

## The “friend who has already aborted”: A look at shared experiences in a virtual community

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**Abstract** *The Brazilian research on abortion has pointed to the existence of a paradoxical dynamic about the event. If, on the one hand, it is a taboo subject surrounded by stigma, evidencing an apparent social invisibility of this practice, on the other hand, it is a common event in the reproductive life of women of all social classes, races, and religions, showing a culture of broad sharing of knowledge and practice on the subject. This paper is about the character of the “friend who has already aborted”, which appears in narratives about the abortion experience shared publicly on an online platform, understood here as a virtual exchange community on the subject, maintained by the international NGO Women on Web. A virtual ethnography revealed that this person gains prominence in the narratives and the universe of the interpersonal social networks mobilized by women in its abortive course, relationships that stimulate reflection on the place of solidarity among women in the collectivization of knowledge and strategies and the production of a common resistance in the context of clandestinity and stigmatization underpinning the theme of abortion in the country.*

**Key words** *Induced abortion, Social networks, Internet, Production of the commons*

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## Introduction

In Brazil, induced abortion is a common phenomenon in the reproductive life of women<sup>1,2</sup>, while it is surrounded by silences and secrets<sup>3,4</sup>, a paradox that is present in the narratives that serve as the object of this paper: in a virtual international community, Brazilians share their shared stories about abortion, in a territory that allows telling the personal experience without putting the secret at risk.

The context that keeps the issue of abortion invisible in the social fabric articulates the weight of legal prohibition – abortion is a crime in Brazil, except for cases involving risk of death of the pregnant woman, pregnancy resulting from rape and fetal anencephaly – to stigma and current cultural and moral taboos<sup>5</sup>, which Adesse and Monteiro<sup>6</sup> call “a vicious and perverse cycle in which the criminalization of abortion perpetuates the stigma and, in turn, the stigma legitimizes the criminalization of abortion”.

Studies on conditions involving induced abortions have pointed out the risks of criminalization to the health and lives of women who have abortions<sup>6–8</sup>, primarily black and economically vulnerable women, which situates abortion as a Public Health issue that concerns addressing social inequalities, more specifically of gender, ethnicity, and class.

The repertoire of strategies developed by women to perform abortion is called by the literature an abortive itinerary: the set of methods, resources and information, and social relationships established with family members, friends, neighbors, health professionals, among other actors<sup>9,10</sup>. Our interest in this paper resides on this relational aspect of the abortive paths, especially in the relationship of mutual support that is established between women during their mobilization to perform an abortion and, mainly, the dialogue with other women who have already been submitted to this experience.

For the analysis of these relationships, we will especially trigger two approaches to Collective Health that discuss the predominant trend that defines care around the opposition between formal and informal<sup>11</sup>: the perspective of networking care, which allows a perspective at the role of social networks in the paths of subjects and their care processes<sup>12</sup>, and the dimension of “production of commons” in health, which takes the collectivization of knowledge, means and affections as “making community”<sup>12</sup>.

The decisive role of female solidarity in the adoption of strategies before legal and moral res-

trictions on the practice of abortion indicates the existence of what Diniz and Medeiros<sup>13</sup> call the culture of abortion shared and transmitted between different generations of women. Thus, the information and communication technologies (ICT) that foster socialization on the internet do not in themselves inaugurate the sharing of information and experiences, nor the articulation of resources and devices to perform an abortion. However, they can provide expanded capacity for solidarity and mobilization of social network resources<sup>14</sup>.

The discussion presented here focuses on stories of induced abortion publicly narrated on an online platform, especially about some of their relational aspects. This is an excerpt from the results of research carried out in the Master in Public Health at the National School of Public Health Sergio Arouca (ENSP-Fiocruz) between 2017 and 2019.

### About the online platform and its choice

The narratives that serve the analysis of this paper were collected on the online platform for exchanging statements about the experience of having an abortion called “I made an abortion”, which is part of the portal of the Women on Web (WoW) group. It is a mapping of stories about legal or illegal abortion from users from 151 countries. The statements are made available by filling out a form with several fields. The criteria for choosing this portal for the field included its relevance (one of the three main results, in 2017, among virtual spaces for public sharing of abortion stories), user-friendly navigation (the stories are available on a wall that resembles an application with avatars), the large number of statements from Brazil, and the fact of publicly informing the organizations that maintain the project (which facilitated the verification of information and contact for interviews).

The WoW website was founded in 2005 and is the virtual continuation of Dutch NGO Women on Waves activism. Since 1999, the organization’s team has been sailing with a group of doctors along the coast of countries where abortion is illegal, providing medical abortion to women who seek it, using the rule of navigation in international waters, governed by the law of the country of origin of the vessel – in this case, a country where abortion has been permitted since 1981<sup>15</sup>. The NGO’s digital arm Women on Web website has telemedicine channels in eleven languages that guide by e-mail, chat or telephone on how to perform abortions with medicines and,

in many cases, send abortion medicines by mail to countries where they are illegal<sup>16</sup>. For Brazilian women, however, a highlighted message informs that the country's customs department retains the packages sent by the organization.

In this work, the analysis will focus on the project "I made an abortion" and its stories, which are publicly available on the website. They are grouped by country of origin – on November 5, 2018, 17 reports were from Iran; 73 from Nigeria; 357 from Argentina; 434 from Mexico; 467 from the U.S.; 794 from Poland and 1,086 from Brazil.

### Observation and data collection

We conducted qualitative research using virtual ethnography, interview, and narrative analysis. Hine<sup>14</sup> states that virtual ethnography can be mobilized to reach the meanings of technology and its structuring cultures, at the same time that they are structured by it. The methodological design was inspired by the work of Miller and Slater<sup>18</sup>, who recognize this complex and nuanced relationship between the online and offline worlds, without separating the internet, as a technology, from the exchange process. Thus, the stages of the virtual ethnography undertaken included the observation of the interaction on the Women on Web platform, from April to December 2018, the collection of 22 shared narratives for analysis, on which we will dwell in this work, the holding of an interview with a representative the NGO that maintains the space, and the analysis of interviews and other publicly available materials about the organization.

We used the filters available on the platform itself to collect the narratives, especially the one that classifies the stories by feelings claimed by women for the experience. We chose a story among each of the 22 possibilities for classifying feelings (from "relieved" to "angry") to ensure some diversity of perceptions that characterizes the exchange between the site's users. Despite free access to the material and the possibility of using nicknames on the platform, we sought to superimpose mechanisms to protect the identification of the authors, assigning new and different codenames.

#### Locating the narratives:

##### Notes on the authors' profile

We sought to identify socioeconomic, cultural, and other characteristics based on how they appear in their texts in order to locate the places of speech from which the narratives start. As per

the elaboration of Djamila Ribeiro<sup>19</sup>, a place of speech is understood here as a way of understanding the social contexts that condition and influence experiences and how they are narrated, enabling reflection on the social conditions that allow given groups accessing places of citizenship or not.

The platform provided some information: the uploading form of stories already asks about age, religion, and children, for example. For others, it was necessary to apprehend the data by reading each narrative, such as the relational and occupational situation, and information that would help to understand the social and economic context of each story. A characteristic common to all reports concerns the territory. It is an urban Brazil, from where they have access to information and communication technologies, a medium to high level of education, medium and large health services, and varying social networks. This characterization is summarized in the Chart 1.

The texts inform about a predominantly young profile of middle/lower classes, most being Christian and without children. Of the 22, 16 report their age and are 19-29 years of age, three mention they are "young", and only three do not report this data even indirectly. Concerning religion, most are Christian (13), one is a spiritist, one is of African matrix, two marked the option "another religion", and five say they have no religion. Concerning relationships, nine are dating; three are married, nine do not have a steady partner (two are divorced), and one does not inform about it. Seven are students (high school and university), four are unemployed, five are working, and seven narratives have very clear information on the occupation. Most mention financial problems (14); one says "low income" and seven do not mention financial issues. Four are already mothers.

The National Abortion Survey<sup>1,2</sup> shows that voluntary termination of pregnancy is a common event in the lives of women of all social classes, ages and religions. Other research focuses on specific populations, often considering women admitted to public hospitals with incomplete abortion, which can be considered a selection bias<sup>20</sup>, since it only considers the portion of abortions that require hospitalization due to complications. Similarly, for this research, the analyzed group was expected to report a young age group, since the young population is the largest Internet user in Brazil, according to the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD)<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the expectation was that this "selection bias" could

**Chart 1.** Chart of the characterization of the authors of the narratives.

Name (feeling of “reference”)	Age	Marital status	Do you have children?	Living with	Occupational situation	Economic information	Religion
Aline (relieved)	19 years	Dating	No	Parents	Student	Financial problems	Christian
Patrícia (apathetic)	23 years	Single, without steady partner	No	Friends	Unemployed	Low income/ incomplete education	Spiritist
Cora (self-assured)	23 years	Married	No	Partner	–	–	No religion
Cátia (comfortable)	24 years	Dating	No	–	Student	–	Christian
Carolina (confused)	26 years	–	Yes	–	Working (health area)	Financial problems	No religion
Daniela (guilty)	29 years	Single, without steady partner	No	Parents	Unemployed	Financial problems	African matrix
Luna (mourning)	–	Married	Yes	Partner	University student	Financial problems	Christian
Débora (resolved)	–	Dating	No	–	Working	Complicated financial moment	Other
Daiane (disappointed)	28 years	Divorced, without steady partner	Yes	–	–	“Decadent” financial situation	No religion
Elaine (selfish)	–	Single, without steady partner	No	Father	Student / unemployed	Financial problems	Christian
Gisele (cornered)	–	Single, without steady partner	No	Alone	–	–	Christian
Fernanda (ashamed)	20 years	Dating	No	–	University student	Mentions a “comfortable” life	No religion
Laura (stupid)	Young	Dating	No	–	Working / incomplete studies	Financial problems	Christian
Graça (happy)	23 years	Single, without steady partner	No	Parents	–	–	Christian
Priscila (irresponsible)	21 years	Single, without steady partner	No	Mother	Working / University student	–	Christian
Nádia (in doubt)	20 years	Dating (engaged)	No	–	Working (mentions the “service”)	Financial problems	Christian
Paula (normal)	19 years	Dating	No	Partner	–	Difficult financial situation	Christian
Raquel (fearful)	23 years	Married	No	Partner	–	Financial problems	Christian
Teresa (confident)	21 years	Single, without steady partner	Yes	Parents	–	Financial problems	Christian
Serena (serene)	Young	Dating	No	–	–	–	No religion
Tatiana (sad)	Young	Dating	No	–	Working (mentions the “service”)	Financial problems	Christian
Zuleica (angry)	26 years	Dating	No	–	Self-employed	Financial problems	Other

Source: Data from the Women on Web Portal organized by authors.

generate a certain homogeneity of profiles and experiences. This is confirmed regarding some of the most common features in the group: young women, most without children, and from urban areas. However, it is not enough to consider the group homogeneous: a diversity is observed regarding occupation, housing, marital status, and economic situation, albeit within a margin and before the scarce, more accurate data regarding the socioeconomic status. An absence felt in the characterization of the group concerns skin color/ethnicity: the website form does not include this question, and this element is not self-reported in the analyzed texts, which prevents the discussion about the intersections between gender, skin color/ethnicity, and class in this work. We consider it a noteworthy limitation because the debate on abortion in Brazil and, especially, on the effects of the criminalization of abortion, necessarily involves the discussion of structural racism: research shows that black women die more due to complications from unsafe abortions<sup>22</sup>, are more processed for carrying out clandestine abortions<sup>23</sup> and face more institutional barriers in accessing health services after abortion<sup>24</sup>.

#### **Female network solidarity: “If it weren’t for her, I would be practically lost”**

The abortive itineraries described in the reports involve the mobilization of partners, family, friends, NGOs, and feminist support groups, whether on the internet or outside, formal health services and health professionals who provide services illegally, as well as the abortion drug suppliers, the primary method used in the group. Thus, they articulate the sphere of primary solidarity, or primary (familiarity, kinship, neighborhood, friendship relationships) and secondary social networks (groups, organizations, and movements that advocate common interests or share knowledge for specific purposes)<sup>11</sup>.

When we identified in the narratives the characters underlying the activated primary networks, women hold a prominent place. Many friends and some mothers and aunts are mentioned as key characters in the narratives, either for the emotional support they provide, for the confidence that qualifies them to be confidants, or for the supportive company at the time of the abortion or the search for health services. It is the case of Daiane. Faced with an unforeseen pregnancy and without conditions or desire to carry it out, she counted on the help of her mother and a friend, although they were not favorable to

abortion. She writes, in a continuous text flow without punctuation, at the same time guilty and grateful, that after using the medication, while feeling the symptoms of the miscarriage, she felt “... *torn inside with my mother seeing me doing something so abominable, and yet supporting me even while she is evangelical. She hugged me but didn’t cry. She asked whether I was okay if everything was going well*”. Ardaillon (1997, p.379), stresses that the decision to abort is always the result of negotiations between ideology, social reality, and desire, which conforms to the “morality of the situation”, in many cases summarized by the sentence: “*I am saying that abortion is morally bad, but the situation is correct, and I am going to do it*”, found, under several variants, in studies with both middle-class women and women from lower classes<sup>25</sup>. Daiane’s narrative conveys this negotiation and shows signs that her mother and her friend also adhered to the morality of the situation, negotiating with their beliefs a space to support her decision.

The mother is also an essential figure in the story of Paula, who, while being Christian like many others, develops a pragmatic narrative without conjuring a feeling of guilt: *When I entered the 6<sup>th</sup> week, I decided to tell my mother, who is currently in the U.S. She supported me in full and said I was right to have an abortion. I decided to tell my aunt (who also supported me), and she knew a friend who sold Cytotec.*

Daniela’s narrative has several striking female characters. One of them is friend M., who accompanied her in the process: *My friend followed everything. Holding my hand. She showered and lifted me off the floor several times. I will never forget that.*

A recurring character stands out in this exchange of information, knowledge, and support in which women hold a privileged place in the narratives, which is that person who has already had the experience of causing an abortion. In the stories of Aline, Catia, Carolina, Laura, Graça, Priscila, Nadia, Teresa and Zuleica, this character appears at some point, whether in the figure of a friend, aunt, cousin, neighbor, acquaintance or even a stranger who ends up being raised to the status of a new friend. In this work, we call this essential character “the friend who has already aborted”.

The central role played by this character in some stories is well exemplified in Carolina’s narrative. Initially without resources to purchase the medication, she was helped by an acquaintance who *they said she had an abortion* and still had

“leftovers” of the medication – unused misoprostol pills. That first attempt was unsuccessful, and, without money to buy the drug in the underground market, Carolina found herself “*devastated*”, she “*swallowed her pride*” and borrowed money from a friend, who was “*as a sister*” to her. However, she was surprised by the contempt of her friend, who “*gave her the runaround*” and did not lend the money. Panicking, at eight weeks’ gestation and watching the time go by without finding the solution she was looking for, she was desperate:

*And I was afraid that time would pass, the fetus would grow, and I would run out of time. I was very desperate; I drank a lot this day. And when I least expected it, a good angel appeared to me. An unknown person who was introduced to me and had gone through the same situation, but with a horrible end [...] and she helped me.*

With the money borrowed from this “good angel”, who became a friend later, Carolina bought more misoprostol and continued her journey. Assistance in accessing the method, sharing resources and information, is one of the contributions of the “friend who has already aborted” in the narratives. Given the instability of the clandestine context, however, this prior knowledge is not always maintained as an alternative. For example, upon arriving in the city of a cousin who had already terminated a pregnancy, Catia discovers that the clinic she was looking for from her indication had been closed by the police.

In some narratives, the mediation of the internet for this exchange of information and support between women gains even more centrality, confirming the contribution of information and communication technologies to the expanded capacity for solidarity and mobilization of social network resources, as pointed out by Castells<sup>15</sup>. This is the case of the 19-year-old student Aline, who became friends on the network with a woman who had already had an abortion, who gave her tips, and the contact she used to buy the medicine. “*If it weren’t for her, I would be practically lost*”, she stated in her text.

Female solidarity is known in the literature on abortion: the transmission of knowledge about practices and methods, the monitoring and sharing of secrecy among women have characterized the safety networks mobilized in the abortion paths of Brazilian women<sup>13,26-28</sup>. It is also worth mentioning the networking configuration of both online and offline exchanges that are established between women. Attention to the importance of social networks in solving

abortive paths allows us to think, together with Portugal<sup>11</sup>, about the articulation of the concept of network with the concept of care, which reveals the intricate connections between public and private actors, and the heterogeneity of relationships and formal and informal flows. In making this articulation, the author proposes to look at the form and content of the social relationships that are established, especially the network ties<sup>11</sup>. In our analysis, the “friend who has already aborted” reveals herself to be one of these ties, a critical “node” in the network mobilized by women. And, when sharing their stories on the platform, these women also become a “node”, a bond, a meeting in the network of others, their readers. This possibility is primarily expressed in the narratives in two ways: as recognition of the importance that reading other stories meant in their paths, and in the intention of reproducing in their reports the details of methods, doses, symptoms, and tips. This almost prescriptive way of communicating the countless experiences of terminating a pregnancy transforms the platform space into a great sharing of ways of doing, which are unique in many aspects, but which narrate a shared experience while also collectivizing common strategies.

**The two flows of the common: “I went through the same as you! Calm down. Everything will be okay!”**

The shared experience is, therefore, the center of women’s interaction on the platform. We identified two related movements in the relationship they establish through the exchange of narratives:

1) *Valuing collective experience as a connecting point between different stories.* Graça’s statement is exemplary on this point:

*I went back to looking on the internet and read all the statements I found. I needed help and encouragement. Reading several cases that worked was fundamental, although I had no idea what those people were like, they provided me with comfort and encouraged me as no other known person could do.*

Zuleica ends her report by thanking the sharing of other women, listing singularities and differences between them, but underlining that her understanding of her own experience was influenced and facilitated by the other women:

*I cannot thank you enough for all the safety I felt here. I am also immensely grateful to each of the women who told her story, from those who wanted to those who did not want to have an abortion, the*

*youngest, the oldest, those who were sure, those who were not, those who had many complications, and those that didn't. Every report is valid and welcome. I knew everything that could or might not happen to me, thanks to you! Thank you, brave women!*

Daiane's speech, on the other hand, reveals the understanding of the experience she lived as something that characterizes her condition as a woman and the relationship between the illegality of the practice and the social injustice marked by gender.

*and I leave here my statement many, many other "Marias" who have gone through and will go through this at one time or another in life, often because of the weight of being a WOMAN. It happened to me and you, in your moment of despair, will also go through it. I only have a heartfelt desire that those who are going to experience it as I did at home through medicines are supported by love and that everything goes well, as it happened to me... kisses and hugs to all... of us who are illegal in a country so unfair to our race of WOMEN...*

Worth noting is that the *weight of being a woman* conveys the condition of subordination common to the experience of women, while the use of the word *supported*, in contrast to the helplessness associated with subordination, signals union between Daiane and the others.

The recognition of common experience as a marker of the perception of being a woman in a given historical context was addressed by Camurça<sup>29</sup>. When studying the sharing and analysis of biographies among a group of researcher-educators, the author points out that they "perceive themselves as women and understand being a woman as a socially shared and historically situated experience, although it is a unique experience for each one"<sup>29</sup>. Thus, these shared experiences, when recognized, provide meanings about the social practices that contextualize the "social ways of addressing girls' menstruation and puberty, [...] the double journey" and, we think, here, the issue of abortion.

2) *The collectivization of learning and strategies as a way of producing the common*, starting with writing directed to a reader, which marks the intention of speaking directly to someone who, in the future, may be sharing the same concerns and anxieties that they experienced. That is what Gisele did: *Well, I'll tell you from the beginning, because I want to share every moment of my experience and every detail, and I know it will help more people who are going through this situation*. Paula also reveals this concern with being thorough: *My story is long, but I need to report the*

*details to other women so that they have as much understanding as possible*. Thus, the narratives transmit a need for "retribution" to the cycle that benefited them in their process, as if they could become, by sharing their experience there, the "friend who has already aborted" of some unknown woman.

Thus, besides the effects of recognizing a collective experience, it is interesting to reflect on sharing and the intention to share this experience. Silvia Federici<sup>30</sup> analyzed the collectivization of reproductive work, which she calls the production of the "common" by women, as a way of resisting exploitation and sexual division of labor in capitalism, in which a central element is solidarity with those who share of these commons. Similarly, it is possible to think about the sharing of the common experience among women on the Women on Web platform as a tool to resist the context of clandestinity, stigmatization, and control over their bodies, where solidarity is a guiding principle of the relationships that are established between them, their "friends who have already had an abortion" and strangers who are yet to have an abortion.

Resistance here has the meaning proposed by Soihet<sup>31</sup>, with particular attention to the "informal roles, visible only through the focus of daily life" as a resource for obtaining clues that enable the reconstruction of the "concrete experience of women in society, which in the relational, complicated and contradictory process with men, have played an active role in the creation of their history"<sup>31</sup>, a perspective that articulates experience and creativity as central praxis for understanding resistance. Some of the narratives covered in this section include the following linked elements: the starting point of shared experience and the production, from it, of a sharing, collectivization of strategies, knowledge, and solidarity that produces commons<sup>30</sup>. Returning to Teixeira's approach, which draws production closer to "making community"<sup>12</sup>, the origin of the term commons goes back to the fields and forests that were shared in pre-capitalist Europe and were the target of encroachment and expropriation by the State-Nations, when it was formed. The allusion to this territoriality of sharing that had been expropriated, and that is once again claimed and built somehow has been used to think about creation based on resistance as "production of the common"<sup>12,30</sup>, a useful approach to reflect on the case under analysis. The exercise of sharing by women who wrote the narratives produces a common as a life strategy, resisting and seeking to minimize

the alienation concerning the knowledge about abortion generated by the clandestine context, by the social stigma and by the historical expropriation that medicine has made<sup>32</sup> of the knowledge of women over their body.

### **Final considerations**

The relational aspects that are part of the abortion paths narrated by Brazilian women on the portal of the Women on Web group are presented in networking, involving primary and secondary social networks. In the face of public policy gaps for humanized abortion care, the social stigma concerning the issue of abortion, and the risks of clandestinity to which they are subjected, women move in a network, relying chiefly on other women to resist the tensions of the context. In the primary networks activated in their itineraries, a character stands out in importance as we sought to demonstrate: the “friend who has already aborted”. Exchanges with this figure are characterized by moral support, information, shared resources, and empathy for a situation already experienced. These elements are also com-

mon to the relationship between women and the statements read, which encourages many of them to repay the gesture they have benefited from, also sharing their stories and learnings. Thus, in the platform environment, they intend also to become the “friend who has already aborted” of other, unknown women who will be able to read their reports. The shared collective experience is, together with networking care and solidarity, a category central to the interpretation of the interaction of women on the platform. Two movements emerge in the relationship they establish, as follows: 1) the recognition that a socially shared experience connects them, and 2) the collectivization of common strategies to address the difficulties of this experience. The solidarity networks connected by experience and common sharing can be thought of as moving fissures in the face of the vicious cycle perpetrated by the criminalization and stigmatization of abortion in Brazil. They can also inspire the Collective Health field to foster public policies that consider the relational and networking dimensions of the shared abortion culture, valuing the experience of women in addressing gender inequalities.

## Collaborations

NIG Duarte is responsible for the conception, collection and interpretation of data, and drafting of the text. VLM Silva and LW Pinto are responsible for orienting, interpreting the data, and revising the text.

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