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Old concerns, renewed focus and novel problems: feminist communication theory and the Global South

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ABSTRACT
Feminist theorizations have made important contributions to communication, albeit somewhat less visible and on the sidelines. Even less visible is research conducted with a feminist lens from the Global South. This article provides an overview of current ways of approaching, understanding, and applying feminist theoretical perspectives at the intersection of gender and communication from non-Western contexts. It also identifies feminist contributions to communication scholarship and makes suggestions for future directions.

In April 2018, college students that identified themselves as feminists led a series of protests, marches, sit-ins, occupations and other demonstrations in several universities across Chile, a seemingly prosperous democratic South American country with a less than stellar record regarding gender violence and women's representation. What started as a protest in one school demanding the firing of a Law professor accused of sexual harassment evolved into a major student movement demanding the end of sexist education, swift responses to on-campus sexual assault, and more visibility and respect for women's work (e.g. course required readings). This so-called feminist surge in student movements has sparked multiple debates about sexism, gender-based violence, and how feasible – or even likely – gender equality is in a country like Chile. Over the months, the movement struggled to have a coherent voice, as inner factions disagreed on the scope of their demands and their approach to negotiations with university officials. Not surprising, given the myriad of issues they had been tackling. What is remarkable is that with this mobilization matters of gender equality and gender-based violence now have a prominent place in public opinion, with 'sexism' and 'assault/abuses' now ranking among the top issues and concerns in public opinion polls (e.g. Encuesta Plaza Publica N° 230). President Sebastián Piñera ended up presenting the so-called Women's Agenda, a series of initiatives to 'move toward men and women having the same rights and opportunities.' More so, mainstream media now regularly address sexism and misogyny, openly speak of 'feminist concerns' and 'patriarchy,' and have explored matters of sexual assault, women's contributions to society, and structural constraints as never before (Rodríguez, 2018; see also Dessi, 2018). Up until recently, these matters were reserved to alternative media and niche publications (see, for instance, Lagos, 2008).

Rather than an anecdote, this feminist uproar illustrates much of what feminism entails in countries in the Global South, and the contributions of feminist theorization to communication in non-Western contexts. As a label to broadly refer to Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, 'Global South' is not a geographically accurate term, but a means to group countries often at the periphery politically and economically, mostly in postcolonial non-settler contexts outside Europe and North America, the so-called Global North (Dados & Connell, 2012; see also Das, 2017; Friedman,

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2015). This also helps reminding that despite mainstream media and even some academic publications' tendency to lump all women together, their concerns and circumstances are not monolithic, that in 2019 the struggle against sexism remains alive and well, and that despite inroads worldwide, gendered structures keep constraining women around the globe in different ways and circumstances. That is why opening gender up to theoretical scrutiny is so important, and why feminist scholarship from non-Western contexts is valuable. In line with feminist standpoint theory, Global South feminists try to frame their scholarship in line with the interests of those oppressed, in order to enable them to understand their own problems and empower them to improve their situation (see Anderson, 2019).

This article addresses such scrutiny, and the underpinnings of feminist theorizations on communication from the Global South. From culturally-anchored bridges between theory and practice, to the epistemological and methodological matters of feminist communication scholarship, the aim of this work is to acknowledge the relevant and varied contributions to our understandings of the intersection of gender and communication from scholars examining women in/from the Global South.

Defining women in/from non-Western contexts

Feminisms and feminist theories are diverse, complex, and heterogeneous, to the extent that they should be understood indeed in the plural form. This is why understanding contributions to communication theory from a feminist lens in the Global South is so important – on the one hand, they showcase the pervasiveness of the political, economic, cultural and social inequalities that constrain women's lives in different parts of the world, and on the other, they relieve that normalized constructs supporting hierarchical gender relations across specific contexts (e.g. Bachmann, Harp, & Loke, 2018; Byerly, 2018; Hernández, 2008; Moorti, 2018; Vega-Montiel, 2011). One of the main tenets of feminist communication scholarship from the Global South is that of differences in women and their particular circumstances. Indeed, one of the main critiques from the Global South is the 'ideological dominance of Western groups in defining women's need globally' (Dempsey, 2011, p. 57). This line of criticism stresses that women do not share the same conditions of oppression, and in so doing challenges some liberal and Western feminists' assumptions that a global sisterhood even exists (e.g. Bosch, 2011; Dempsey, 2011; Hernández, 2008; Lee, 2006). Along these lines, scholars in both the Global North and South have claimed that the West often cast itself as a site of progress and civilization for women, and that Western actors serve as savior of women-others (e.g. Alvarez et al., 2003; Chow-White, 2006; Dosekun, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; Sarikakis, Rush, Grubb-Swetnam, & Lane, 2008). Mohanty (2003) is particularly critical of constructing Third World women as a homogeneous group:

> Automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read: not progressive), family-oriented (read: traditional), legally unsophisticated (read: they are still not conscious of their rights), illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward), and sometimes revolutionary (read: their country is in a state of war, they must fight). (p. 40)

Most Western theorizations or Global North feminisms do not fall into such homogenizing constructions of Global South women. However, this line of critique stresses the *risk* of universalizing models of women's liberation – they tend to rely on Western values, and as a result the Global South appears as a barbarous place that needs to catch up to West standards (e.g. Chow-White, 2006; Dempsey, 2011). The argument here is that the colonial divide is at the base to the global North–South, or West/Rest divide (Grosfoguel, 2008, cited by Bardhan & Zhang, 2017) and that the meaning of gender and womanhood is not uniform across the globe (see Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). This has been consistently posited by post-colonial feminists, who argue women are better understood as socio-economic political groups that exist in particular contexts, rather than 'sisters in struggle' (see Mohanty, 2003; also Aguilar & Juan, 2005; Bergeron, 2001; Hegde, 2006; Moorti, 2018; Stohr, 2015). As Stohr (2015) summarizes,

> [I]t should not be presumed that all women share the same goals, or that different women conceptualize the goals they do share in the same way, or that actualizing the goals women do share is necessarily accomplished by the same means. (p. 222)

Not surprisingly, then, the very nature of feminisms is contested across diverse cultural contexts (Dempsey, 2011; see also Alvarez et al., 2003; Hernández, 2008). The Global South is no exception. Some mainstream forms of feminisms can and have been used to advance the position of certain women (typically middle class and heterosexual) as if that is enough to help *all* women, effectively silencing the voices of marginalized women. Alvarez et al. (2003), for example, document the 'crises of inclusion' and 'crises of expansion' within Latin American feminist activism and scholarship, with multiple conflicts related to class, racial and ethnic differences as well as rural-urban divisions. This is why Global South feminist scholarship stresses difference *among* and *between* women rather than commonalities, while acknowledging that women are overall a marginalized group in comparison to men. This can be related to intersectional theory – a staple of feminist scholarship across borders for two decades (Byerly, 2018) – which posits that people's experiences are defined by an array of interwoven identities such as race, socio-economic status, caste, cultural history, sexuality and religion, to name a few. A term coined by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality highlights that all identities embody a set of categories and that oppression cannot be understood by considering a single element of an individual's experience. This has been long acknowledged by feminist theorizations worldwide, but given the profound inequalities among women in non-Western countries, it is quite prevalent in Global South feminist communication scholarship: talking about women in general obscures the fact that concerns such as reproductive health, education, violence against women and labor rights, to name a few, are not homogeneous.

For example, Alvarez et al. (2003) highlight how black and poor Brazilian women's sense of oppression was different from those of their middle class and white counterparts: the former endured police violence in the *favelas* (shantytowns) on a regular basis, the latter did not. Not surprisingly, these divergences extended to notions of agency and autonomy, and translated into how different groups of women expressed themselves and interacted in society. Similarly, Morrell's (2016) interviews with South African feminist scholars showcases that these researchers go to great lengths to not just fit the country 'into a theoretical box created by Northern theorists,' but that they need to engage 'in a dialogue that included considerations of self, context and the very specific political issues that presented themselves' in South Africa (p. 194). In so doing, they have addressed how gender operates 'in contexts of political struggle, gross inequality and cultural and historical diversity, all against the backdrop of a particular route from imperialism, colonialism to post-colonialism' (p. 205).

Main issues regarding Global South women

Rather than gender mainstreaming itself, Global South scholars pay great attention to women, and focus on comparing women's experiences with other women, rather than comparing women to men (Blazquez Graf, Flores Palacios, & Ríos Everardo, 2012; Mendes & Carter, 2008).[1] For example, women of African descent with diasporic experiences frequently find that they have more in common with men from their communities than with white American or European women (Guy-Shetfall, 2006, cited by Sarikakis et al., 2008). Similarly, a great deal of attention is paid to women's subjectivity, and along these lines Gould (2014) has stressed how different women assign divergent meaning to the Islamic veil (hijab) in contemporary Iran and its state-mandated veiling, concluding that 'the meanings of the hijab are as variable and variegated as is the cloth from which it is woven' (p. 235). This is also why this kind of feminist scholarship is particularly sensitive to cultural, social, and economic differences among different kinds of women in the Global South (see Dosekun, 2015; Vega-Montiel, 2011).

Confounding this is the fact that non-Western feminisms and feminist scholarship are not organized by theoretical approach, let alone a univocal approach to matters of gender and

communication (e.g. Al-Mahadin, 2011, Vega-Montiel, 2011). These scholars often borrow from Western theoretical formulations – at the same time they are somewhat skeptic of Western feminisms – and mix them with indigenous approaches that can help inform analyses of communication systems and contexts that are relevant to the realities of specific cultures and nation-states (e.g. Al-Mahadin, 2007; Rivera, 2008). What gender entails, and how gender equality can be achieved, is defined by these realities. The single label of the Global South (or, alternatively, 'the rest of the world') actually refers to a myriad of geographical, political, linguistic, cultural and racial issues and interests, and in diverse mixtures and proportions (Das, 2017; Schutte, 2011), all of them informing the status of women in society. Global South feminist scholarship sheds lights into the inequities of power and privilege than engender womanhood in countries and regions often ignored in academic literature.

For instance, Debert and Gregori (2016), in analyzing the sphere of violence against women in Brazil, highlight that Brazilian feminist thought has emphasized that such violence is not exclusively caused by class inequalities – as argued by law enforcement, sociologists and politicians— but with the positioning of men and women in society. While acknowledging inroads made in Brazilian Law on familial violence, Debert and Gregory argue that criminalization of domestic violence ignores that the power inequalities that characterize the relationships between victims and their aggressors are not limited to the private sphere of domestic life. Their critique of the law and the state apparatus also has to do with how they deal with domestic violence. For instance, the Specialized Police Stations for Women's Defense (which serve women victims violence, including rape, assault and attempted murder), are often located in areas easily accessible by public transportation, but do not offer shelters for victims: A woman who denounces her husband for aggressions has to go back to the same place where she lives with her aggressor before police procedures begin their course.

Just to be clear, while there is important criticism, Global South scholars do not dismiss feminisms and the fight for gender equality sits at the center of feminist communication theorizations in non-Western contexts as well. What is different is an epistemological approach that understands that difference is a key element in defining gender, differences that (re)produce social inequalities (Mendes & Carter, 2008; see also Aguilar & Juan, 2005; Blazquez Graf et al., 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Moorti, 2018; Rivera, 2008; Vega-Montiel, 2011). In dismissing a globalist approach, these feminist scholars thus showcase the pervasiveness of sexism and the multiple forms it circumscribes women's lives across time and cultures – all women endure inequalities, but these inequalities affect women's lives in different ways.

This is not a minor issue. By disregarding homogeneity, feminist communication research from the Global South stresses the cultural underpinnings of women's status, and thus tackles how communication between different individuals shapes their civic life *together* (Stohr, 2015, emphasis added). The focus on women's circumstances thus inform how a given society functions, and gender inequality is explained beyond the provision of certain rights and addresses its ethos. For instance, Al-Mahadin (2011) argues when discussing Arab feminism that it is nearly impossible to secularize Islamic feminist debates about women, since 'family law derives its force, ethos and binding provisions from interpretations of Islamic Sharia' (p. 10). Along these lines, debating whether the burqa is a symbol of oppression must start with an understanding of the Arab world and the meanings of women's attire in a given historical and social context. Similarly, Rivera (2008) insists that when it comes to indigenous women in Latin America, gender perspectives cannot be separated by the cultural and political reality of native peoples in the Americas, with definitions of women's place interwoven with cultural constructions that indigenous people strive to keep alive or even claim as part of their identity. Along these lines, Tapia Tapia (2016), uses the incorporation of *Sumak Kawsay*, the Andean philosophy of living well, into the Constitution of Ecuador to address gender politics in this South American country. While Andean tenets could have challenged narrow constructions of gender that subordinate women, her conclusion is that the adoption of *Sumak Kawsay* as a guiding principle failed to significantly impact the way gender violence is framed in this country's

legislation, since it did no lead to broader possibilities for women to access justice or legal protections.

Feminist scholarship from the Global South also pays particular attention to five interrelated issues where the experiences of Global South citizens are especially illuminating: economic justice, migration, human rights, decolonization, and peace and disarmament. Regarding economic justice, Southern feminist scholars have stressed the unequal and oppressive effects of both economic instability and neoliberal policies related to globalization for specific groups of women, who make up a great portion of the global poor. Work on this area has stressed that globalization itself is shaped by gendered practices and ideologies (Jad, 2010; Parekh & Wilcox, 2018; Das, 2017) and has served as 'a system hostile or antagonistic to women' (Jaggar, 2001, p. 301), further increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, and strengthening sexist barriers (see also Das, 2017). Women's vulnerability in the Global South has worsened due to neoliberal policies at the core of globalization of the economy (Tallis & Mathonsi, 2018: see also Blazquez Graf et al., 2012). On a similar vein, women comprise a higher proportion of migrants, particularly labor migrants, and the phenomenon has accelerated along with globalization. Feminist scholarship on this matter highlights how the mix of gender, race, class and immigration status results in heavy burdens for immigrant women (for instance, seemingly gender-neutral immigration policies often work to the detriment of immigrant women, see Parekh & Wilcox, 2018, and Das, 2017). Recent research on this has focused on the feminization of labor migration, particularly domestic workers, as well as diaporas, borders and incarceral states (Aguilar & Juan, 2005; Blazquez Graf et al., 2012, Das, 2017; Jad, 2010; Rivera, 2008; Sarikakis et al., 2008; Vega-Montiel, 2011).

Global South scholarship has also examined to a great deal how women in the region experience human rights violations, often in contexts of economic instability and political unrest. Work on this area shows how women and girls endure sexual slavery and forced domestic labor, or are prevented from accessing education, health care or food (Balagopalan, 2010; Bergeron, 2001; Das, 2017; Parekh & Wilcox, 2018). These violations are further complicated by matters of war, militarization and disarmament, in which women's agency and autonomy is regularly challenged or dismissed (Friedman, 2015; Giraldo, 2015; Jaggar, 2001), and confounded by historical contexts marked by Western colonialism and imperialism (Das, 2017; Jad, 2010; Giraldo, 2015; Hernández, 2008; Sarikakis et al., 2008; Vega-Montiel, 2011). Work in this area stresses that gender injustice arise within specific transnational contexts, such as historical relationships among nations and current global economic policies (Parekh & Wilcox, 2018).

What all of these approaches and examination have in common is a consideration to the material and ideological elements in context-specific local practices of sexism and oppression. Examination of female subjectivities in such scenarios demand for an accurate reflection of the diverse interests, experiences, and concerns of women in different parts of the world, with great attention to differences in culture, history, and socio-economic and political circumstances (Parekh & Wilcox, 2018).

Global South feminist ways of doing communication research

Global South feminist scholars know that their own experiences tint their interpretations and acknowledge that they pay attention to differences, to voices and representations of both men and women and how labeling such dichotomous categories (re)produce their identities and status. This task is not particularly easy and has been met with resistance (Bachmann, Harp, & Loke, 2018; Gallagher, 2003; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Sarikakis et al., 2008). Borrowing terms from feminist scholar Schutte (2011) – who was talking about philosophy – communication as a discipline is still very masculine-dominant and defined by Anglocentric and Eurocentric ways of representing knowledge. For instance, Shome (2016) argues that media studies in general

> … universalizes a particular history of modernity … that neglects how media functions in the Global South (including in the 'developed South') … [and] may have suppressed other epistemes of media and communication from gaining visibility in flows of everyday and academic knowledge. (p. 246)

Both the male-centric and North-centric aspects of this critique are particularly relevant to Global South feminist communication scholarship on many levels. For example, such ideological impediments of what constitute scientific knowledge make it difficult to develop feminist theorizing that might not make sense, or be well-received in the more traditional academia. These scholars theorize from the very social and cultural conditions they want to explain and deconstruct, and since many of them are women themselves, they are often negotiating the feminist project. Yet more complex, these feminist scholars often must speak for other women, telling their stories, which is 'inherently at odds with feminist assumptions and aims' (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 130).

In dealing with this scenario, Global South feminist communication scholarship has developed somewhat of a distinct identity and that is reflected in its epistemology and methodology. While it still often relies on Western terms and approaches of what constitutes research, it also adopts a strategic and conscientious attitude toward the research process. Global South feminist researchers' concern with women's different experiences has thus led to approaches that pay particular attention to matters of consent, agency, status and voice. More importantly, feminist scholars in the Global South have built substantive theory from empirical observations. In so doing, they have pursued a critical approach to knowledge about gender and communication, have laid bridges between theory and practices, and have contributed to changes in the very contexts in which they function. For example, Parameswaran's (1999) study of urban Indian women readers of imported romance novels stressed that the consumption of seemingly lowbrow literature actually served as a resource to improve English-language skills. More importantly, rather than accept the traditional gender roles in these books, readers used these romance novels to bolter their identities as cosmopolitan women.

Traditionally this kind of communication research has favored qualitative methods – especially ethnomethodologies and qualitative textual analyses – but increasingly feminist researchers dealing with Global South settings are using mixed-methods approaches and have taken advantage of technology to conduct cyberethnographies and online in-depth interviews.

Given the great socio-economic inequality in the Global South, conducting research in this context is difficult on many accounts. First, the scarcity of resources to conduct research and especially applied communication research (with ties to transformative and activist strategies) represents a mayor burden – software licenses, travel costs, academic databases, and news media archive access come to great costs (if they are available at all) for research that might not be groundbreaking in the eyes of funding agencies or officials. After all, feminisms are often ill-regarded, and feminist research is not necessarily valued given its 'non-conformist approach of multi-perspectival research and theory that does not privilege "objectivity" or "anonymity"' (Sarikakis et al., 2008, p. 508) when putting women at the center of research. Dismissal of feminist work as valid scholarship due to its common focus on the personal and the private arenas is a global phenomenon, and the Global South is no exception.

Second, language barriers often make it hard for scholarly research to be widely known or even conducted. Take for instance the vast production of Brazilian feminist scholars in communication and other social sciences, which regularly appears on Portuguese- or Spanish-language journals, but it is largely ignored in the Anglo-centric and English-language academic world. This results in limited knowledge of Afro-Brazilian feminist conceptualizations of gender violence and body exploitation – a major issue regarding black Brazilian women – or its connection to matters of class, race and sexual orientation.

Along these lines, Wöhrer (2016) found that even for scholars studying Global South women, being located at a North American or Western European institution was an important factor in authors being published and referred to – in both the Global North and the South. Das (2017) even argued that Southern feminists' attempt to fit into Western canonical requirements by publishing their works in leading Western journals or seeking higher degrees from Western institutions results in Northern feminists' intellectual hegemony being normalized. The fact that the present paper itself relies heavily on English-language literature is quite telling.

Another language-related issue is that scholars are not necessarily fluent in indigenous languages, and subjects might not be fluent or educated in a more traditional language. This also includes being fluent in the academic languages and ways of doing of the discipline: while for a Western scholar it might be obvious to write a paper with a literature review, followed by a section on methods and results, many scholars in the Global South adhere to different paradigms of what constitute research or how it should be presented. To some, such approach may appear as impressionistic, unscientific or unrigorous (e.g. Das, 2017; Rivera, 2008; Waisbord, 2016). Mohanty (2003) complained that Western eyes looked at Third World women as traditional, illiterate and unsophisticated. The same can be said about how Western scholars often look at non-Western scholarship, with non-traditional approaches being read as low-quality rather than simply different.

Third, the variety of women's realities means that scholars often have to deal with subjects that do not have the means to understand, for instance, a consent form, institutional review board/ethics committee language regarding confidentiality, or one's right to withdraw from a study. These subjects are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuses, misrepresentation, and pressures from different fronts, from the perceived authority of the person conducting the research to the specific situation that is being under examination. For instance, if somebody does not have access to steady income or education, let alone a phone service, it would be hard to call a researcher to let them know one no longer wants their testimony to be used on a paper. Cultural norms and practices further confound this. In response, feminist scholars have stressed the importance of ethical standards, and many have gone to great lengths to ensure that the women participating in their studies know what they are signing up for and how the researchers are speaking on behalf of others. This has even led feminist researchers to posit whether study participants are entitled to be listed as co-authors or depersonalize authorship, an idea in the spirit of transparency and due credit favored by feminist scholarship (see Bondi et al., 2002; Evans, 2015, chapter 4). For instance, the book *Playing With Fire* (2006) is officially authored by the 'Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar.' The book is written in the collective voice of women doing NGO work as activists in their communities, and their experiences and insights on this regard. The authors, however, chose to publish as a collective and include 'non-academic' women. Similarly, Alvarez et al.'s (2003) historical recount of meetings of Latin American feminist scholars and activists acknowledges that some of the authors of the article gave their testimony and others served as editors, with all of the involved individuals listed as authors and in alphabetical order.

Examining gender, difference, and overall sexism across latitudes

Global and Global South feminism regularly assess the interplay of power in multicultural settings (e.g. Parameswaran, 2002; Sarikakis et al., 2008). In the last decade in particular, this kind of research has paid attention to four broad areas and made important contributions to each one: gender-based violence, gender and politics, representation, and the digital public sphere. Next is a brief overview of some of Global South feminist research's insight to the politics of gender and communication, with emphasis on media and technology.

Gender-based violence

Women's marginalized status across cultures is made evident by how often they are subject to physical and psychological violence, often *because* of their gender. This includes matters of domestic violence, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, feminicide, forced marriage and dowry and honor killings, among others. In some places, these issues are deeply entrenched in social and cultural practices; in others, they have to do with hegemonic understandings of a woman's place. In any case, they highlight the reality of women's treatment. Since media play a key role in the discursive construction of reality, much research on this topic has been on the mediated messages about these matters, and global feminists have found plenty to critique in how such violence is represented and evoked in the

social imaginary. From word choices to the reproduction of cultural (mis)conceptions about women's sexuality, the result is one that either justifies violence or blame victims for their situation. Research shows that media take interest in reporting these aggressions only when the violent act is clear and evident – and often as isolated events rather than a social phenomenon – and thus psychological violence hardly reaches headlines or public discourse. For example, in Brazil Souza-Leal, de Carvalho, and Antunes (2018) identified that news broadcasts report cases of physical aggression and rape without acknowledging the gender component of the event, only describing the scene of crime and the police facts – without a cultural and social context. Likewise, women are regularly portrayed as submissive victims of domestic violence in Indian soap operas, and in some popular Latin American songs, which arguably promotes misogynistic behaviors (e.g. Al-Mahadin, 2007; see also Giraldo, 2015; Somani & Doshi, 2017). News coverage of sexual assault 'ends up undermining the goals of feminist activism,' argued Moorti (2018, p. 147), who also showcases that feminists need new tactics to combat gender-based violence.

Indeed, awareness about how gender violence is treated in media has been experiencing a revival, thanks to the growth of feminist movements and their political actions, as well as media training endeavors lead by feminist scholars (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolá, 2016; Sills et al., 2016; Vega-Montiel, 2011). For example, in Argentina after the eruption of the movement #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess, as in not one less woman dead due to gender violence), media started to present the cases of murder and rape as a collective story caused by 'machismo' (Luengo, 2017), giving a cultural context to the events. Arguably, there are ways to go on this regard, but gender sensitivity and more complete perspectives on gender-based violence are important inroads.

Gender and politics

For a region largely deemed as non-modern and uncivilized, the Global South has a mixed record in matters of women's representation and visibility in politics. While women continue to be mostly confined into the realm of home and family, and there is evidence of politically-inspired gender violence (that is, actions aimed at forcing women to leave politics, e.g. Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016), some women politicians and leaders have managed to make a dent in the glass ceiling. Sirimavo Bandaranaike of then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) became in 1960 the first woman elected prime minister in the world and many Global South countries have elected a woman as head of state – many in the last decade or so. As of June 2018, Sweden is the only Global North state in the top 10 countries with the greatest proportion of women in national parliaments, 43.7% (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2018). Rwanda (61.3% of the lower house), Cuba (53.2%) and Bolivia (53.1% of the lower house), all of them with half of the parliamentary seats occupied by women, top the list. Admittedly women in positions of power do not equate gender equality or women empowerment, but it is an important step in giving women visibility and access to matters of policy, politics and authority.

Such scenario has allowed feminist communication scholars to explore the relationship of gender and femininity in political settings under a new light. According to Inglehart and Norris (2003, see especially chapter 8), when it comes to gender equality in politics, culture matters a lot, and research in the Global South supports this notion. Despite being often at a disadvantage, elected women officials in the Global South have managed to succeed in their political ambitions, and showed that femaleness is not at odds with competence (what has been called a double bind in female leadership, see Jamieson, 1995). These women have experienced different paths to power, but more importantly, they have not necessarily had to minimize their gender. For instance, both Chile's Michelle Bachelet and Liberia's Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf portrayed themselves as soft-spoken, motherly, and compassionate – traits not often associated with political power (Bachmann & Correa, 2013; Cantrell & Bachmann, 2008). This is not to say they did not endure gender-based criticism and sexist media coverage, but that even so they were able to run viable campaigns, which is in itself an achievement. In the case of Bachelet in particular, at least during her first term in office (2006–2010),

she managed to keep high approval ratings while being labeled by supporters and detractors alike as caring, feminine and matronly (Bachmann & Correa, 2013).

Research also shows that such successes have come with mixed results in terms of women's empowerment. In traditional countries – in terms of gender roles and hierarchies – media keep shutting down women voices that attempt to defy the norms. Ette's (2017) study on media coverage of four women running for presidential, governorship and parliamentary offices during the electoral campaign of 2015 in Nigeria, for example, shows that even with candidates that had multiple political achievements, newspapers often suggested they lacked skills for the jobs and that some of them won their nomination just because there were not strong male candidates.

However, there is also evidence that emerging feminist political action has resulted in the empowerment of women and the transformation of their agency. Movements like Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV) in China (Han, 2018), Young Asian Feminist Aotearoa (Schuster, 2013), the Feminist Five – also in China – (Tan, 2017) and some young feminists groups in Latin America (Coe, 2015; see also Hernández, 2008; Rivera, 2008) are facing gender inequalities and promoting transformations in the patriarchal hierarchies. For example, the GWWV adopted a series of strategies to confront online misogyny and backlash against feminism, but more importantly, rely on their network of followers to fight back against these attacks (Han, 2018). Similarly, in order to make the Feminist Five case in China known, feminists had to use media tactically and creatively to represent women's bodies in public spaces and avoid censorship. Some of these feminist movements have even impacted on the political agenda, as shown by the 2015 Argentine feminist protests under the slogan #NiUnaMenos (Luengo, 2017) and SlutMarches through all Brazil in 2011 (Matos, 2017).

Representation and visibility

How women are portrayed and seen has long been a staple of feminist communication research, which has paid attention to the scarce visibility of women in media other than as sexualized subjects. Indeed, scholars have contended that global and Global South media should make more of an effort to mainstream gender as a matter of human rights and dignity (Sarikakis & Shade, 2008).

In the context of the Global South, the focus has been on the beauty standards imposed mainly by the Global North (including the 'thin-ideal'), and how it impacts women's lives. More recently research has taken a turn into examining the new ways in which girls and women are reappropriating the concept of beauty and adapt it to their reality. For example, visibility of black women on Brazilian media – historically underrepresented – has been linked to a re-valorization of Afro-Brazilian culture and the empowerment of black girls and women to recognize themselves as attractive (Gillam, 2017). In Nigeria, studies show that women express their empowerment through styling – cascading hair extensions, long manicured acrylic nails, false eyelashes – in an effort to promote an attitude that values beauty and consumption as part of their identities. To them, being 'modern women' entails subjecting their appearing to intense self-scrutiny: they experience beauty as power (Dosekun, 2015), a similar attitude observed in Indian teenagers (Sur, 2017). This goes along a criticism of women's sexualization and objectification, and the appearance of the new and modern empowered women. In these cases, spouting feminist ideals is seen as a sign of modernity, a cosmopolitan profile that is not free of negative connotations (e.g. Dosekun, 2015; Han, 2018).

Research also shows that women remain underrepresented in media outlets and advertising, and that media messages keep reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes (e.g. Somani & Doshi, 2017; Soriano, Lim, & Rivera-Sánchez, 2014; Vega-Montiel, 2011), at the same time that new gender roles have made appearances. Somani and Doshi's (2017) study shows that over the years, feminine characters in Indian soap operas have changed, with some achieving non-traditional subversive roles. This has been linked to the emergence of new feminist voices appropriating spaces that were originally designated for men, such as the Internet (e.g. Kim, 2017).

Cyberfeminisms and the digital public sphere

The Web 2.0 and the propagation of the Internet, paired with the rise in access to smartphones and social media, has changed the scenario for feminisms worldwide. In the Global South, the digital public sphere has proved to be a useful space in the process of strengthening feminist activism. The new technological platforms, when available, contribute to the consolidation of women organizations without the need of big resources and structure, promote collaboration, and make more visible the struggle against sexism and the promotion of gender equality (Han, 2018; Luengo, 2017; Matos, 2017). Cyberfeminism works as a form of activism that uses technology – from microblogs and YouTube videos to hashtags and social networks – to push forward feminist causes, offer spaces of expression for oppressed groups, and enhance visibility in the public agenda (Baer, 2015; Han, 2018; Matos, 2017). Even though these technologies are not widely accessible in all of the Global South, they have in many cases facilitated the sense of belonging to a community, consolidating sororities around the world and establishing horizontal relations between them (Chen, 2014; Luengo, 2017). Research in this area has paid attention to how online tools give voice to marginalized and silenced individuals, to what extent they favor political resistance, and whether they contribute to social justice. The evidence is mixed and even contradictory, but has helped informing further theorizations of what – and who – defines feminisms in the digital world in this region. For instance, hashtags campaigns have allowed women to spread their stories of violence and interrogate the mainstreaming of gender-related problems in places like Latin America and Oceania (e.g. Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolá, 2016; Schuster, 2013).

In addition, feminist research has also paid attention to the uses of such online platforms, and more importantly, *who* are these users. Digital literacy is not evenly distributed – not to mention Internet access – and thus not everybody has the knowledge or the habit of communicating through this kind of media (Schuster, 2013). This could be a hurdle to the promise of cooperation, as to a great extent, the Internet remains an exclusive space. The other issue is that new technologies tend to reinforce power imbalances in women's communication networks (Lee, 2006) and tend to have a colonial and Western bias (Mendes & Carter, 2008), with a discourse that criticizes women if they do not put technologies to good use (e.g. improve women's organizations, see Lee, 2006; Mendes & Carter, 2008).

That said, women's use of communication technologies around the world has grown, often linked to grassroots and development initiatives (Sarikakis & Shade, 2008), and the focus of feminists situated in the Global South is more on the users than the uses – potential or real. These feminist scholars do not limit their inquiry to just the discursive nature of gender and technologies. As Lee (2006) argued, women are affected by new communication technologies even when they are denied the privilege of accessing them.

Conclusion and challenges ahead

This article has tried to highlight the main characteristics of Global South feminist scholarship in the field of communication. Even while this kind of research is not as visible or prominent as other contributions from non-Western countries, it remains relevant in today's world, when women still constitute a largely marginalized segment of society and whose voices are often silenced. Communication plays an important role in how this marginalization is normalized and (re)inforced, and that is why widening the scope of feminist communication research from the Global South is advantageous. It is scholarship that underscores the human condition and avoids universalizing approaches, enriches our understanding of gendered experiences and social and discursive phenomena, and combines theory and practice in an articulated fashion with a fresh insight – it addresses women's oppressions and subjectivity in very specific and concrete contexts. In line with standpoint theory, it prioritizes locationality and how this is interwoven with matters of decolonization, social justice, globalization and conflict. Nuanced understanding of how gender operates in such contexts also allows for empowering women in these very same locations.

Global South feminist scholarship does not come without problems. Even when no theory is static, with feminist communication theory concepts and approaches are constantly changing and being continuously refined – which explains its lack of consistent labels or terminology. It is not easy to conduct, and it is often disregarded as unscientific. That said, it has been gaining visibility in the academic world – in journals, textbooks, and conferences – and has proven to be important. Notable inroads have been made in the last two decades.

There are challenges as well. One of these challenges is conceptual and has to do with how transgender identity and gender fluidity fits within its rage. By and large, gender has been understood in dichotomous terms. Indeed, most scholarship on gender has concerned only cisgender and in many countries of the Global South, transgender identities are taboo – if not illegal. Even popular feminism sometimes fails to integrate trans-identities, for example, when Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, known for her strong feminist perspective, claimed in an interview that trans women would universally benefit from male privilege and thus differ from so-called 'real' cis women (Fischer, 2017). In particular, research should pay attention to the voices of trans women *as* women, since their experiences with womanhood are unique. Some countries in the Global South have long understood gender as non-binary or acknowledged third genders (for instance, hijras in India and fa'afafine people in Samoa), with opens the door for further theorizations and conceptualizations of gender.

Another challenge is methodological and has to do with more need of comparative research. Comparative inquiry has long served the social sciences and humanities, but in communication is heavily skewed toward Western democracies (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). Feminist research has been developing in recent years an increasing number of studies that establish comparative crossings between women who are part of different nations and cultures, in order to understand the diverse dynamics in terms of gender roles, gender violence and representation, but more can be done. Some of the research that has been made in the recent years focuses mainly on the cross-national analysis between Global South countries and Global North ones, examining aspects like women's perception about gender violence and their representation in media and culture. More studies comparing different Global South nations would enrich understandings of the differences in women's experiences. Comparative research, after all, also provides an antidote to universalism and ethnocentrism, and awareness of other systems, cultures, and patterns of thinking and acting (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). Women would be better served with a more complete understanding of their circumstances with realistic frameworks that support social action.

Global south feminist communication research would also benefit from developing more indigenous approaches to their examination of gender relations and women's lives. This would help this kind of scholarship to develop a stronger voice and contribute a meaningful global dialogue about women and sexism. As Bosch (2011) argued, such dialogue would help rearticulate old concerns and contribute toward a more nuanced understanding of them, since most feminist scholars enjoy a cultural privilege over the condition of most women they examine and that may influence their own analyses.

Note

1. However, some Global South scholars have paid attention to matters of femininity and masculinity, as well as non-binary understandings of gender. See for instance Viveros-Vigoya (2007), Morrell (1998) and Patel (2017).

Disclosure statement

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