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To cite this article: María Elissa Torres Carrasco (2022) Neoconservative camouflage: the datafication of abortion debates in Ecuador, *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 5:1, 2110356, DOI: [10.1080/25729861.2022.2110356](https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2022.2110356)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2022.2110356>



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Published online: 21 Nov 2022.



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Neoconservative camouflage: the datafication of abortion debates in Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the controversy between neoconservatives and prochoice groups in their political use of abortion data in Ecuador. Despite the fact that there is a huge underreporting of abortion in the country – since it is an illegal process, with two exceptions – I keep track of how the narratives on this issue have changed from a moral and religious tone to a datified discourse focused on “science” and human rights where both neoconservative and prochoice groups are forced to produce their own studies, data, and conclusions with the little information available. Combining statistics together with a discourse analysis of the debates on the decriminalization of abortion for rape in 2019 in the National Assembly and the debate on the Constitutional Court in 2021, I observe the controversy that develops in the use of data. In conversation with literature on social studies of science, technology, and techno politics, I seek to contribute to the debate on the production and political use of data directly related to human rights, with an emphasis on women’s rights in Latin America.

Camuflagem neoconservadora: a datificação do debate sobre o aborto no Equador

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a controvérsia entre grupos neoconservadores e pró-decisão no uso político de dados sobre aborto no Equador. Apesar da subnotificação dos dados sobre o aborto no país – devido à sua ilegalidade com exceção de duas causas – sigo o rastro de como as narrativas sobre esse assunto altamente controverso mudaram de um tom moral e religioso para um discurso centrado em dados da “ciência” e direitos humanos, onde grupos neoconservadores e pró-decisão são forçados a produzir seus próprios estudos, dados e conclusões com a pouca informação disponível. Por meio de estatísticas, e o análise de discurso dos debates sobre a descriminalização do aborto por estupro em 2019 na Assembleia Nacional e o debate no Tribunal Constitucional em 2021, observo a polêmica que se desenvolve

KEYWORDS

Controversy; abortion; Ecuador; data; women’s rights

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

polêmica; aborto; Equador; dados; direitos femininos

PALABRAS CLAVE

controversia; aborto; religión; Ecuador; datos; derechos de las mujeres

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no uso dos dados. Em conversa com a literatura de estudos sociais sobre ciência, tecnologia e tecnopolítica, procuro contribuir para o debate sobre a produção e uso político de dados diretamente ligados aos direitos humanos, com ênfase nos direitos das mulheres na América Latina.

Camuflaje neoconservador: la datificación del debate sobre aborto en Ecuador

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la controversia existente entre grupos neoconservadores y pro-decisión en su uso político de los datos sobre aborto en Ecuador. A pesar del subregistro de datos sobre aborto en el país – debido a su ilegalidad con la excepción de dos causales – sigo el rastro de cómo han cambiado las narrativas sobre este tema, altamente polémico, de un tono moral y religioso a un discurso datificado centrado en la “ciencia” y los derechos humanos en donde tanto grupos neoconservadores como pro-decisión se ven forzados a producir sus propios estudios, datos y conclusiones con la poca información disponible. A través de estadísticas, análisis de discurso de los debates sobre la despenalización del aborto por violación en 2019 en la Asamblea Nacional y el debate en la Corte Constitucional en 2021 observo cómo la controversia se desarrolla en el uso de los datos. En conversación con los estudios sociales de ciencia, tecnología y tecnopolítica, busco contribuir al debate sobre la producción y uso político de datos directamente vinculados con los derechos humanos, con énfasis en los derechos de las mujeres en América Latina.

1. Introduction

In a vibrant moment for the continent, when laws for access to safe and free abortion are becoming harsher in some countries (USA, El Salvador, Honduras), while others have legalized this practice with the highest human rights standards (Colombia), we are constantly fed news that enrage or are massively celebrated by pro-choice or pro-life groups. Although these movements do not represent a single consolidated group nor are motivated by the same interests, they do represent two sides of a single coin. On the one hand, the pro-choice movement, represented mainly by feminist women, is seeking the complete legalization of abortion with laws and funding that ensure free access for all who need it; on the other hand, neoconservatives, also called anti-rights by Latin-American feminist movement and some scholars, via a conservative and retrogressive dogma not only oppose the legalization of abortion, but also demand more punitive laws, less funding, and no public or private education when it comes to anything related to sexual and reproductive rights, restricting access not only to women's rights, but also to LGBTIQ+ human rights.

It is important to dwell on the strategies used by neoconservatives to camouflage themselves in a pro-human rights rhetoric, as well as in a scientific discourse that aims to confuse the public, voters, and civil society, in order to curb the advance of human rights in their countries and to move backwards on achievements that appeared impossible to do away with. Democracy debt, underreported data, lack of human rights, and

women's and reproductive rights are concepts that scholarship as well as prochoice activists have pointed out in discussions about abortion in Central and South America (Fernández Anderson 2020; Morgan 2015; Sutton & Borland 2019), at risk because of its misuse and abuse by the neoconservative movement.

In this article, I analyze the Ecuadorian case, where the legalization of abortion, when pregnancy is caused by rape, has almost a decade of being constantly debated, even though already decriminalized. This debate has taken the form of a controversy between two antagonists: prochoice, and neoconservatives self-proclaimed as prolife, who use data and laws (as data) to support their positions. The objective of the article is to show how the neoconservative movement validates its moral and religious arguments to show them as if they were objective and prohuman rights, camouflaging political and moral options that can be described as neoconservative.

For a better understanding of the context, I also analyze the prochoice arguments, data production, and discourse as their strategies are the ones that are being mimicked by neoconservative groups in a clear effort to create confusion amidst civil society by robbing tools that have been long used by feminist collectives and advocacies. It is through the controversy generated between these two groups that are fighting with similar arguments and data, but with radically different resources and power, that we can grasp a better understanding of the datafication of these discourses and its large consequences for society.

2. Materials and methods

Given that “before there are data, there are people, people who offer up their experience to be counted and analyzed, people who perform that counting and analyses, people who visualize the data and promote the findings” (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), in this article, we understand data as the objectification of experience through the production of quantitative and qualitative artifacts such as statistics, visualizations, and figures. Data can be manipulated in order to dissuade people from adopting one side of the controversy generated by the right of women and people capable of gestating¹ to have abortions.

The legal doctrine of national and international law is here considered as data, as it has been used as numbers, as quantity over quality, and as a tool that seems objective but that constantly was used out of context by neoconservative groups in order to confuse or even alter their true significance. As international treaties, articles of laws, and the Ecuadorian constitution is cited over and over, the law becomes a common token of debate not only in courts and in the national assembly, but also in the day to day of civil society interested in this subject. Thus, law itself becomes datified in order to achieve different ends. Although we cannot say that human rights and legal bodies are data, as we understand mathematical data or figures, the way in which they were used in the aforementioned debates leads us to think of them as a strategy that datafies this type of legal tropes to feed this controversy.

Through discourse analysis of the debates that occurred in the National Assembly of Ecuador,² cautious reading of the laws, sentences, a review of news and social media,

¹With the term “people able to gestate,” I refer to transmen, nonbinary, gender fluid, and queer people that can gestate.
²January 3 and 15, February 5, August 1 and 6, September 3, 10, and 17 of 2019.

historical research on the evolution of the criminalization of abortion in Ecuador, and data analysis of the presented statistics, I aim to develop a careful summary of the current debates upon abortion in Ecuador and how the controversy is dwelling in the creation of political credibility by neoconservative groups, camouflaged under a supposedly correct use of law and data science. In the first part, I do a brief review of the evolution of the penalization of abortion in the Ecuadorian law and the current debates that have developed upon the recent decriminalization of abortion when pregnancy is caused by rape. Then I analyze the available official data and national and international doctrine of law to discuss abortion in the country, and conclude by looking at the State's responsibility amidst this controversy.

2.1. Evolution of the penalization of abortion in the Ecuadorian law and current debates

The criminalization of abortion has existed in Ecuador since its first penal code, issued in 1837.³ A hundred years would pass, until 1938, to permit this procedure, only if the pregnancy was the consequence of a rape in cases where a woman was deemed "insane or idiotic," or if the life of the pregnant woman was at risk (Goetschel 2019). Despite its century-old ban, it was uncommon for women and people that performed abortions to be effectively denounced and prosecuted. The beginning of the prosecution of clandestine abortions in Ecuador is linked to the issuance of the new Comprehensive Criminal Organic Code (COIP)⁴ in 2014, which moved the discussion on abortion to the public arena when attempts were made to decriminalize it in all cases of rape (Zaragocin et al. 2018). Then President Rafael Correa (2007–2017), who had enormous popularity, threatened to resign if this possibility was even debated. The situation immediately moved this topic to the National Assembly of Ecuador, but ignited it in the streets and hospitals of the country.

Doctors from all over the country began to denounce women, mostly indigenous, black, and impoverished, who arrived with obstetric emergencies to hospitals, in order to not to be co-responsible for probable cases of voluntary abortion (Surkuna et al. 2019). According to a research by the *Colectivo de Geografía Crítica de Ecuador*,⁵ between 2013 and 2014, before the new COIP existed, 51 women were denounced for this crime at a national level, compared to 192 women accused between 2015 and 2017 (Moreano, Torres, and Elizabeth 2020). Similarly, between 2014 and 2020, the 134⁶ trials initiated against women for abortion were located mostly in the provinces

³In 1837, the penalty was against the person who performed the abortion, generally doctors or men with knowledge of the process. Women were not considered autonomous subjects of law yet. Since 1872, via a reform of the Code, the penalty is also against the woman that performs or agrees to have an abortion.

⁴The Comprehensive Criminal Organic Code (*Código Orgánico Integral Penal* in Spanish) is the newest reform of the Ecuadorian Penal Code. It was discussed by the National Assembly between 2012 and 2014, the year in which it was approved. It is enforceable since August 2014. This legal document describes all the possible crimes and offenses that are punished in Ecuador along with their sentences, and it can only be edited or reformulated by the Ecuadorian National Assembly.

⁵Critical Geography Collective of Ecuador, in English.

⁶The fact that there is a criminal complaint does not necessarily imply that there is an immediate trial, so the number of trials would seem little compared to the number of complaints. In addition, the criminal complaint data in Ecuador are registered by the State Attorney General's Office (*Fiscalía General del Estado* in Spanish), while the prosecution data are registered by the Judiciary Council (*Consejo de la Judicatura* in Spanish), another institution of the State. There is no homologation of data between these two institutions for this type of crime or crimes on violence against women in

with the highest population density in the country, followed by provinces that have low population density but a large number of indigenous and/or impoverished populations⁷ (Sistema Integrado de Actuaciones Fiscales 2021).

In 2019, the first reform of the COIP was implemented by the National Assembly of Ecuador. Without the presence of Rafael Correa as an obstacle to the decriminalization of abortion in case of rape, several assembly members of the Justice Commission of the Assembly proposed this reform based mainly on the high rates of sexual violence against girls and adolescents in the country. In the debate, in addition to the participation of the Assembly members, the interventions of representatives of civil society gave their opinion on the subject from their professional expertise (medical, legal) or from their life experience (survivors of sexual violence, people adopted or living with disabilities from birth).

Far from the moral Catholic imperatives that usually accompany this discussion in Ecuador, the Assembly members who did not approve of the reform bowed to a neoconservative discourse that has gained strength in the South America since 2013, as Ailynn Torres indicates: “When speaking of neoconservatism, we warn of a backlash regarding programs of sexual morality and gender equality; also alliances and linkages between Catholic and evangelical sectors; and the judicialization of their agenda and claims using democratic channels” (Torres 2020, author’s translation). In Ecuador, neoconservative movements have been consolidated under an ecumenical umbrella in which different faiths converge to fight against so-called gender ideology⁸ and with greater emphasis against the decriminalization of abortion. Collectives and communities of faith have been part of a religious activism following the guidelines of their churches. The Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference itself made a public call on social networks to parishioners and assembly members to “expose with clarity and courage their scientific, ethical and legal arguments, free from all fundamentalist positions, whether of a social, political or religious nature” (Vega 2020; Yépez 2020).

Thus, on this occasion, both prochoice and neoconservative participants of the debate used in their argument’s international human rights treaties, the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, its laws, codes, and data on incarceration and violence against women to defend antagonistic positions. Despite the majority of assembly members voting in favor of decriminalization, this did not happen because five votes were missing for the absolute majority necessary for the approval of any law.⁹

Faced with this refusal, several grassroots and women’s organizations filed lawsuits in the Constitutional Court of Ecuador between July 2019 and March 2021¹⁰ alleging that

general, as a homologation process that does exist with other crimes such as those related to violent deaths (Ethno-Data, s. f.).

⁷Pichincha (62), Guayas (65), Pastaza (44), Cotopaxi (19), Carchi (20), and Morona Santiago (24).

⁸Gender ideology is defined by neoconservative groups as “the anti-scientific conception of our sexuality that, seeking to make it politically effective, uproots it from its natural reality to want to explain such a human dimension, simply, through culture” (Laje, 2017). This pseudo academic concept is used to delegitimize the historic fight for an improvement in the access to human rights specially for women and LGBTQ+ people, although racism, regionalism, and xenophobia are also camouflaged in this discourse. This “concept” is easily confused as academic since a lot of congress, courses, and events are being held in Spain and Latin America around it and a lot of articles and books of nonacademic presses is being released.

⁹The summary of the vote was: For, 65; Against, 59; Abstention, 6; Absent, 7; Total 137.

¹⁰Through the same constitutional path, Colombia decriminalized abortion when pregnancy is caused by rape in 2006, and more recently abortion for all unwanted pregnancies in 2022.

the criminalizing of abortion in case of rape is unconstitutional. In the Constitutional Court, the debate was not public, as it was in the Assembly; however, in the verdict, one can read both the arguments for and against decriminalization. In this debate, 129 *amici curiae*¹¹ were also read, coming from civil society, feminist collectives, faith communities, and international participations, which exposed their expert position on the subject. Again, these reports, argued pro and against the declaration of unconstitutionality based on human rights, official data from different institutions of the State, and from a medical/biological perspective on the beginning of life. The debate concluded on April 28, 2021, with the Court declaring unconstitutional the criminalization of abortion in cases of rape.

Even though it became legal to access to abortions under this legal cause, the National Assembly had the obligation to develop a law to regulate the access. After months of debates, and with the interference of the current president, a law that makes it almost impossible for survivors to access abortions was approved. This law limits the procedure until the twelfth week and asks for numerous bureaucracies to be filled out and legal procedures to be paid off before arriving in a hospital where the doctors have the chance to deny the abortion, and does not give other options if they do not feel comfortable with performing this medical procedure. This leaves survivors with virtually no access to this right.

2.2. *Political use of data*

Obtaining reliable data on the situation of women in Ecuador is complicated. Not only, as has been pointed out in STS scholarship, because of how complex and controversial it is to produce these knowledge technologies that

are therefore used both to assess and to shape social realities. Though they appear neutral or apolitical, these technologies produce and reinforce hierarchies between what is “knowable” and what is not. As a result, knowledge systems are part of conflicts rather than extrinsic to them. (Merry and Coutin 2014)

but also by the lack of consensus among the institutions that produce the data and what has been pointed out by human rights movements and organizations as null interest and political will for the production, monitoring, and homologation of data (CARE-Ecuador & CEDEAL 2018; Coalición Nacional de Mujeres del Ecuador et al. 2020; Corporación Promoción de la Mujer et al. 2018).

Despite the fact that since February 2018 there is a Law¹² in Ecuador that requires the creation of the Registry of Violence against Women,¹³ the latter does not yet exist and there are no clear signs that any ministry or State institution is working on developing one.¹⁴ Data on sexual violence, gender-based violence, femicide, access to

¹¹The *amici curiae*, *amicus curiae* in the singular is a legal tool in which an individual, groups, or representatives of an organization through a report or text supply the judges with criteria from their expertise to contribute to the debate that justice operators will have.

¹²Law to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women, *Ley para Prevenir y Erradicar la Violencia contra las Mujeres* in Spanish.

¹³*Registro Único de Violencia en contra las Mujeres* in Spanish.

¹⁴On August 10, 2021, the Judiciary Council launched a dynamic data visualization tool on femicide and violent deaths against women in Ecuador: <https://www.funcionjudicial.gob.ec/victimas%20de%20femicidio.htm> as a first step to make these State data public. In addition to the Judiciary Council, there have been other citizen and academic initiatives such

sexual and reproductive health, and other rights that ensure a life free of violence can be obtained only upon direct request from the institutions that handle this data. While it is understandable that there is an extensive under-registration in the data on abortion, as a partially illegal activity, this under-registration is also related to the Ecuadorian State's shortcomings to produce and publish data of vital importance to ensure its accountability, as well to illuminate where a remedial or corrective action can take place to advance the full enjoyment of human rights (Langford and Fukuda-Parr, 2012). The problem is not only the impossibility of counting the abortions that occur in secrecy, but also the little concordance that different entities of the State have between them and over time, as independent media *Wambra* pointed out in its research about abortion in Ecuador:

To find out how many women are prosecuted for abortions in Ecuador, we made several requests for information to the State Attorney General's Office and the Judiciary Council. The data provided is contradictory. In the first response, the Attorneys' office sends a document that records 197 reports of the crime of abortion between January 2012 and December 2018. When we requested the clarification of several data, we received a second response with the registration of 307 crime reports and its procedural stage, from 2014 to 2018. Subsequently, we made a new request, to which the Attorneys' office responded, for the third time, with the registration of 286 crime reports of abortion from 2014 to June 2019. (Wambra: Community Digital Media, 2019b)

In the debates, special emphasis was placed on the figures of sexual violence against girls, adolescents, and women, registered births of women under 19 years of age, and data on women prosecuted since 2014 for abortion – numbers that we have thanks to the intense work of non-governmental and academic organizations that have investigated abortion from different angles in Ecuador (Coalición Nacional de Mujeres del Ecuador et al. 2020). Although among the neoconservative faction the existence of sexual violence and the high rate of pregnancies of girls and adolescents was not denied at any point in time in the second debate of the Assembly, a neoconservative legislator asserted that there are no women accused of this crime; in turn, a prochoice legislator refuted it by giving the data of the State Attorney General's Office or Judiciary Council. In the following interventions, it was repeated that there were no women prosecuted, in a vicious circle that had no conclusion, and no one to blame considering that there is not one set of official data to dwell on, but different numbers that contradict themselves. This created a controversy around the few data available from the State, generating the feeling among civil society and even legislators that these data 'are not really data' and therefore cannot be discussed or legislated upon.

This overlaps with the problem of how to measure data on abortion when it is linked to maternal mortality, a token that for decades has been used internationally by feminist groups to show how abortion is a public health issue, and the importance of its legality. Since, for example, deaths as consequences of malpracticed abortions can be misclassified and reported not as such, but as hemorrhages and other complications, maternal mortality can be hidden. With the lack of a consolidated data

as EthnoData (2020): <https://www.ethnodata.org/es-es/dashboard/> and the Alliance for the Monitoring and Mapping of Femicides in Ecuador, *Alianza para el Monitoreo y Mapeo de Femicidios en Ecuador* in Spanish (2017 and forward): <http://www.fundacionaldea.org/mapass>.

collection system or functioning protocol to record maternal mortality, despite the few efforts made by institutions such as the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses and the Ministry of Public Health (INEC & MSP 2018), the ranking of the country in several international reports increases, as apparently it features lesser maternal mortality than in reality exists. Moreover, State's funds can thus be channelled to other health issues that, at least data wise, seem more urgent.¹⁵

The World Health Organization (WHO) itself defends that maternal mortality can be reduced by allowing women access to safe abortions that are not life-threatening. According to the WHO, each year between 4.7% and 13.2% of global maternal mortality can be attributed to clandestine and malpractice abortions (OMS 2020). However, regional neo-conservative groups have taken as examples the cases of Uruguay and Argentina (where despite decriminalization mortality has apparently not decreased) and Chile (where maternal mortality has been reduced without decriminalizing abortion in all its causes) to suggest that this affirmation on the different national and international health situations is a "myth." Viviana Bonilla, a former independent¹⁶ assemblywoman influential in the Ecuadorian political environment, echoed this premise in the National Assembly debate in 2019, assuring that:

The first myth that we hear repeatedly is that the legalization of abortion will have an impact on the reduction of the maternal mortality rate. And this is absolutely false. This has been used conveniently in the pro-abortion discourse and therefore it cannot be a reference for an objective analysis of the issue. Reviewing the maternal mortality rate published by the WHO and CELAC¹⁷ studies with a cut to the year 2015, I do not say it,¹⁸ not only that it cannot be verified that the decriminalization of abortion has an incidence in the reduction of maternal mortality, but in many cases just the opposite happens. There are data in countries where abortion is completely criminalized, and the rate of maternal mortality is low. There are also countries where abortion is widely decriminalized, and the maternal mortality rate is quite high. Notice what is happening in Chile, where Chile has penalized with an exceptionality: Chile managed to reduce 40 points in the maternal mortality index between 1980 and 2015, to 40 points. Only in 2017 was the exceptionality of abortion in case of rape introduced. That is to say, the decriminalization of abortion had nothing to do with the decrease in the maternal mortality rate in the Chilean case. The source: the Ministry of Public Health of Chile. Let's go to the case of Argentina. Argentina has criminalized abortion, but since 2012 it also introduced this exceptionality, that is to say, that abortion can be decriminalized in cases of rape. Look at the year 2012 when this cause is introduced. There were 35 deaths per 100 thousand live births. That means that 35 women die for every 100,000 live births in 2012. What happens two years later? The rate rises to 37 deaths per 100,000 live births. What happens in 2015? It rises even higher, and the rate is 39 deaths per 100,000

¹⁵The World Health Organization itself has made several efforts to cope with this tendency of disguise maternal mortality and its link to abortion in countries that have this reproductive right criminalized, as well scholarship has developed around this subject (Abou Zahr and Wardlaw 2004; Gutiérrez, Leyva Flores, and Aracena Genao 2019; Healy, Otsea, and Benson 2006; Sanhueza et al. 2017; Yamin and Falb 2012),

¹⁶Viviana Bonilla won a seat in Ecuador's National Assembly as part of the political movement Country Alliance (*Alianza País* in Spanish). A movement was founded by former president Rafael Correa (2007–2017) who won the presidency of the Republic of Ecuador on three consecutive occasions. However, when his successor, also former president Lenín Moreno (2017–2021), became president, there was a strong fracture in the movement, in which Rafael Correa was expelled from it. Several influential assembly members, such as Viviana Bonilla, also separated from this political bloc to support Rafael Correa. Bonilla ended her term in the National Assembly without being part of any political movement also known in Ecuador as "independent."

¹⁷*Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe* or as is known in English: United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

¹⁸Referring to the fact that the data doesn't come from her but from CELAC and WHO.

live births. I reiterate that the source is from the Ministry of Public Health of Argentina.¹⁹ (Session of the National Assembly No. 565. Bonilla 2019)

Both the Chilean and Argentine data that the assemblywoman exposes are not exact. She overlooks, for example, that in 2013 and 2014, the maternal mortality did decrease in Argentina, and Chile has decriminalized abortion in three causes and not only one, in addition to several public policies such as greater access to contraceptives and improvement in health services that have influenced the decrease in maternal mortality of this country (Wambra: Community Digital Media, 2019a). Beyond the veracity of Bonilla's claims and the relationship that they could have for unsafe abortion in the region, it is surprising that exactly the same data are used in several debates around South America to not only delegitimize this already popular and strong argument used by pro-choice groups, but to raise it to the level of myth (Loza and López 2020).

On the same day, in the National Assembly, Martha Villafuerte,²⁰ representative of civil society, in the midst of a passionate intervention against the decriminalization of abortion, contributed to the debate through data only that the State had invested zero dollars in Ecuadorian families so far in the year, because there is no State policy that directly invests in families as beneficiaries but in individuals understood as subjects of rights. However, at the beginning of 2021, she directed the self-publication of the study "Ecuador: Abortion in figures," whose introduction states:

During the last years of our fight for the defense of life and family, the statistical scenario has become our battlefield for both positions. However, the figures that are handled daily are increasingly distorted from the anti-life perspective (...) For this reason, we have updated the most relevant statistical figures, with the collaboration of professionals, in order to improve our argumentative content not only for debates, writings, interviews or publications, but so that this material is a true source of query on statistics on abortion in our country. (Villafuerte 2021)

The data collected belongs to the INEC and the MSP.²¹ Again, they are on maternal mortality, but also on female mortality and morbidity, showing that complications and deaths resulting from abortion hardly appear. According to this report, maternal mortality related to abortion is 4.29%, which is not a serious concern as there are few cases. However, the shortcomings that the country has in producing a reliable report on this subject are not mentioned, nor that this percentage is equivalent to the fifth cause of maternal death in the country. This figure that has been stable for at least the last 6 years (Subsecretaría Nacional de Vigilancia de la Salud Pública 2020), in accordance with the data presented in research by non-governmental organizations such as Surkuna (Surkuna 2021) or in the National Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health 2017–2021²² (MSP 2017). It is also mentioned that despite under-registration and illegality abortion ranks fifth in

¹⁹This and the following quoted interventions and citations from *amicus curae* are translations made by the author from Spanish.

²⁰Martha Villafuerte participated as a civil society member in the Assembly debate. At that time she represented the Family Network of Formative Principles. Currently, she is the director of the Ecuador National Family Network. In 2020, she was a candidate for the vice presidency of Ecuador for the United Ecuadorian Movement (*Movimiento Ecuatoriano Unido* in Spanish). Her pairing and candidate for the presidency was the evangelical pastor Gerson Almeida, with 1.73% of the votes in the first voting round that meant eighth place among sixteen candidates.

²¹National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC in Spanish) and the Ministry of Public Health (MSP in Spanish).

²²*Plan Nacional para la Salud Sexual y Reproductiva 2017–2021* in Spanish.

causes of maternal deaths in Ecuador, implying that this number would be a lot higher if we could document the reality.

The fact that the necessary data are not produced for this type of debate and to improve the formulation of laws and public policies illustrates how State's power makes invisible – consciously, or unconsciously – the disadvantage for women to exercise their right to choose to have or not have children, as well as access to a life free of violence. Without periodic medical gazettes, reports, or accountability on these issues, the problem is not visible to the State, and therefore no one to take charge of it. As Emmanuel Didier expresses, “numbers are not only descriptive signs, but they are also immediately linked to action” (Didier 2018). The power of the State is then expressed not in building measurement systems to control a vulnerable group, but in the total lack of these measurement mechanisms, perpetuating their vulnerability. The usual criticism of measurement systems has been that “Measurement is a technology with power, harnessed by those able to use it” (Merry and Coutin 2014). In this case, those who have power choose not to produce any data feeding the controversy and aggravate the already poor access to reproductive rights in Ecuador.

This also influences a biased understanding that the population as a whole may have of the reality and needs of women who have abortions in the country, since quantification is a *technology of distance* that serves to communicate realities and life stories beyond the spatial and conceptual limits of a community (Fukuda-Parr 2010). Activity is more than necessary in a multicultural, multi-ethnic country with a large percentage of impoverished population such as Ecuador. Abortion itself, as a procedure, could be just a reproductive issue, either surgical or pharmaceutical, that is, easy, safe, and cheap to perform (WHO 2022); yet in Ecuador it is also a legal, political, electoral, human rights, gender, ethnic, and class issue. All these become decisive actors involved in something as intimate as reproduction and in the specific context that is being debated in Ecuador forced reproduction.

The informal situation around this data in Ecuador is the perfect breeding ground for these appropriations and reinterpretations to occur, and have a strong conclusive effect on the daily life of its citizens. Thus, each of the arguments put forward, both for and against the decriminalization of abortion, become data or devices whose activation will never create the same results, which can be used by different groups with different intentions and conclusions:

while formulas, lists, and pacts are portable and can travel across geographic locations, the results of their activation are never homogeneous. Each time a device is used, its outcomes vary in small and large ways (...) as it turns out, these devices are the means by which people clarify moral preferences and enact temporal assumptions about the “goings-on” of life. (Ballesterio 2019)

Finally, in the neoconservative group, those who are not on the side of reframing the statistics in their favor have found a good source of data in national and international law. These actors constantly emphasize that it is not religion or morality that guides their positions, but the legal instruments to which a democratic society responds, directly attacking the prochoice argument that insists that the legalization of abortion is a debt of democracy of the South American countries that share a history of military dictatorships in the seventies (Morgan 2015). Although the existence of international treaties and

human rights has been a fundamental pillar for several countries to decriminalize abortion globally, the self-called prolife groups in the last decade have used these same legal tools to slow down the advancement of fundamental rights. Despite the fact that a pillar in the neoconservative schema is the criticism and demonization of organizations such as the United Nations, WHO and others for promoting what they call an “anti-life” agenda, they also use their reports and precepts at convenience when desired, as assemblyman Roberto Gómez in his intervention in the aforementioned debate:

So, you cannot fraudulently try to stigmatize that this is a matter of religions. If it were about religions, there would be nothing to explain. It would be an absolute truth. But if it were an absolute truth for those of us who believe in a secular state and come to legislate for all Ecuadorians, we also believe that it is possible to explain it from any point of view without approaching, under no circumstances, the subject of religion. (...) Those who voted in favor of abortion in the commission put themselves on the verge of going against the Constitution and of legalizing the deliberate termination of human life. In a country where the State must protect life from the moment of conception, and it is legitimate not because the Constitution says it, but the Constitution says it because it is legitimate. (Session of the National Assembly No. 565. Gómez 2019)²³

In the interventions of the assembly members, as in the reports presented by them and in the *amici curiae* sent to the Constitutional Court for debate, the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (2008),²⁴ Children and Adolescents Code (2003),²⁵ Civil Code (2005),²⁶ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), American Convention on Human Rights (1969), among others were cited hundreds of times. The same legal bodies that were being cited among prochoice groups to defend decriminalization:

Regarding Article 4 of the American Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to have their life respected, this right will be protected by law and in general from the moment of the conception.” No one can be arbitrarily deprived of life. (Session of the National Assembly No. 565. Alarcón 2019)²⁷

Section 1 of Art. 66 of the mentioned norm, in its pertinent part, prescribes the following: “the right to the inviolability of life,” whose regulations, based precisely on the principle of unequivocal, inalienable, and unbreakable character that determines its total prevalence through the presuppositions established in Art. 45. (CIDECIVE. International Cooperation for the Defense of Citizens’ Rights. Oversight and Mediation, 2021)²⁸

Art. 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states: “Children are considered as such from conception to 18 years of age.”²⁹ These international treaties ratify what has already been expressed by the constitutional norm and thereby exclude the possibility of a reform that violates legality (Cuesta and Torres 2019).³⁰

²³Assemblyman Roberto Gómez belongs to CREO (CREO translates to I believe in English), a right-wing movement founded by the current president of Ecuador, the banker and Opus Dei member, Guillermo Lasso (2021–2025).

²⁴Last modification in 2021.

²⁵Last modification in 2014.

²⁶Last modification in 2016.

²⁷Extract from de National Assembly debate, Assemblyman Freddy Alarcón.

²⁸Extract from an *amici curae* presented for the debate in the Constitutional Court.

²⁹Actually, this is false as the convention says in the article 1: “For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” What the assembly members maybe are referring to in this report is that many countries of the region have signed this Convention clarifying that in their countries a child is considered from the moment of their conception to 18 years of age.

³⁰Extract of a report presented by two assembly members for the debate in de National Assembly.

The right to life is established in the first paragraph of Art. 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, that “Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.” (...) the United Nations Human Rights Committee, in the General Comment made on the cited article of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, stated, among other things, that “The expression ‘inherent right to life’ in Art. 6 cannot properly be understood in a restrictive manner, and the protection of this right requires that States adopt positive measures.”³¹ (*Judgment No. 34-19-IN/21 AND CUMULATIVE*, 2021)

In this emulation of prochoice speeches by neoconservative assembly members and civil society, it was important to show how relevant the doctrine of international and national law is to “defend life” and the “best interests of the child,” downgrading the importance of Ecuador’s subscription to conventions such as CEDAW³² to one more piece of data among the sea of subscriptions and data that can be extracted from the doctrine of law.

2.3. Manufacturing political credibility

The response of neoconservative groups to the controversy generated by abortion has been to transfer it to “objective” platforms from which pro-decision arguments have been built for decades. This, as Bernasconi points out in an analysis of the debate around euthanasia in Chile, allows “the interweaving of moral reasoning with regimes of knowledge that provide it with legitimate arguments, evidence and legitimate proofs” (Bernasconi 2011). In a clear confrontation of arguments, each data infrastructure, be it national, international, numerical, or legal, is appropriated and reinterpreted for convenience to refute or annihilate social demands that had gained regional legitimacy in the political arena in recent decades.

This shift of controversy to new platforms feeds into the narrative of human rights in which

individual citizens with all their particularities and idiosyncrasies are made commensurable to each other through their fundamental entitlements as rights-bearing subjects. Fundamental rights perform the magic equivalence by erasing the marks that birth, gender, social rank, education and political affiliation leave on our embodied experience. (Bal-lestero 2019)

This foundation of equality and commensurability among all people becomes a fact from which the opposing positions starts to, on one hand, defend the right of women to decide about their sexual and reproductive health and about their lives; and on the other, to defend what neoconservative communities frequently mention would be the “most important” right: the right to life. However, this defense no longer comes from dogmas, faith, or fear of divine punishment, but from presenting and self-proclaiming themselves as defenders of human rights and “pro-life warriors,” leading to victimization as “the new radicals” again in accordance with the adjectives with which feminist activists are also accused. This can be read in the following interventions:

There is no act more revolutionary than defending life. They call me reactionary and radical. Okay I accept it. Call me what you want. When it comes to defending life from the moment of

³¹Extract of the Constitutional Court’s sentence that decriminalized abortion when pregnancy is caused by rape in April 2021. This part is written by one of the two judges that voted against it.

³²Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

conception, I will be radical and I will never be ashamed of that. (Session of the National Assembly No. 565. Bonilla 2019)

During these days I have, of course, pronounced myself as a defendant of life. I have received a lot of attacks for thinking differently (Session of the National Assembly No. 565. Cuesta and Torres 2019)

I would like to clarify that this does not respond to religious creeds, as at some point has been denounced. This responds to a conviction and to the request of citizens who feel represented with this position. Nothing is falser than to believe that girls, adolescents, women, are not being defended. (Session of the National Assembly No. 611 Cuesta and Torres 2019)

We might think that it is then a bioconstitutional debate, as has been occurring in the last couple of decades, in different countries that have formulated unique legislations when they have tried to overcome the controversy between the ethical and biological fusion that represents the research and commercialization of embryos (Jasanoff 2011). However, this still early bioconstitutional debate that is taking place internationally has only been reflected in Ecuador in the prohibition present in the Code of Children and Adolescence,³³ since 2003, of genetically manipulating fertilized eggs.

Without a previous bioconstitutional debate on the beginning of life and the implications of the criminalization of abortion, both in the laws and in the daily life of Ecuadorian women, what has happened has been the stagnation over the years of the phrase “protection of life from the moment of conception” in different constitutions, codes, and laws that have survived the constant legal reforms that these instruments experience in Ecuador,³⁴ based more on tradition than on a discussion centered on the biological or legal field (Goetschel 2020). In the current debate both in the Assembly and in the Constitutional Court, there been a contrast of positions based on what, one would think, could be believed as an objective and indisputable fact: the origin of life.

On the one hand, several authors from diverse fields claim that life exists from conception itself, even before the implantation of the embryo in the uterus. On the other hand, in the realm of biology, there are claims that this science defines life as the condition of cells to reproduce and metabolize. Therefore even the cells of a human body are alive when its heart stops beating and its brain stops working. Thus, biology would be able to define the life of a cell but not the life of a human being:

Biology does not define human life, but life. Life is a particular form of organization of matter that meets two essential conditions: reproduction and metabolism. The definition of life *sensu stricto* refers only to cells. A living cell is so because it can divide and can metabolize. The definition of cellular life is not relative but absolute and is not the result of any social or legal convention. (Kornblihtt 2020)³⁵

Being that conception is equivalent to fertilization, or fertilization of the ovum by the sperm (immediately or in a little more than one day); and this constitutes the crucial event for the

³³Art. 20. – Right to life. – Children and adolescents have the right to life from the moment of their conception. It is the obligation of the State, society, and the family to ensure, by all means within their reach, their survival, and development. Medical and genetic experiments and manipulations from the fertilization of the ovum to the birth of children and adolescents are prohibited; as is the use of any technique or practice that endangers their life or affects their integrity or integral development.

³⁴Since 1938, when abortion was decriminalized for two cases, Ecuador has had seven different constitutions.

³⁵Extract from an *amicus curiae* presented by Rodolfo Kornblihtt in the Constitutional Court’s debate. Kornblihtt is an Argentinian biologist that also participated in the debate for the legalization of abortion in Argentina,

beginning of life of a human being, since it generates an embryo between these two cells, from which the gametes initiate a genetic exchange or syngamy for the formation of the zygote, with a genome or genotype uniquely human (*Sentence No. 34-19-IN/21 AND ACCUMULATED*, 2021)³⁶

Aside from the difference in these two argumentations, one for the decriminalization of abortion and the other one for the criminalization of women that have abortions, we see that those who argue from genetics and biology in favor of decriminalization do so without affirming at any time that there is a consensus on the beginning of human life – but on the basis of what science understands by life in general and on the unviability of fetal development without constant exchange with the body of the pregnant woman. Neoconservative positions cite this as a crucial part of their argumentation: an indisputable and scientific fact that life begins at the moment of the conception, relating it to existing laws in the Ecuadorian legal framework – that is, making this biological/medical platform a mandatory norm for laws that have its genesis in non-bioconstitutional and moral arguments, from a not so recent past in which religion was deeply linked with the formulation of legal instruments.

Thus, the controversy is diverted from its moral origin to an apparently scientific argument, providing rationality and certainty (Bernasconi 2011) to a debate accused of having no foundations beyond the moral and religious ones. Manufacturing political credibility requires additional and different kinds of work, even when political authorities support their positions on the basis of scientific claims (Jasanoff 2011). In this counter argumentation, what ends up being at stake is not to define once and for all when the beginning of life happens, but who can generate the greatest political credibility based on arguments that play with scientific language.

3. Conclusions

As can be seen, a great part of this controversy has been fed by the Ecuadorian State in its diminished effort on funding the production of reliable data on women's access to justice and to sexual and reproductive health. Thus, through the lack of data, abuse, and misuse of the little information available, there occurs constant distortion in the discourses and studies produced by neoconservative groups; while the prochoice movement, as well as several media and NGOs, keep demanding the State invest in generating these vital numbers to figure out the broad complexity of the criminalization of abortion in the country.

The existence of this controversy with the State's own data among assembly members could be interpreted as State violence. And it could even be argued that the lack of conclusive data on an issue as transcendental as access to sexual health, and the consequences of the lack of it in the lives of Ecuadorian women, is gender-based violence. The State should take charge of the production of data and provides resources for it. The data that currently exists have been produced at the formal request of stakeholders (non-governmental organizations with a gender focus) or by research carried out by international organizations dedicated to the issue such as UN Women, but not by the will of

³⁶Extract of the Constitutional Court's sentence that decriminalized abortion when pregnancy is caused by rape. This part is written by one of the two judges that voted against it.

the State to clarify and publish these data for the formulation of public policy or its use in research.

The literature on human rights and its metrics focuses on a criticism of the construction of indicators from biased or reductionist points of view, and on how we can improve them for a better implementation of them. This points to greater State responsibility to not perpetuate the rights violations of these historically harmed groups. In the case presented in this article, we can appreciate not only the need for an effort to create these data, but also how the lack of data allows the distortion of the few existing sources, thus putting at great risk the advancement of women's rights.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

María Elissa Torres Carrasco is an anthropologist. She has been part of several interdisciplinary projects framed within an STS perspective, such as the LGBTIQ+ rights in the Andean Region, urban anthropology, nutrition, and violent deaths in Ecuador. Her current interests are the relationship between abortion data production and its influence in the access to human rights.

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