

EDITORIAL



Bioethicists under threat

The title of this editorial is not exaggerated: I am a developing world bioethicist and most of my work has been focused on reproductive rights. To be clear, most of my theoretical writings and empirical research are about abortion. Abortion is a crime in several developing countries, and, globally, the Latin American and Caribbean region has the most repressive laws against abortion, along with high rates of clandestine abortion.¹ Women can go to the jail for having a miscarriage when they are not being properly protected against criminal prosecutions, as has happened in El Salvador.² In my case, being an academic who is engaged in women's reproductive rights has led me to an unprecedented situation as an academic in Brazil: I have received threats against my life and can no longer go back to my university to teach, to meet students, or to participate in academic celebrations such as commencement, where I was the main speaker this year.³

The issue here is not solely about "academic freedom" or "freedom of speech", or even the legal question of "freedom to hate" or "hate speech". It is also about staying alive to write, speak, or teach. My positions about abortion are explicitly based on what is described as "good" science. Indeed, the refutations of my research – specifically on the magnitude of abortion in Brazil – have been utterly weak.⁴ However, I still have mixed feelings about my work: I am proud of my work when it is discussed in evidence-oriented settings, yet afraid of my work when it is read or quoted without context by those who claim the "right to hate".

We are now witnessing a deepening divide historical moment in the global South for reproductive rights – on the one side, the "gag rule" is not just about the U.S. government's restrictions on financial support for the Global South, it is also about the expansion of the conservative movement's efforts to restrict women's and girl's access to sexual and reproductive information and services;⁵ on the other side, there is a growing response from civil society and academics to challenge and undo the criminalization of

abortion. The recent green wave in Argentina, where hundreds of thousands of girls, women, and families took to the streets to advocate for the passage of progressive abortion legislation is a new image for the region. Sadly, the counter response to the surge in public demonstrations in support of abortion has been an increase in violence.

My story is not an isolated anecdote from a country where the news is largely about corruption, political crises, or one of the highest rates of homicides in the world. Latin America and the Caribbean is the most dangerous region in the world for human rights defenders.⁶ Due to the long-lasting military dictatorships, we have a poor tradition of vigorously AND respectfully discussing ideas. When it comes to difficult issues, circulating academic papers and engaging in reasonable disagreements is not part of our political culture. For some, silencing voices is the way to resolve dissent. I do not intend to paint a picture of the enlightened North and the gangster South – in fact, the "infanticide debate" is a good example of how similar language is often used across settings.⁷ The main difference, I guess, is that being a developing world bioethicist demands a more profound engagement with issues: it is not enough to relax in our tenured academic positions and aspire only to writing papers to be read and discussed by our peers at international congresses. We have to actively use our knowledge to confront the reality.

My point here is straightforward – academic freedom is not the magic solution to our times of brutal controversy when we claim the right to be safe and alive. I am not questioning our duty to write and to be responsible for our arguments. Any issue has to be under our scrutiny to be "discussed".⁸ But as developing world bioethicists, our mission is about more than promoting free discussion: we have to reclaim our places at the university and any space where change can be made by ideas and arguments and not by violence. We need to be both safe and active.

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¹Singh S et al., *Abortion Worldwide 2017: Uneven Progress and Unequal Access*, New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2018

²Malkin E. They were jailed for miscarriages. Now, Campaign aims to end abortion ban. *The New York Times*, 10 April 2018, p. A 11. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/world/americas/el-salvador-abortion.html>

³Phillips D. Professor forced into hiding by death threats over Brazil abortion hearings. *The Guardian*, 2 August 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/aug/02/professor-forced-into-hiding-by-death-threats-over-brazil-abortion-hearing>

⁴Diniz D, Medeiros M, Madeiro A. National Abortion Survey 2016. *Ciênc. saúde coletiva*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 22, n. 2, p. 653-660, Feb. 2017. http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1413-81232017000200653&lng=en&nrm=iso.

⁵Greer S L, Rominiski S D. The Global gag rule and what to do about it *BMJ* 2017; 356: j511

⁶Amnesty International. *Amnesty International Report 2017/18: the state of the world's human rights*. London: Amnesty International, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL1067002018ENGLISH.PDF>

⁷Giubilini A, Minerva F. After-birth abortion: why should the baby live? *J Med Ethics* 2013; 39: 261-3; Giubilini A, Minerva F. An open letter from Giubilini and Minerva. *J Med Ethics* (blog), 2 Mar 2012, <https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-ethics/2012/03/02/an-open-letter-from-giubilini-and-minerva/>; Savulescu J. 'Liberals are disgusting': in defence of the publication of post-birth abortion. *J Med Ethics* (blog), 28 Feb 2012, <https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-ethics/2012/02/28/liberals-are-disgusting-in-defence-of-the-publication-of-after-birth-abortion/>

⁸Schüklenk U. In defence of academic freedom: bioethics journals under siege. *J Med Ethics* 2013; 39: 303-306.