public health policies in a context that criminalizes women’s autonomy over their own bodies.

⁴ Currently three situations permit women to terminate a pregnancy legally: 1) a pregnancy that poses a risk to the life of the pregnant woman; 2) a pregnancy resulting from sexual violence, up to the twentieth week of gestation; and 3) in cases of foetal anencephaly – according to a Federal Supreme Court ruling from 2012.

⁵ A press release from Curitiba City Hall (2022) states that, according to an IBGE survey published on 16 December 2022, the city has the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the south of Brazil and is ranked sixth in GDP nationally.

Exploring these convoluted pathways, the analysis proposed here seeks to comprehend the online and offline networks constituted by women, as well as the moral grammars that occur on the borders between legality and clandestinity, above all in situations where the Brazilian State proves insufficient. It is worth emphasizing that this text is the result of a series of studies that aimed to understand access to legal abortion, as well as the situation of networks of legal and clandestine abortion in Brazil.

The research project that provided the basis for the analyses contained in this article is coordinated by Professor Taysa Schiocchet, entitled *Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic⁶ on access to legal abortion for girls and women using the SUS: a diagnostic assessment and action strategies from a sexual and reproductive rights perspective*, supported by the CAPES-Epidemics Program (Emergency Strategic Program for Preventing and Combatting Outbreaks, Endemics, Epidemics and Pandemics). This umbrella project encompasses *Digital Media on the borders between legal and clandestine abortion in Brazil*, a study coordinated by Professor Lara Facioli. Both research projects are developed by the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), the Human Rights Clinic (CDH) and the Gender Studies Nucleus (NEG). It should be pointed out that the other authors of this text conducted undergraduate research that focused on studying online and offline abortion networks in Brazil.

Although the core research focuses on the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, our monitoring of social media posts was extended to earlier and later moments, ranging from 2017 to 2023, time points that mark, respectively, the mass entry of many feminist organisations onto the Instagram platform and the period closer to the write-up deadlines for the research findings, with the aim of maintaining the studies up to date. This strategy made use of the features of digital tool to maintain this online past in order to comprehend the flows of information that compose the activities of women’s collectives and the analysed networks.

The posts identified in this time interval (approximately 200) were catalogued on the basis of their guiding theme (whether they referred to access to abortion or another correlated social issue) and the audience targetted (whether directed and linked to articulations with other groups, to a professional and activist public, and/or to women seeking the service). Cataloguing and analysis covered the period from January to October 2023. We also consulted two advice pamphlets produced by organisations, which we picked out due to their juridically-based advice intended to ensure that those involved are not legally compromised. These were the “Guide to the Popular Defence of Reproductive Justice” (Coletivo Margarida Alves, 2020) and the “Guide to Good Practices in Feminist Coverage of Abortion in Brazil” (Carvalho, Vella & Assis, 2023).

In the online research, our observation focused primarily on accompanying the flow of networked subjects, which involved observing diverse platforms in their multiple functionalities, from Instagram posts and timelines to private chats. We observed interactions on Instagram pages and on the websites of feminist collectives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work to assist women needing to terminate a pregnancy. We also accompanied clandestine abortion networks that start

⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, was a severe acute respiratory syndrome caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In Brazil, the first death from the coronavirus outbreak was registered on March 12, 2020, and more than 700,000 deaths had been recorded by 2023.

on Instagram and Facebook pages and continue via WhatsApp. Finally, we conducted four interviews with feminist militants and activists who campaign directly on the frontline for the legalization of abortion in Brazil, as well as assist women primarily looking for legal abortion options.⁷

In proposing to analyse women’s networks, we refer to the notion of network in broad terms, not limited to digital social media, although these are central to the constitution of what we are observing here. These are on and offline networks that together not only “[...] create connections between individuals or communities separated in different spaces” (Martino, 2014, p. 61), but also establish welcoming environments with information and free and attentive support, breaking with the premise that these women are victimized. Consequently, there is no real divide between the online and offline spheres since they are mutually constituted. In this text, we mark a certain separation didactically in order to make clear for the reader the spaces in which the research was conducted.

Women’s Networks and the Porous Borders between Legality and Clandestinity

On the internet, we can note a growing online presence of collectives mobilized around the issue of abortion, working to support and inform women about the judicial and political processes that involve the existing legal framework in Brazil. This is the case of NGOs that work both in Brazil, providing information on the possible medical options for cases covered by law, and those that instruct and refer people interested in obtaining an abortion in other Latin American countries where the practice is a right guaranteed by legislation. In the case of clandestine abortions, the conduct of NGOs has been to intervene to ensure that women undertake the procedure as safely as possible and back the use of misoprostol as a beneficial method recommended by WHO itself since 2005.

These orientations, relations, discussions and presentations of information take place on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and more recently TikTok. Diverse activist web pages, publications and profiles propose to “take abortion out of the closet”, which means not only speaking openly about the issue but also sharing frequent accounts of women who decided to terminate a pregnancy and managed to perform the procedure safely through the assistance offered.

The dynamic of the ‘closet,’ in this case, can be understood in the terms of Eve Sedgwick (2007), who discusses affective relations between people of the same sex. For the author, the closet is a regulator of social life, a way of thinking about reality and moving about within it. Similar to what happens in sexual relationships, the practice of abortion involves subjective strategies of exposure and concealment.⁸ The negotiations over how and whom to tell are permeated by an attempt by the women involved not to

⁷ In view of the scenario of persecution faced by women and feminist activists, we have opted not to mention sources that could publicly identify the interlocutors of the accounts collected in interviews and from posts on social media. Consequently, in this article we do not mention names and have not repeated the texts published on social networks verbatim so as to avert any possibility of locating the people involved through the use of search tools. When citing people’s remarks, we have chosen to replace terms and words without altering their content.

⁸ For a deeper understanding of the relationship between the ‘closet’ as a set of social devices and the issue of abortion, also see Luna and Gomes (2024).

cause more psychological, emotional and physical harm to themselves or those close to them than what the criminalization of abortion in Brazil already entails. Contrary to what commonplace attitudes might suggest, the suffering involved in the abortion procedure spreads to circles of family and friends and to the relationships that women establish with other people (Simões, 2019).

As the Argentinian researcher Barbara Sutton (2017) explains, the moral frameworks that impel these forms of silencing operate through a biopolitical dynamic,⁹ combining the political economies of states with religious moralities. Curbs are placed on the capacity of pregnant women to act on their own bodies, making the prohibition on the termination of gestations appear to be preventing an act of violence against the body of the present and future citizen. Criminalising women thus ensures a relation of shaming through social penalisation. The blaming introjected by those who undergo abortions tends to undermine the understanding of abortion as a right, sometimes making silence the least degrading option (Sutton, 2017, p. 895).

In this normative itinerary, suffering is the factor that authorises speech. In other words, people listen to those who fit the profile of the ideal victim of sexual violations and who subsequently request an abortion; those who suffer physically, or mentally, due to the nonviability of their foetus; and, in the narratives on clandestinity, those who admit to a constant moral anguish on account of their own actions. Hence, we can determine that the moral economies of suffering, in their legal, mediatic and biomedical aspects, constitute a constrictive regime of sexual citizenship (Sabsay, 2016).

"Taking abortion out of the closet," in the sense of producing a set of information that contributes to removing the practice from its status as a taboo, is not encountered in the conduct of the women who need to terminate a pregnancy, whether in the legal or clandestine spheres, since, for them, in this contemporary setting of criminalization, keeping the matter a secret and forgetting what has been done is both urgent and necessary to prevent confrontations, judgments and legal consequences.

For George Simmel (1999), secrecy makes possible the enlargement of social life, the maintenance of certain connections and the possibility of creating a second world based on strategies of exposure and self-management. In the case of women, the strategy of secrecy ultimately allows them to maintain freedom under the terms of the law and with the confidence of not being subject daily to moral labels like 'abortionist,' 'murderer' and so on.

⁹ Throughout this text we make use of the concept of biopolitics, following the diagnoses of Michel Foucault. On his lecture course "Society must be defended," Foucault defined biopolitics as a technology of power that institutes the modern form of governmentality, inverting the paradigm of "make die and let live" of the monarchical regimes of sovereignty prior to the eighteenth century as the maxim "make live and let die" (Foucault, 2003, p. 242-243). It takes the principle of government through individualisation from the Christian pastoral and combines it with the disciplinary powers of the same period so as to guarantee, along with the control of each body, the management of individuals as a biological species, establishing the domain of the 'population' as an object of governance. In the author's words, "the new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on" (Foucault, 2005, p. 289). Sexual reproduction is inserted, therefore, within these spheres of biopolitical regulation, intersecting directly with racial and sexual politics, as developed in works by feminist authors from the field of anti-colonial studies (cf. McClintock, 2010).

Thinking about the construction of abortion networks among women presupposes understanding them through the circulation of persons, money, symbolic values, information, interpersonal relations, care networks and moral grammars. In this sense, the construction of these networks as a form of escaping the legal/illegal dichotomy can be conceived through the notion of the management of illegalisms, as formulated by Michel Foucault (2016).

The idea of illegalisms as an analytic operator breaks with a narrative that views crime management as simply a state response to the discovery of illegalities (Salle, 2014). From this perspective, the management of what is considered a criminal or illegal practice takes place through power relations and games (Pimentel & Pinho, 2022) that involve the law itself and legal apparatuses, not through a clear and consolidated differentiation between the legal and illegal. In other words, these borders are nebulous and we can question how women traverse them, as well as how they cope with this permeability through online and offline networks.

The formulation of the "differential management of illegalisms" by Michel Foucault (2007) sets out from the premise that the law is not made to prevent certain types of behaviour but to differentiate ways of circumventing the law itself and imposing limits on illegality. According to Vera Telles (2010, p. 101), laws, codifications and formal rules "[...] have power effects, they circumscribe fields of force and it is in relation to them that this transitivity of persons, goods and merchandise needs to be situated." It is not a question, then, of an opposition between the formal and informal, the legal and illegal. In fact, it is within their folds that power games, relations of force, fields of dispute and inequalities become circumscribed.

Inspired by these reflections, here we have opted to use the categories of legal and clandestine to capture the nuanced ways through which abortions come to inhabit these folds. We believe that emphasizing the clandestinity, rather than 'illegality,' of some of these procedures helps question the supposed coherence and complementarity between the illegality and criminalisation of abortions not covered by the criteria for legal exceptions. Furthermore, it offers tools for understanding the paths taken by women who begin their requests for legal termination of pregnancies in the health services but who, for whatever motive, seek and obtain abortions outside the official and legitimate channels.

For these reasons, we contend that the category of clandestinity allows us to formulate a perspective that highlights a tangle of relationships (legal and illegal) situated on the margins of the State. More to the point, it is impossible to completely separate exclusive spheres of legality and clandestinity in the search for abortion in Brazil, given that even women whose action is permitted by law may, for countless motives, resort to all kinds of clandestine methods, whether safe or not, in order to speed up the process, suffer less exposure and humiliation, or simply manage to have an abortion.¹⁰

¹⁰ Recently, in January 2024, the São Paulo city council suspended the legal abortion services provided by a hospital in the city, Vila Nova Cachoeirinha, despite the institution being a referral hospital for the procedure. According to Rebeca Mendes, a lawyer and founder of Projeto Vivas, twenty girls and women had their services discontinued or were unable to receive medical assistance at the Cachoeirinha Hospital. Some of these patients had to be referred to other states or other hospitals in the city, far from where they live. This is a significant example of the challenges faced by women seeking legal abortions in Brazil and how the work of NGOs helps prevent women from having to resort to clandestine methods. For more information on this issue, see Lara and Koyama (2024).

In this article, therefore, we chose to explore accounts and stories on legal and clandestine abortions recounted by activists or posted on social networks through the same analytic lens, such that any comparison between the different cases is obviated. In the case of abortions that do not involve the three legal exceptions, it is also the state's omission that is in question when it comes to the sexual and reproductive rights of women. In other words, the fact is that the criminalisation of abortion curbs the agency of women who do not wish to be pregnant,¹¹ just as it also consolidates averse and unsafe ways of terminating pregnancies.¹²

What we discovered from the empirical research is that feminist networks providing support for abortion act between the blurred lines of official bodies and the omissions of public policy in order to assist and try to ensure the physical, emotional and financial safety of women in different situations of legality who feel abandoned by the public health system. A post describing the abortion trajectory of one woman, collected on the web page of a feminist organisation, states that the guidance received on the ways available to obtain an abortion was fundamental, likewise the support given to enable it to happen safely and legally – which in this case occurred under the exemptions provided by Brazilian law. The narrator stated: “I was able to pursue my right without fear!” having been assisted by the organisation.

In elaborating this text, exploring the folds, borders and relations established between the legal and clandestine, we were able to comprehend the importance of these networks for maintaining life, relieving suffering and sharing information. This is what we wish to emphasize by highlighting, within this complex historical moment in which we live,¹³ the negotiations, agencies and effects of an omissive, inadequate State that continues to criminalize abortion practices among women.

It is in this context that we can observe a practice of ‘harm reduction,’ a term used by one feminist collective to justify the act of “sharing just and safe information” in an online post. This phrase aptly translates the work that the circuits of mutual help have been performing in the country.

¹¹ In this text, when we refer to “women who do not wish to be pregnant,” we are considering those women who do not have pregnancy as a life project and those who, for whatever reason, do not wish to be pregnant at a specific moment in their life. As Martha Celia Ramírez (2015) points out, the decision to have an elective abortion is contextual and cannot be considered on the basis of absolute circumstances.

¹² As the 2021 National Abortion Survey (PNA) showed, one in seven women aged around 40 had undergone at least one abortion in Brazil. There is also a class and colour divide among those most likely to be at risk and to die: these are poor and black women. The PNA 2021 mapped incidence rates of 11% among black and brown women and 17% among indigenous women, higher than the average for white women (9%). The survey's questions on repeat abortions underline this inequality, since 74% of those who had a second abortion (21% of the total surveyed) were black. A similar differentiation prevails in terms of class profiles with a rate of 13% among women from lower income groups (up to US\$233 per month), approximately 33% higher than the general average of abortion among the public surveyed (10%) (Diniz, Medeiros & Madeiro, 2023).

¹³ Argument on the Failure to Comply with a Constitutional Principle (*Arguição de Descumprimento de Preceito Fundamental*: ADPF) number 442, which calls for the decriminalisation of abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy, was submitted to the Federal Supreme Court in 2017 by the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), with the support of the Anis Institute of Bioethics. After five years without any action being taken, on the eve of her compulsory retirement, Justice Rosa Weber ruled in favour of the case on 22 September 2023. Following her ruling, the current president of the Supreme Court, Justice Luís Roberto Barroso, suspended the vote in the virtual plenary by moving for the issue to be decided at an in-person plenary. As of October 2023, no date had been set for this decision to take place.

A Look at Feminist Networks Addressing the Issue of Abortion: the Digital as a Relationship

In the wake of studies of the strategies adopted by feminist activism in defence of abortion, we examine some of the trends in sociology that have unfolded in relation to the interconnective processes of social movements, especially through social networks on the internet. As Rodrigo Nunes (2023, p. 19) has shown in his survey of studies on the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, the impulse given to actions coordinated through digital spheres has been interpreted in compartmentalized form in terms of modes of political organisation. These studies describe virtualities as a kind of mobilizing space.

This problematic foregrounds questions relating to so-called cyberfeminisms. These designate a series of manifestations produced from the 1990s onwards that opposed the technological essentialism of the radical feminists of the 1970s and 1980s for whom digital apparatuses, because of their male design, were necessarily phallocentric (Paasonen, 2005).

Even so, as Susanna Paasonen (2005) explains, it is important that we do not create a contingent understanding of the category of cyberfeminisms, neither reducing it to a mere generational marker, nor equating it with women's uses and creations of technology. One fruitful path is suggested by Judy Wajcman (2010, p. 149), a technofeminist theoretician, who argues for a framework that "[...] conceives of technology as both a source and consequence of gender relations." Her perspective revisits the approaches of socialist feminisms (Wajcman, 2010, p. 149) that shift the concept of technology from highly inventive technical equipment to the recognition of everyday sociotechnical artifacts conceived on the basis of the "social shaping of technology."

This approach seeks to examine and understand technology both in terms of diverse social factors – economic, political and cultural – and through its technical dimension. The common-sense view tends to see technical change as the primary cause of social change with social and human factors only mediating the 'natural' process of technological revolution. From the viewpoint of the social shaping of technology, though, a technical tool cannot be conceived in isolation from its context.

In other words, these women's networks have nothing spontaneous about them: they amount to a field of forces created in constant relationship to the State to cope with the effects of the latter's omission when it comes to health and life-sustaining policies for women. These are networks formed by Brazil's own political and social culture, which has prevented historically subalternised groups from accessing not just basic rights but also the conditions to make their own choices about their lives and bodies.

Concerned not only with the legal situation of abortion in Brazil, one of the publications by feminist organisations collected on Instagram, for example, asked what would come "after decriminalisation." The response was: build support networks to combat the stigma and fight to make free and fair access to abortion a reality. The caption to the image adds that the Brazilian public tends to reject the termination of pregnancies due to "political, religious or moral notions," refuting the idea that dialogue on the issue is rejected simply because it constitutes a 'crime.'

As the examples show, although digital abortion networks are gestated in specific national settings, they are used contextually, such that the digital does not mark a separate sphere of the ‘real’ but is constituted in consonance with and through it. Put otherwise, the digital is not an abstract space but a weave of social relations that incorporate local, national and sometimes global contexts.

Despite the fact that we are dealing with the institutional spaces of NGOs that basically operate within the sphere of legality, it is important to mention that absolutely clandestine, commercialised and sometimes scam-ridden networks, whose actions put women’s lives at risk, share the same digital space, on and offline, in the dispute over abortion practices.

There are countless groups on the internet in which women share experiences of risky abortions and, especially, scams that involve the selling of fake misoprostol. In general, the circuit through which these women pass involves a flow from Instagram to private spaces, such as WhatsApp chats. In the latter spaces women and pharmaceutical drug sellers negotiate the abortion process in complete anonymity – with no safety or guarantees for the former.¹⁴

These online networks can extend to face-to-face spheres and dynamics, culminating in insecure clandestine clinics or even the possibility of crossing national borders in order to have a legal and safe abortion in other countries. In other words, a network is woven whose elements and modes connect the internet to contextual dynamics and prohibitive legal systems.

Network Architecture: between Feminisms, Institutionality and the Market

We can understand the feminist circuits for accessing abortion to be permeated by disputes over abortion itineraries with clandestine groups that act both online – referring here to the websites marketing the remote selling of misoprostol – and offline, including the clandestine clinics and delivery points for the medication. In these spaces, the clandestine sellers can assume the task of explaining how to use abortion drugs correctly and may exhibit a varying degree of care and comprehension of the situation of the women who turn to them for help. Observations made by Diniz and Madeiro (2012) and Porto and Souza (2017) in ethnographic research on abortion itineraries, conducted in diverse Brazilian localities, show that the attitude of the commercial intermediaries varies according to context. In any event, the works suggest that the action of these agents is primarily connected to the commercial intention of selling products, as well as fear of denunciations (Porto & Souza, 2017, p. 602).

¹⁴ Concealed by the dynamics of the internet itself, sellers assume various functions, such as ensuring that the women receive the medication (which may be authentic or made of flour), accompanying the abortion procedure, and providing information on what to do and where to go if problems occur. In the case of sales of counterfeit drugs, the women end up blocked on WhatsApp, without the possibility of making any kind of complaint or receiving back the money they invested in the process. Worse still, they face the huge stress and worry of not having solved their problem and continuing with the unwanted pregnancy.

At another level, part of the potential for women’s networks to provide support is built around their commitment to a transnational militant politics. Whether in the collected interviews or in the ethnographic fieldwork via Instagram, we noted the recurrent presence of Brazilian organisations in activist encounters and international seminars hosted by movements in neighbouring countries. In 2019, representatives of one of the NGOs participated in the “First Symposium on Art, Politics and Feminism,”¹⁵ promoted by Socorristas en Red,¹⁶ a coalition of collectives active in the distribution of abortifacients and in accompanying terminations of pregnancy. According to the organisers and echoed by the participating Brazilian women, held one year on from the historical debate in Brazil’s National Congress, the space served as an invitation to think about and reflect on the decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion, with the intention of helping expand the repertoire of ‘other’ images and narratives that allow a deconstruction and transformation of the crystallised social meanings surrounding abortion, (non)reproductive sexual rights and bodily autonomy.

Despite its critical timing, focused on the intensification of the debate in the Argentinian legislature, the Socorrista initiative combined the deepening of intercontinental dialogues crucial to the forming of activist experiences and the shaping of declarations in defence of abortion. The same NGO maintained contact with participants of the 14th Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting (EFLAC), held in 2017 in Uruguay. The work of Álvarez et al. (2003), a historical Argentinian feminist, alongside more recent research like that of Julia Kumpera (2021), emphasises that the EFLAC meetings have served as a terrain for negotiating and referring groups since their consolidation in the 1990s.

Some of the zines and posters produced in 2017, with phrases like “abortion is a political act” and “sexual education to decide, free abortion to avoid dying,” served as inspiration when convoking the Festival for Women’s Lives, held in Brasília in 2018. At this event, what appeared to predominate was the intersection of debates, with green scarves for legal abortion standing out in conversation circles on dissident sexualities. This commitment to an anti-normative politicisation of abortion is simultaneously constructed through digital and artistic communication alliances.

A certain transitivity is thus part of the architecture of the abortion networks with the materiality of attitudes and publicizations concerning abortion connecting points that expand and open to the national and transnational. Also serving this end is the penetration of social media, which depend on the permeability of audiences and the reverberation of messages. However, a constant risk is still imposed by the ‘walls’ of institutionality: “You can discover the hardness of the wall by what happens to what is thrown at it: a wall can be marked by the encounter with the object” (Ahmed, 2022, p. 232).

The walls of criminalisation function as barriers that enclose and confront alternative ways of distributing misoprostol through malicious accusations based on the recording of online activities and the systematic interception of parcels after denunciations made to Correios, Brazil’s national postal service. The latter measure even caused the closure of one of the main international supply infrastructures for

¹⁵ For more information on the event, access: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RLkw7I2aqm-Cmz7G1_JiXx0EDAgCSSjy/view.

¹⁶ For further information on the collective’s work, see Socorristas en Red (2022).

abortifacients for home use in Brazil. From 2019, one of the organisations that we followed, based in the Global North with offices in Latin American countries, had to cease shipments to Brazil after a series of searches and dumping of the packages sent.

Subsequently, the organisation adopted the same strategy used by Brazilian activists. Faced with the risk of internal accusations of political persecution and imprisonment, they backed the development of guides to safe abortion and legal defence for women who wish to terminate a pregnancy. The materials cite the legal framework in order to help women avoid the state’s punitive powers: examples of the kinds of advice commonly emphasized in the pamphlets are “for someone to be charged for an abortion, a forensic examination is needed to prove the physiological state of pregnancy, as well as the fact that the abortion was induced and not a miscarriage” and “the right to non-self-incrimination means that no one is obliged to incriminate themselves or produce evidence against themselves.”

Ultimately, both the pamphlets and the guides that stipulate the dosages recommended by the World Health Organisation produce a symbiosis of the legal and illegal, since, by signalling options within the bounds of legality, they shield those who have had a clandestine abortion against the confessionalist apparatus of the regimes of criminalization and, in so doing, broaden the margins of safety for acting within the suspension of legal limits.

Finally, the legality of indirect commercialisation of misoprostol is also stretched. Even if NGOs opt not to do so in order to ensure that their operations can continue, users fill the comments areas of publications with calls to decriminalise abortion or share advice either with short remarks that refer to *socorrismo*, or recommend suppliers who, based on their firsthand experiences, have proven to be dependable.

This ample network of relations denotes the close proximity between institutions from the third sector (present at media events and activist meetings), numerous interconnectivities in the circulation of knowledge from gender studies and health studies from a gender perspective (through the concept of sexual and reproductive rights and support for medical abortion) and informal mediators in the sale of medications.

If, as Ahmed (2022, p. 32) contends, our possibilities of life and subjective production depend on positionalities, then the dynamic of abortion networks manage to delimit a range of positions, constructing other paths that can be followed: those that enable people to avoid the shadow of hospitals, the clandestine clinic and the police inquiry and incident rooms.

Suffering and Pain, the Moral Grammars of Abortion

In the Brazilian case, we can observe how the current legislation regulating access to abortion sets out from a notion of reproductive rights and public health operated under the assumption of a state of misfortune and violence. Approached from this perspective, the women who can have an abortion are those who assume the status of victims. In other words, the women legally permitted to terminate a pregnancy are those who: 1) have suffered sexual violence, leaving them vulnerable, in a state of trauma; 2) over the course of a desired pregnancy, discover that the foetus has developed a clinical condition that prevents its survival, leading to grief related to loss of the embryo; and 3) the pregnant woman is victimised by the gestational development itself, which places at risk her life and her reproductive potential.

Hence, the permissions and denials surrounding women's reproductive capacity are crystallised in laws and public policies that act through exceptions in order to provide 'support' to the victims of situations in which pregnancy is impractical.

The structural misogyny that permeates abortion in Brazil can be observed in the behaviour and positions taken by diverse political agents in the public and private spheres. As an example, we can mention the continual reinforcement of the idea of women as those most suitable and responsible for childcare, as made explicit even in dynamics in which custody is shared.¹⁷ The same applies to practices and discourses insofar as men are rendered invisible as subjects corresponsable for the pregnancy, whether or not the latter came about through violent action.

With the rise of neoconservative movements and their actions in the Brazilian federal legislature over the last two decades, we can also see the strong attempt to reintroduce traditional values of male preeminence in society and politics. The fiercest attacks of these groups have been aimed at the rights of the LGBTQIAP+ population and reproductive rights – where the intention is to eliminate all those exceptional cases where abortion remains legally permitted, making it an heinous act, an absolute sin. As the anthropologist Lia Zanotta Machado (2017, p. 31) points out, by seeking to control female sexuality and reproduction, the proponents of this neoconservative agenda "[...] do not speak about women's rights but about their duty. Women, once fertilised, have the obligation to be mothers."

As Maria das Dores Machado (2018) explains, the overlapping of these two fronts of persecution – against reproductive rights and against the rights of the LGBTQIAP+ population – has been central to the spread of conservative institutional representations. Although sectors of Catholic conservatism made resurgent attacks on forms of contraception and sexual autonomy since the 1990s, the approval in 2002 of the Second National Human Rights Program, aligned with the fight against homophobia and the for the implementation of policies specifically aimed at the LGBTQIAP+ population, has been the main factor driving Catholic and evangelical lobbies to get sex education projects banned and to feed moral panics over gender ideology and 'child sexualisation' over the last two decades.

In the 1990s, the success of feminist organisations in inserting gender issues in United Nations programmes and resolutions provoked an initial change in discursive politics led by the Catholic Church. Disagreeing with the repercussions of the agendas of institutional equity and reproductive health for the patriarchal model of the nuclear family, the Catholic Church began to legitimise its positions on the basis of biologism, arguing for the naturalness of sexual binarism and the complementarity of male and female roles. The promotion of the civil rights of LGBTQIAP+ persons from 2000 onwards intensified this sense of threat posed by the consolidation of the recognition and political viability of subjects with 'deviant' sexualities, opening up spaces for the normalisation of non-heterosexual and non-reproductive sex. Ultraconservative viewpoints are guided by the compulsion to classify homosexuality

¹⁷ Studies in the field of legal sciences shows that even though magistrates apply shared custody with the understanding that both parents equally share the rights and duties relating to the child – participating in their education, upbringing and care – in the view of the families, the mother performs better the role of carer and the father the role of provider (Toledo & Loreto, 2020), which reinforces gender inequalities.

as a pathological deviation, which, according to the Christian moral framework of cis-heteronormativity and the negation of pleasure, implies behaviour that is always promiscuous and thus reprehensible.

In this sense, abortion, as a mechanism that eliminates the fatalistic and risky potential of sexual practices not undertaken with the intention of producing children, was identified as a correlate threat to the order of chaste sexuality, the bastion of reproductivist cis-heteronormativity.

Recently, in October 2023, in a debate on the Federal Chamber of Deputies' Commission of Human Rights, Minorities and Racial Equality, deputy Tadeu Vereni (Workers' Party), rebutting the arguments of deputy Nikolas Ferreira (Liberal Party) about women's supposed desire to have abortions, pointed out that "if men could become pregnant, abortion would not be an issue under debate and many of those who condemn it would perhaps be in favour" (Se homem [...], 2023). In other words, holding women responsible for an abortion situation highlights absolutely unequal relations in the field of gender issues.

Added to this is the fact that the interests and structures of the dominant model of reproduction, combined with the legal framework that regulates access to abortion, reinforce as part of their conditioning factors the idea that abortion is naturally unhealthy, risky, violent and necessarily deadly. In other words, in the sense explored by Didier Fassin (2019), this demonstrates a system of moral economies that is realised in the practices and perceptions of a community.

By shifting the focus onto the configuration of moral sentiments, based on the connection to norms and values in public space at a given historical moment (Fassin, 2019, p. 71), we can observe how women's bodies are taken as a responsible space that is imperatively subjected to the reproduction of life through the absolute maintenance of pregnancy. The prominence of religious actors in the political debate on abortion indeed reinforces the approximation of the issue to the agenda of morality and customs. Naara Luna and Rozeli Porto (2023, p. 153) remind us that organisations campaigning for decriminalisation work precisely against this movement by situating the topic under a "distinct discursive logic: that of public health."

Given the centrality of moral and normative sentiments when it comes to the relations that configure access to the termination of pregnancy, Fassin's category (2019) of moral sentiments and grammars becomes a central element in understanding the importance of creating other places where relations can be established that approach the desire for an abortion from a different set of values.

When militants and activists spoke about institutional care spaces for abortions, they frequently highlighted the large demand from women with a legal right to terminate their pregnancy, who contacted the networks to learn how to behave in the hospital so that they would not be distrusted and the procedure would be performed. There thus exists a widely shared perception that the woman needs to be enough of a victim for her not to be disbelieved or reported to the police at this critical moment.

Based on the narrated recollections of such situations, we can suggest that focusing on what is deemed acceptable or not allows us to appraise the difficulties of broadening the debate on the decriminalisation of abortion in Brazil, even considering the concrete reality that this type of procedure is very widely practiced – whether within the bounds of legality or, especially, on its margins.

In summary, two fundamental factors exist involving gender relations in the search for abortion in the Brazilian context: on one hand, Brazilian women are the main carers of people and homes (IBGE, 2019); and, on the other, the termination of a pregnancy beyond those cases covered by the law are conceived as socially and legally illegitimate.¹⁸ This denounces how, through the control of bodies and populations, a female identity is configured and enforced, linked to compulsory motherhood and to the false notion that women possess a natural desire to want to bear and care for children (Costa & Soares, 2022).

When it comes to appropriate emotions, we have seen how the moral view of institutions with regard to legal exceptions for abortion depends on situating women in the position of victims. Along these lines, Cynthia Sarti (2011) details in her work how the contemporary production of the victim is linked to the experience of war and the reparation policies deriving from this context, as well as the instruments for qualifying victims created by psychiatry through the clinical category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Through the work of psychiatry, the possibility of diagnosing the suffering of specific sectors of society has become universalised. In this way, victimhood receives a moral and clinical legitimacy through the demonstration, followed by qualification, of psychic suffering. Seen through this logic, exposure of this suffering legitimises the person victimised by something to make social demands linked to their condition.

So, in the case of abortion, what we did was to explore the boundaries of the moral grammars that sustain the conceptions given by the State and the hegemonic values of the population in order to glimpse subjectivities that are invalidated by presenting characteristics that diverge from the expected. In other words, by contrasting the understanding of the normal with what is considered anomalous, we arrive at a framework that expresses how emotions that go beyond suffering – such as relief, happiness, indifference and fear – are excluded from the emotional repertoire expected of someone seeking an abortion.

This happens because, according to the activists, women in hospitals need to not only perform the behaviour of someone who has been the victim of explicit violence but also demonstrate that they are devastated by the fact that they are compelled to not continue with the pregnancy. It entails the embodying of a certain sadness over the loss of the foetus, the impossibility of exercising motherhood and demonstrating beforehand that this will have to be borne as a burden, a trauma, something that cannot be repeated, spoken about or revisited.

Circuits of Mutual Help between Women and Confronting the Notion of Victim

Given the context of institutional illegality and popular stigma that criminalises women who do not wish to be mothers, studying feminist networks that provide support for abortion reveals the assurance of another possibility for female agency. Whether by ensuring access to information validated by science or by pointing to the legality and thus the possibility of accessing the procedure in the respective region, the online women's networks work, socially moulded, in the gaps left by public policy.

¹⁸ The cases provided for under existing Brazilian legislation are: abortion in the case of rape, abortion of anencephalic foetuses, and abortion of pregnancies where the woman's health is at risk.

In a publication posted on the Instagram timeline of a feminist collective dedicated to helping women and girls access reproductive rights in Brazil and abroad, a reader asked: “Do you know how to get access to legal abortion in the case of sexual abuse?” In carousel format, the publication makes clear the amplitude of what the law considers sexual violence, asserts the need to report undesired unprotected penetration in order to obtain the abortion, and details how violence can occur at any moment of a relationship, whenever the woman’s partner imposes something that was not agreed – even if the start of the sexual relation was consensual. In clear and accessible terms, the text accompanying the images continues with instructions on where to seek help, with the recommendation of multi-professional care services for which the women are referred to the SUS, emphasizing also that there is no need to present police or judicial documents to ‘prove’ violence occurred. The collective insists on the fact that the woman’s testimony is enough and that the project team is available to answer questions and provide support.

Through publications like this, it becomes clear that the effort of online women’s collectives to “take abortion out of the closet” stimulates an environment in which other moralities – such as reproductive autonomy, female dignity and free sexuality – direct the discourse and effective practice of the activists. The work of the networks of women activists and militants ranges from the design of web pages and advice pamphlets on safe abortion to the creation of diverse mechanism on social media to attract the public’s attention.

A post on one Instagram page, for example, states that “Cytotec is safer than Rivotril.” The publication’s caption mentions the research to which it refers (Pedroso, 2012; Lazarus, 1985) in order to scientifically ground the arguments made – that terminating a pregnancy tends to be less traumatic than continuing with an unwanted pregnancy – which shows the concern of the help circuits to pass on information.¹⁹ Another site, which aims to help women seeking a clandestine abortion, provides space for them to relate the courses of action they took, but also their feelings, sensations and motives for deciding on an abortion. This circuit constitutes a practice of networked mutual help, which goes beyond a solitary search to solve a problem (Facioli, 2017).

On this point, one of the cases collected in the posting of accounts on Instagram reinforces the notion of openness and the broadening of meanings created by the feminist support networks. The woman in question narrates that because of the “support and care” received from the network’s activists, she realised that she was being blessed by a “work of God” by managing to have an abortion in safety. According to her, possessing a religious faith centred on the figure of God, many people remark that abortion is not a “thing of God” and that “God doesn’t help those who have abortions.” She goes on to say that she concluded that these are all lies since she had experienced a profound relief after the procedure.

¹⁹ The post was accompanied by the following caption: “The criminalisation of abortion causes mental suffering. This is not just a catchphrase; it is the truth. Pregnant women forced to proceed with an unwanted pregnancy suffer intense psychological consequences, such as anxiety and depression. Studies have shown that the psychological responses to abortion are far less severe than those suffered by women who carry their unwanted pregnancy to term and decide to give the child up for adoption.”

The networks seem to expand the possibilities for understanding the experience itself beyond the punitive moralistic frameworks that situate women as either criminals or victims. Being welcomed, informed and guided towards a safe procedure is a movement that generates well-being and security and gives new meaning to religious belief itself and the moral dimensions inscribed in the act of abortion.

The online feminist support network treats abortion as a health procedure. It humanises the debate on the importance of legalisation of the clinical termination of pregnancy by exposing the endeavour of public policies to criminalise and marginalise the bodies and subjectivities of women and those who become pregnant. In other words, by informing people about the punitive agency of the State, by shaping the use of online networks to promote the maintenance of women's lives, by taking the place of the caring arm of the state, a parallel front is created that enables recognition of the omissions in Brazil's legislation and policies.

In addition to the information tools made available in public posts, the support and individual guidance offered by the networks we monitored can be understood as an insertion in women's lives at a personal and affective level – in other words, in the unfolding of the desire and possibilities for terminating a pregnancy of every woman supported by these networks.

In sum, the perspective and the mode of action adopted by militants and activists who support women undergoing abortion enable an expansion of the ways of living the event through other moral frameworks, which diverge from the expectations and circumscriptions of the public spaces for legal abortion care. There is a rupture with narrow notions of victimhood and expected emotional grammars, generating a space of welcome, dialogue and the possibility to be heard, which allows the expression of diverse emotions.

What we observe is that within support networks, women acquire a greater capacity to make their own choices and feel safe in expressing sadness, fear, relief, happiness, insecurity and whatever else emerges, subjectively, in terms of feelings related to the abortion procedure. A section of posts containing the testimonies of women who contacted a web page that we accompanied exemplifies this diversity. One of the women narrates that she had never been against abortion and was a "supporter of the cause." In her words, the fact that she had faced the situation of an undesired pregnancy meant that, although sure that she wanted an abortion, she felt very frightened. In another post we read the account of a mother of two children who feels good about her decision to terminate another pregnancy that had occurred in an undesired way. She said that she was already back home and had no regrets about the procedure. Finally, she thanked the feminist organisation for its support and guidance. When these women find themselves on the edge of criminality, therefore, due to the wish and impossibility to not have a baby, it is the networks – and the militants behind and at the front of them – who welcome, teach and guide the people who come to them, rather than the State, even before they have to cope with the omissions of public policy.

Final Considerations – the Challenges and Possibilities for a Future of Women’s Rights

“I feel exhausted, not from helping, because it’s gratifying to see women safe, but I feel tired that we have been unable to advance in terms of legislation” remarked one of the activists we interviewed, who lamented Brazil’s outdated legislation compared to some other Latin American countries.²⁰

In this text we have been able to show that this tiredness is explained by the complexity of a political activity situated in confrontations with the state and, more than this, that every day confronts moral frameworks based on unequal gender relations in a process of subalternising and silencing women.

A significant effort is made to cope with the absence of information in relation to abortion, even in those contexts where access to the procedure is guaranteed under Brazilian law. Activists related that women who had a legal right to abortion come to them without any information concerning the legal possibilities for obtaining the procedure, which involves mobilising a set of information dedicated to clarifying the circumstances they face.²¹

We also perceived the fundamental need to orient women concerning the gender relations that are entangled in the situation of the pregnancy while simultaneously extending beyond it. In other words, discussing abortion with anyone presumes speaking about how relations between men and women are shaped by deep inequalities, which leads some women to not even realise the forms of violence that may be experienced in the negotiations with the genitor of the embryo.

This is a lacuna to which the feminist groups analysed here also direct their efforts. Through regular stories and post, they provide guidance on the services to which women can turn in cases of sexual violence and rape, encouraging the use of Dial 100, a hotline for denouncing human rights violations, while also warning Instagram users about the dynamics of re-victimisation and discrediting frequently perpetrated by state investigative and care agencies: “What should you do in the case of sexual violence? The woman needs to be supported in the police environment in a respectful way for her to feel safe to narrate what she experienced.”

Here it is worth highlighting another dimension that involves the responsibilities of the State, namely the attempt, in recent years, to kill off the gender debate in the classroom context.²² According to Fernando Balieiro, over the last decade, “[...] diverse moral entrepreneurs have been responsible for spreading a moral panic

²⁰ Abortion is currently decriminalised in the following Latin American countries: Puerto Rico (1937), Cuba (1965), French Guiana (1975), Guyana (1995), Uruguay (2012), Argentina (2020), Colombia (2022) and Mexico (2023) (Silva, 2022). The last three cases, in particular, are associated with the emergence of the so-called ‘green tide,’ a wave of protests and legislative pressure work coordinated by feminist movements in the region and spreading the *pañuelos verdes*, a kind of visual defence of abortion. For more information on the Latin American panorama and Brazil’s position on the regional stage, consult the documentary *Verde Esperanza* (Maria Lutterbach, 2022) and the Map of Abortion in Latin America (Silva, 2022). Although the documentary is not available for free download, it has been screened in public venues throughout Brazil, mainly at universities. It is also possible to rent the film for R\$5.90 on the website, see (Verde [...], 2023).

²¹ In most cases, in addition to informing the women, activists need to provide legal support that may even involve legal proceedings, which requires NGOs and collectives to develop partnerships with lawyers working in defence of the cause.

²² Between 2014 and 2015, during the discussions on the National, State and Municipal Education Plans, a moral panic was generated that thwarted any progress on sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil, as well as threatening intellectual and artistic freedoms, while simultaneously criminalising teachers.

against school teaching materials, educational programs that include addressing gender and sexuality differences” (Balieiro, 2018, p. 1). Due to pressure from religious and conservative factions in the National Congress and municipal councils, this process culminated in the removal of the gender debate from schools, which directly involves questions relating to abortion and reproductive rights.²³

How can we provide young women with information on sexual and reproductive rights, including about legal abortion in Brazil? The school is a fundamental space for discussing these issues, especially in a country where the family is the main perpetrator of violence against children and adolescents.²⁴

Another aspect we can mention based on our findings concerns precisely the moral grammars that, in social space and particularly in hospital environments, consolidate fixed views of the human subject, which prevents women from seeking an abortion in these spaces, even when they have a legal right to the same. Women very often prefer to obtain a clandestine abortion to confronting a morality that judges them for their pregnancy, which hinders access to abortion and which demands from them a performance intimately and irrevocably linked to the identity of victim. Put otherwise, in the hospital, women cannot speak.

According to Gayatri Spivak (2010, p. 12), the process of consolidating subalternity occurs through the “[...] lowest strata of society, constituted by the specific modes of exclusion from markets, from political and legal representation, and from the possibility of becoming full members of the dominant social stratum.” According to the author, when this process is established, it becomes impossible for the subaltern to speak.

We can reflect on the women in this research, especially those who seek spaces to realize an abortion, and how they are prevented from speaking or, when they speak, how they are not heard. This becomes clear in the field reports when activists depict the way women seeking legal abortion services are treated in hospitals. Questions that cast doubt on the violence experienced, pejorative remarks about the sex lives of the victims of violence, requests for police reports or forensic examinations as a prerequisite for the abortion to be allowed, or even performances that involve the need for the woman’s suffering are among the restrictions imposed by moral frameworks that only permit any possibility of female elocution or agency when linked to a victimised and guilty identity.

²³ Even with the actions of the Federal Supreme Court, which ruled that bills that removed gender from schools were unconstitutional, the detrimental effect of the persecution of teachers has become consolidated and is still experienced today. One episode that throws into question the STF’s position and highlights the scenario of persecution and censorship of teachers is the ongoing analysis of the law bill introduced by Curitiba city councillor Eder Borges (Progressive Party), which aims to allow parents to ban their children from taking part in classes and educational activities that involve discussion of gender and sexuality. The councillor’s alleged aim is to “prevent indoctrination in schools” and preserve the *pátrio poder* (paternal responsibility) in the full exercise of raising child, requiring children to “show obedience, respect and services appropriate to their age and condition” (Garcia, 2023).

²⁴ According to the 2023 Public Security Yearbook, 75.8% of rapes committed in Brazil between 2021 and 2022 involved vulnerable boys and girls, under 14 years of age, and people considered incapable of consenting, either because of a disability or illness. In addition, 82.7% of rape victims and raped vulnerable persons had some kind of relationship with their attacker, whether a family relationship, a romantic relationship or friendship, among others. The data from the Yearbook that emphasises the importance of dealing with gender and sex education in schools is that among those cases actually reported to the police, six out of ten victims are vulnerable people aged between 0 and 13 whose attacker is a relative or acquaintance.

The possibility of accessing these networks allows women not only to receive support and information, but also to share their experiences, anxieties, fears and wishes. This dynamic also relocates female ‘muteness’ insofar as it configures an exercise in women speaking out and repositioning themselves in social space.

It is important to mention that in the midst of the networks constituted on the borders and in the absences of State public policies, women are also exposed to the possibility of financial scams or even a process that may lead to their death. In this sense, the networks of militants and activists work hard to avoid women from accessing networks of scammers or being exposed to physical, emotional and financial peril.

It remains for us to acknowledge and comprehend that, even with the decriminalisation of abortion in Brazil, feminist activism will continue to occupy an important place in confronting the inadequacies of the State, since obtaining the right not to be imprisoned for having an abortion does not mean that public policies will be effective.

Consequently, for women to perceive the hospital as a space of support or for other women not to be overburdened by the work of compensating for the state’s omissions, a profound transformation is required in our gender repertoires and in the ways in which we consolidate policies for historically subalternised groups in Brazil.

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