

ADDRESSING HARMFUL NARRATIVES TO SUPPORT REDUCTION IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN MEXICO, PARAGUAY AND ECUADOR

Report to inform the Feminist Futures Free from Violence project
through a behavioral science lens

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Introduction

As part of Fòs Feminista's Feminist Futures Free from Violence project, Fòs Feminista and its partners aim to enhance gender equality and empowerment of women and girls and those who have other gender identities in Latin America and the Caribbean. As part of this work, Fòs Feminista and its partners aim to transform individual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.

Fòs Feminista has partnered with ideas42, a behavioral design firm, to develop value-based messages to address and counteract harmful arguments that minimize, victim-blame or normalize sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). ideas42 identified harmful narratives common in the countries of interest as well as the context that perpetuates these narratives. This report details the narratives identified as well as recommendations to address harmful narratives related to SGBV.

What is a narrative?

A narrative is an explanation used by an individual, group, or community to understand and explain why something has happened, why it is true or false, or why it is justified or unjustified. Narratives serve as heuristics that help us make sense of how the world works and why. Harmful narratives play a fundamental role in the perpetration and normalization of gender-based violence.

A norm, by contrast, is a rule or a standard held by an individual, group or community. Research from the behavioral sciences has long established that we develop shortcuts, or heuristics, to organize and process information. Narratives often manifest social norms, but they also play a role in shaping norms.

Approach

To develop recommendations ideas42:

1) Identified harmful narratives related to normalization SGBV in Mexico, Paraguay and Ecuador

ideas42 reviewed literature and partner materials to identify existing narratives related to the perpetuation and normalization of gender-based violence. Based on the literature review, ideas42 identified narratives which are categorized into the following themes

1 Tolerate Violence

2 Justify Violence

3 Positive Masculinity

2) Proposed strategies to address selected narratives

After identifying the harmful narratives, ideas42 applied a behavioral lens to understand the drivers of the harmful narratives and conceptualize ways to address them.

2) Rapidly tested and iterated on alternative messages

ideas42 shared the messages with Fòs Feminista implementing partners during a testing and brainstorming session. ideas42 collected partner feedback and made refinements and removed and added additional messages based on partner feedback.

Implementation Considerations

This report is intended to inform strategies for developing messages to address harmful narratives which perpetuate gender-based violence. The recommendations provided herein are not fully developed messages but instead concepts and approaches which can be leveraged and tailored based on partner needs. Partner organizations are encouraged to build on this guidance and example messages and tailor for the intended population and delivery channel.

Some potential audiences shared by partners include:

- Adolescents
- Young men and women
- Civil Society Organizations
- Community Leaders
- NGOs
- Educators
- Ministry of Health representatives

Further, it is important to consider the channel that will be used for dissemination. Examples of channels identified by partner organizations include:

- Email
- Whats app
- Social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn)



NARRATIVE #1

Men are violent by nature. Women must not trigger them.

Additional Context

Many women believe violence is normal and they must tolerate it. Women tend to minimize the violence they suffer because of the perception that women must be deferential and deprioritize their needs for others.

Women feel powerless in addressing violence. They are told to keep quiet for the sake of their relationship, family and children.

Many women fear that when they deviate from traditional gender norms, including a lack of deference to men and putting “her needs” before the family’s, they may become the subject of gossip and be stigmatized and ostracized by their community.

Community norms dictate that women should accept violence, and that it is a sign of weakness if they cannot do so. As a result, women do not speak up if they experience violence and are concerned about community gossip and perception. This allows for the violence to continue.



Behavioral Lens

Fundamental Attribution Error:

We tend to believe that people’s personality traits have more influence on their actions, compared to the other factors over which they don’t have control. As it relates to gender-based violence, individuals may believe that they experience violence because of their character, rather than due to something external and out of their control. This perception can limit a victim’s likelihood to seek help or support because of fear of judgement.

Learn more about fundamental attribution error [here](#).

Addressing The Narrative

1 Emphasize that gender-based violence is a crime

Men tend to minimize the violence they practice, and women minimize the violence they suffer, a consequence of the relationship between masculinity and violence. Acknowledging that violence is a crime can help to reduce its normalization.

2 Humanize the victims of gender-based violence

The identifiable victim effect teaches us that individuals feel greater empathy and are more likely to act in situations when there is a specific and identifiable individual as opposed to a vague group. Storytelling helps an audience empathize with the individual and makes messages more memorable.

3 Reflect on the consequences of spreading gossip

When communities gossip, particularly as it relates to individuals deviating from specific gender norms, it further reinforces those gender norms. It contributes to social isolation and increases a woman's vulnerability to violence. Messages should highlight the consequences of community gossip and aim for perspective taking and empathy building to put community members in the shoes of someone who is the subject of community gossip.

4 Do not portray women as weak or in needing help

Portraying women as victims, needing help or weak can reinforce the notion that they need to be protected and therefore controlled.



Potential Messaging

Conduct a group reflection exercise to consider the consequences community gossip

Message campaign in which a daughter is telling her father about her hopes and dreams for the future.



NARRATIVE #2

Jealousy equates to love. If my partner is not jealous, they must not love me.

Additional Context

Jealousy is perceived as a normal part of a relationship and a way to demonstrate love for one's partner. However, it is also used as a way for partners to exert control in a relationship.

Accusations of a woman's infidelity led to community gossip and a threat to a man's masculinity. Men sometimes feel the need to "prove" their manhood in response to gossip, which can result in intimate partner violence. Because men feel humiliated by a partner's infidelity or threat of infidelity, they will use the threat of violence to control their behavior.



Behavioral Lens

Halo Effect

Positive impressions of people, brands, and products in one area positively influence our feelings in another area. As it relates to jealousy and gender-based violence, victims of violence may overlook or mischaracterize certain behavior because of the admiration they have for their partner. They are more likely to view jealous behavior through this lens.

Learn more about fundamental attribution error [here](#).

Addressing The Narrative

1

Elevate positive relationship attributes

Share alternative ways to demonstrate love such as trust. Messages should not focus exclusively on illustrating the harmful effects of jealousy but also emphasize healthy ways a partner can demonstrate love.

2

Rather than demonize jealousy, **decrease its acceptability as a mechanism for controlling behavior.** Demonstrate the negative consequences of jealousy, or how it can escalate to control and the use of violence.



Potential Messaging

Demonstrate healthy couple communication through storytelling.

Trusted male community members share stories of how they show their partners love.



NARRATIVE #3

A man's role is to protect women and controlling women is a means of protection, not violence.

Additional Context

While young men have rejected the "machismo" persona, there is a pervasive attitude of benevolent sexism. There is a perception that women are weak so men must protect them.

While physical violence may not be socially acceptable, control is socially acceptable and not perceived as violence. That may be through controlling a partner's movement or making household decisions.

Men tend to minimize the violence they practice due to the relationship between masculinity and violence.

Because people believe that violence is victim's fault, being a victim is perceived as shameful and therefore communities don't rally around victims. As a result, victims typically do not denounce or speak out when they experience violence.



Behavioral Lens

Moral Licensing

An individual perceives that positive action or thought justifies negative behavior. In the context of gender-based violence, a perpetrator justifies their use of control or violence because they believe that doing so is in the best interest of the victim, that they have good intentions.

Learn more about fundamental attribution error [here](#).

Addressing The Narrative

1 Broaden the definition of masculinity and what it means to be a man

Portray men and women in nontraditional roles to broaden expectations for how men and women are expected to behave. Using trusted messengers can also strengthen the effectiveness of this approach. When community members see people that are influential and that they trust challenging gender norms it provides the space for them to also question their own actions and gender expectations.

2 Emphasize the cognitive dissonance between the belief and the action

Men reject the idea of violence against women and yet justify their actions as serving women. Messages can highlight the disconnect between supporting women and the negative consequences of control and violence.

3 Demonstrate positive ways men can show their love and care for women without using violence and controlling behavior

The behavioral science concept of social proof describes a tendency, when faced with ambiguity about how one should act, to look to the examples of peers, on the assumption that they know more about what the “correct” behavior is. Community members look to others to understand what behavior is acceptable and commonplace. By demonstrating positive ways to show love and trust, community members have a model for alternatives to using control and violence.

4 Expand how community members define violence

To minimize the use of control, community members need to reject control as acceptable behavior and recognize it as a form of violence.



Potential Messaging

Trusted messengers share positive descriptions and stories of ways they have challenged traditional gender roles.

Conduct a group reflection exercise to consider what the community defines as violence and the negative consequences of control and psychological violence.



NARRATIVE #4

Being "macho" is outdated

Additional Context

The perception that women are objects is outdated and rejected amongst young people living in Latin America and the Caribbean. This positive narrative, that being "macho" is outdated, can be elevated and leveraged to reduce gender-based violence.

Many young men perceive the male ideal to be a man that prioritizes their family.

The need to be perceived as a man is driven by social hierarchy. Internally most young men do not identify with the "machismo" attitude. Young men feel the pressure to fulfill traditional male roles and attitudes to maintain their status in the social hierarchy.



Behavioral Lens

Pluralistic Ignorance:

A situation in which a majority of group members privately reject (or accept) a norm, but incorrectly assume that most others accept (or reject) it, and therefore go along with it. In the instance of the machismo attitude, individually young men reject the machismo attitude and portrayal of masculinity. However, because they believe this opinion to be unique and different from their peers, they do not publicize this opinion and will instead continue to follow the social norm. This allows for harmful social norms to persist.

Learn more about fundamental attribution error [here](#).

Addressing The Narrative

1

Provide positive male role models

Leveraging young men's internal rejection of the machismo attitude, provide an alternative aspiration for masculinity and generate a greater comfort in young men's identify. When people have a stronger sense of self, they can take ownership of group transgressions.

2

Share messages of positive masculinity from influential community members

Community messengers are influential in shifting norms. When messages come from trusted and influential community members, others are more likely to trust them. Demonstrating positive masculinity provides young men with the freedom to express their own rejection of machismo norms and help to shift the normative behavior.

3

Elevate the rejection of the machismo attitude and openly criticize the use of control and benevolent sexism.

Young men internally reject the machismo attitude, but they often feel as though they are in the minority and therefore do not publicly reject it. Be specific in rejecting harmful masculinity. Rather than rejecting the label of machismo which already has a negative connotation, target specific behaviors such as controlling a women's moment or her involvement in household decision making.



Example Messages

"Men are..." campaign

This message campaign provides examples of positive characteristics of men.

Prominent community leaders share their own journey of learning about positive masculinity, and how it has strengthened their relationships.

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