Navigating Norms: Charting Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Sexual Health Rights Through Global-Local Sport for Development and Peace Relations in Nicaragua

Lyndsay M.C. Hayhurst
York University

Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom and Emma Arksey
University of British Columbia

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) funding sport for development and peace (SDP) programs are drawn to the promise of such initiatives for young women in global South countries such as Nicaragua to promote their sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and prevent gender-based violence (GBV). While “international” feminist norms in support of “girl power” tend to be advocated by INGOs, gender norms in Nicaragua emphasize “machismo” that tend to uphold male domination. Based on a case study of international-regional-local NGO relations as they “play out” in Nicaragua, this paper connects international relations studies that explore the conditions through which norm change “happens” with postcolonial feminist participatory action research (PFPAR). To conclude, we discuss how to better understand the tensions of “norms in conflict” in SDP, with a particular focus on the pressures for local NGOs to accommodate—and connect—their contextual circumstances to the demands of transnational partners and the rising focus of Western donor organizations on “measurable” outcomes.

What impact do international actors—focused on Western feminist norms—have on local norms when it comes violence against women, and promoting sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) through sport for development and peace (SDP)? What are the barriers and enablers to norm change in SDP programs? What happens when conflicting international and local norms—as Cloward writes (2015, p. 3)—“collide,” and at what point does transnational activism lead individuals and communities to reject local norms and take up international ones?

In this paper, we use these questions as departure points to contemplate the dynamics of an international-regional-local partnership to support a SDP program that uses a gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and SRHR-focused curriculum in Nicaragua. Specifically—through support provided by an INGO and a regional Central American NGO (RNGO)—the local NGO (LNGO) uses soccer (or fútbol) to “empower girls” and improve gender relations in a remote rural community in Nicaragua.

Our aim is to contribute to sociological and international relations (IR) studies of SDP in a number of ways. First, while debates pertaining to local/international partnerships in SDP—and the influence of international actors on ‘local’ SDP programs—have been widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012), few studies have used IR theory to better understand the impediments to social change—and more specifically, norm change—“on the ground” through responses to transnational activism in and through SDP. That is, there is a clear gap in the SDP literature and a need to critically examine that ways in which youth (in this case, young women) and their communities respond to, and enmesh with, transnational activism and norm promotion in the context of SDP-related issues—in particular, SRHR education through SDP.

We submit, through drawing on IR literature on transnational feminist activism and norm change, that these problems of translation are rooted in a number of phenomena, including: 1) the increasing quantification of foreign aid and SDP, which emphasizes some outcomes and ignores other influences, responses and undertakings of international and local norm behaviour and change; and 2) global GBV discourses—where women are responsible for learning how to defend themselves—that fail to consider the unique cultural contexts where taking on this responsibility ignores existing gender roles and unequal gender relations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

Transnational Activism, Social Change and Local-International ‘Norm Behavior Change’

For more than a decade, scholars of transnational activism and normative change have argued that the responses of local community members to the norms promoted by transnational activists are crucial to normative outcomes on the ground. Of course, as Merry (2006, pp. 39–40) points out, the terms “local” and “global” are themselves problematic, as so-called “global” actors come from localities themselves, and the “local” context is almost always...
touched by influences from elsewhere. Still, coalitions of actors and ideas extending from places beyond a country’s borders frequently enter with the goal of changing localized beliefs and practices, and this is common in the field of advocacy for gender equality.

Cloward argues that changes in local behavior that entail rejection of existing local norms on the ground require individuals to “embrace international actors” (Cloward, 2015, p. 498). Merry, in turn, argues that successful local norm transformation typically requires the work of “translators”—intermediaries like NGO activists and community leaders who “move between the discourses of the localities they work with, taking ideas from one place and redefining them or adapting them to another” (Merry, 2006, p. 39).

This translation necessitates transnational actors’ awareness of local norms. In order to maximize effectiveness, there “must be a recognition that NGOs are actively and continuously co-creating the context in which they operate” (Ginsberg, 2016, p. 433). And yet, this can also lead to difficulties in adhering to the goals of a movement. A lack of attention to local needs in program design can create adverse incentives, in which local funding recipients superficially carry out short-term projects without adopting the intended norms or policies of transnational donors at a deeper level (Sundstrom, 2006).

**Postcolonial Feminist IR Theory, Gender, Development and the Challenge of ‘Agency’**

Postcolonial theory openly contests Western cultural authority and complicates the North-South binary that tends to dominate discussions of IR and development (Agathangelou & Ling, 2009). McEwan (2003, p. 1467) notes how utilizing a postcolonial lens in the context of geography and development also holds the potential to heighten a focus on “the material realities of global inequalities, and towards a revivified political and ethical project.” By extension, postcolonial IR approaches further complicate the terrain of global politics; while social constructivist approaches in IR have frequently been criticized for underemphasizing how power and domination operate in global relations, postcolonial approaches place power inequalities at the forefront of discussion (see Hayhurst, Sundstrom, & Waldman, 2018).

Postcolonial feminist IR theory acts as a useful conceptual tool for understanding how the purported “beneficiaries” of SDP initiatives interact with foreign donors who most often have very different understandings of violence, femininities, gender relations, roles and norms (Hayhurst et al., 2018). Other scholarly work in SDP demonstrates how there are pertinent tensions at play in assuming that—for example—global South NGOs are passive recipients of international/global North SDP agendas (Lindsey & Grattan, 2012). In a similar vein, postcolonial feminist IR perspectives are useful for sustaining a focus “the politics of location” in recognizing how gendered normative change occurs in transnational campaigns, paying attention to how social actors construct notions of femininities and masculinities, while understanding that such understandings are fluid and varied across different local and regional settings (Agathangelou & Turcotte, 2016; Salazar, Goicolea, & Öhman, 2016).

Postcolonial feminist IR approaches are also imperative for critiquing the current “neoliberal” focus on young women in the global South as “hyper-industrious, altruistic, entrepreneurial female subjects” (Wilson, 2015, p. 807). As previous research in SDP has revealed, the “Girl Effect” mantra—part of an original Nike-driven global campaign positioning girls as the “new pana-ceas” to the most pressing development issues of our time—has shifted through the pores of SDP programming (Hayhurst, 2013, 2014). As a result, hundreds of SDP programs now focus explicitly on enhancing the agency of young women and girls through—for example—teaching them self-defense skills, learning about their SRHR, and being “empowered” to “just say no” to violent situations (e.g., Hayhurst, 2013). Moreover, feminist NGO activism on GBV, by taking on the task of responding to the problems of women and girl survivors, “may foster the aims of neoliberalism, either by serving the role of former state social services or by justifying the privatization of such former state functions” (Johnson, 2009, p. 9).

**Contextualizing Gender-Based Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights**

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) estimates 35 percent of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual partner violence or non-partner sexual violence, or roughly 938 million women. Instead, GBV has emerged as one of the most salient human rights violations across the globe; but in particular, in global South countries such as those in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (Simister, 2012). In lieu of using terms such as “intimate partner violence” or “domestic violence”, we mostly use the term “gender-based violence” throughout this paper to highlight the gendered nature of such violence (Simister, 2012).

Violence against women began to be articulated as a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), and was recognized formally as such during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). At that Conference, women’s organizations from the global North and South managed to bridge their differences and find remarkable common purpose on the goal of combating violence against women (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 170–171). Thus, through various channels of transnational activism against gender violence, violence against women was reframed as a human rights violation that is widely relevant to women.

While it does seem to be the case that the global feminist movement has united around the phenomenon of GBV as a problem of worldwide relevance to women, regardless of cultural context, our prevailing concern is that—in fact—cultural context and social and power relations need to be better foregrounded and brought to bear on globally-driven GBV and SRHR programs that use SDP-focused curricula in global South countries such as Nicaragua. For this reason, it is imperative to ground violence against women, gender violence, SRHR rights and GBV prevention locally, and nationally, within the wider Nicaraguan context, so as to not erase the specificities of experiences of the local young women targeted by SDP interventions such as the ones involved in this study. In focusing on an international/local partnership that uses GBV prevention strategies, and SRHR education, through a football-focused SDP program, we recognize GBV and SRHR are not uniformly understood globally. That is, we acknowledge “conceptions of violence and of the relationships and social structures within which it occurs are highly variable” (Merry, 2015, p. 44).

**Sport for Development and Peace: Perpetuating or Preventing Gender-Based Violence?**

The current discourses focused on “the girl as the new agent of social change” have stimulated an abundance of girl-focused SDP programs, particularly in the global South (see Hayhurst, 2013). As rates of GBV continue to escalate on a global scale (but particularly
in the global South), girl-focused SDP NGOs are rapidly coalescing into a growing movement—and increasingly incorporating SRHR education and GBV prevention strategies into their curriculum. For example, SDP studies have demonstrated that by learning sports such as karate, young women may have the opportunity to defend themselves from gender-based, domestic and/or sexual violence (Hayhurst, MacNeill, Kidd, & Knoppers, 2014). And still, learning these activities does little to challenge underlying ideas about race, gender, sexuality and that serve to “dehumanize” those identified as targets for these types of programs (Hayhurst, 2014).

To our knowledge, there have been no empirical studies that directly investigate how NGOs in the global South might succeed in challenging gender norms and addressing GBV through SDP programs that use—for example—fútbol as a tool to teach SRHR education curriculum. Little is also known about the ways that programs designed by INGOs in the West that support NGOs delivering SDP programs in the global South can influence a resistant domestic normative context, particularly in terms of GBV prevention through sports such as fútbol. In this paper, we begin to address these lacunas.

Nicaragua: Gender Politics Context and The Women’s Movement

Understanding how GBV prevention strategies and SRHR are deployed by international NGOs to a rural community in Nicaragua requires deep appreciation of the gendered political history underlining these terms. Existing legislation in Nicaragua since the 1970s has sanctioned the authority of males as having absolute control over the family and in society more broadly (Cobo del Arco, 2000). After their initial support for the feminist movement, the Frente Sandanista de Libertion National (FSLN) was careful to only re-introduce a family values perspective, especially via emphasis on family values throughout the law (Law 779) in greater detail below:

Law 779 made a radical shift from focusing on intra-family violence (Law 230) to specifically addressing violence against women in both public and private spheres [. . .] and acknowledging that violence against women was a product of unequal power relations. It recognized new crimes, particularly femicide, created specialized courts, and banned the use of mediation for any crime contained in the law. Despite significant limitations—the exclusion of lesbian, bisexual and trans women from the principle of non-discrimination, the continued full criminalization of abortion, no mention of legal pluralism, and the very restricted participation of “civil society” (sic) in intersectoral decision-making bodies—the law met most demands of the women’s movement, so the women’s movement claimed it a victory ([Campana 28 de setiembre et al., 2013] as cited in Jubb, 2014, p. 299).

In short, Law 779 “provides a route for women to access justice and protection from violence and to hold perpetrators to account” (Amnesty International, 2013), and upholds “many regional and international human rights standards,” (Jubb, 2014, p. 289). In contrast, law 846—the reform law—was passed in 2013 in order to “re-introduce a family values perspective, especially via mediation, which feminists rejected because it promoted male perpetrators’ impunity and the re-privatization of violence against women,” (Jubb, 2014, p. 289). Jubb underlines the stark contradictions and ambiguities at the heart of feminist organizing related to gender-based violence in Nicaragua, where a clear underlying commitment to family values and codes— including “obligatory motherhood for girls”—directly clashes with Law 779’s rejection of family values and focus on violence against women in both public and private spheres (Jubb, 2014, p. 299).

Indeed, these “family values” are also deeply connected to a culture of machismo. Machismo is described by Sternberg (2000) as “a cult of the male” (p. 91), and is an intensely ingrained, aggressive paternalism and sense of male entitlement which permeates both political and social institutions in Nicaragua. In his study of male attitudes towards sexual health and women’s subordination, Sternberg found Nicaraguan men to express pride in sexual conquests and dominant stereotypes. Infidelity was agreed to be “natural” in men, while unfaithful women were deemed immoral and wicked. Furthermore, decisions of when women should bear children or undergo an abortion were granted to men (Sternberg, 2000). Taken together, these findings suggest the existence of a complex web of power relations between genders that depart from the dominant discourses in some of the global North countries from which donors hail—leading to potential conflicts in local/global norm dynamics in understanding gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights. In the next section, we provide further context on these conflicting norm dynamics by outlining the case study organizations involved in our research.

Methodology

Background on Case Study Organizations

International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO). The INGO was founded in 2007. Based in Western Europe, the INGO focuses primarily on funding gender-based SDP programming, and has conducted work thus far in over 20 countries, partnering and funding “local” NGOs in predominantly global South countries with an emphasis on creating and disseminating “best practices” in using sport as a tool to support women’s rights.

Through a partnership with a transnational corporation, the INGO has been using sport to address gender-based violence, healthy living, economic empowerment and promote young women’s sexual and reproductive health rights through “the Program.” This intervention was developed by the transnational corporation and uses “the Curriculum” to position sport as a tool to develop young women’s economic proiciencies, social capital and networks. The goal of the Curriculum is to: 1) positively impact the lives of young women who hail from a wide range of contexts, and 2) use a global approach, with the potential for local adaptability.

Regional Non-Governmental Organization (RNGO). The RNGO was founded in 2003, with the goal of enhancing the rights and well-being of Central American women. The RNGO also aims to promote the leadership abilities of Central American women and to ensure they are able to lead their communities in key decision-making forums that impact their lives. The RNGO provides grant-making programs, capacity building opportunities, monitoring and evaluation guidelines, networking initiatives and knowledge tools for Central American grassroots organizations. The organization also distributes funding from global funders to local entities that focus on promoting and defending women’s rights throughout Central America.
Local Non-Governmental Organization (LNGO). The LNGO was founded in 1994, with a mandate to empower Nicaraguan youth—especially Nicaraguan young women—through a number of initiatives in the areas of health and education. In addition, in the words of Staff Member 5, this LNGO aims to:

Raise young people’s awareness in all spheres of their lives. It is everyone’s responsibility to promote a healthy environment, to defend their rights, to exercise citizenship in public spaces, influence and participate in community development, environmental and natural resources protection, and to build resilience to climate change (Staff Member 5, LNGO).

In the late nineties, the LNGO initiated a football tournament through an alliance with the Peace Corps. While originally both young women and men were playing, it soon became apparent that they needed to “close the tournament for boys” so that young women had more of an opportunity to play. At the time, it was clear to the Board of Directors of the LNGO that, as Staff Member 5 noted:

The boys had work, they had salaries, they had money. They were able to buy their own fútbol shoes. The parents gave them permission to go out […] However, the girls didn’t have access to any resources. They were not able to buy their own balls or fútbol shoes.

In 2002, the LNGO began holding fútbol tournaments exclusively for young women. Soon after, the focus shifted to using fútbol for social purposes, as Staff Member 5 confirmed: “we needed to move beyond playing.” For example, tournaments would be held with two winning teams: one that wins the most games, and the other wins due to the young women’s ability to respond correctly to questions about SRHR and GBV. Thus, the LNGO started to concentrate on promoting young women’s SRHR education through fútbol. In 2006, the LNGO started to receive funding from the RNGO for projects specifically focused on the empowerment of young women. In 2011, the INGO (through the RNGO) began funding the LNGO’s fútbol interventions focused on SRHR education and GBV prevention.

Postcolonial Feminist Participatory Action Research (PFPAR)

Data for this study were collected through PFPAR strategies, guided by a postcolonial feminist lens and involved a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, poster collaging and photovoice activities that took place from January—November, 2015. A total of 7 organizational staff members (INGO = Staff Members 1, 2; RNGO = Staff Members 3, 4; LNGO = Staff Members 5, 6, 7) participated in interviews, and 19 young women who were involved in the LNGO’s SDP program took part in poster collaging activities. Eleven of these young women participated in separate semi-structured interviews.

A PFPAR approach involved various methodological strategies that were used to foreground unequal power, social and gendered relations involved in the research process (see Hayhurst, 2017 for more details on this approach). Photovoice was used as a means through which to accomplish a collaborative research approach: it is a visual research method often used in PAR research, whereby participants are given cameras to capture their perspectives on a given issue (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996). In this case, the young women were given cameras to document their experiences in the SDP program. They were given the cameras for three days and then assembled for two days thereafter to create poster collages of the “best photos” using art supplies that were provided to supplement their posters. The young women and Hayhurst then shared their photos in a group discussion.

Following this, the group came together to rank the barriers and enablers that seemed to arise sequentially across each poster collage (9 posters in total with two young women per poster). This approach was inspired by Castleden, Garvin, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation (2008) photovoice work with the Huu-ay-aht First Nation. Upon returning to Canada, Hayhurst then worked with the LNGO through several Skype meetings to create a collaborative digital story that incorporated the photos and poster collage footage. This methodological strategy was used to verify findings, and in a similar vein to Castleden et al. (2008, p. 1398), enabled us to “communicate back participants’ priorities for action,” which then informed our data analysis. All interviews were conducted in English, and those conducted with the LNGO staff and the young women used a translator (see Hayhurst, 2017, for further methodological details).

The data gathered with the young women were analyzed collaboratively through the poster sharing activities, through which the broad categories of “barriers” (“barreras”) and “enablers” (“alentos) were created (see Figure 1). Sub-themes were then identified and developed (e.g., “transporte”/transportation, machismo). These sub-themes then guided our secondary analysis of the photos. Data coding and analysis were facilitated using Nvivo 10, a qualitative data analysis program. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of participants.

Results

Interviews with staff from each of the various entities involved in funding—and deploying—the Program administered by the
LNGO discussed the ways that creating and shifting local attitudes and understandings of GBV, gender relations and SRHR was imperative to not only the safety and well-being of the young women, but also to demonstrating the ultimate success of the program. In the sections that follow, we show how the responses of local community members to the norms promoted through the INGO’s Curriculum—deployed through the LNGO’s curriculum—were fundamental to the normative outcomes on the ground.

In the next section, we discuss and weave the research findings through the various stakeholders involved in deploying information about GBV and SRHR. Throughout our discussion, we examine the social relations embedded in these webs of organizational actors. In doing so, our goal is to demonstrate how local norms were emeshed with the regional and ‘globally-driven agenda’ of GBV prevention, and SRHR promotion through SDP as curated by the INGO’s Curriculum.

Changing “Local” Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights: “Increasing the Impact”

**INGO: “She is capable of change”**. From the INGO’s perspective, creating a mechanism through which to show “collective impact” was essential to enabling their donors to acknowledge various “pieces” of the global gender-focused SDP work being conducted by their regional and local partners in the field (such as the RNGO—and, by association—the LNGO). Specifically, through the INGO’s Curriculum, program partners take up terms such as “life skills,” “economic empowerment” and “GBV” and shape them according to their own needs, with guidelines as to how to do this presented in the manuals. Put differently, key concepts are standardized and used in the Curriculum across different contexts with a wide range of partner organizations. The INGO examines whether the Curriculum is successful through “the Software”—a customer relationship management tool through which they—along with local program partners (e.g., the LNGO) are able to manage [their] program data including collection, storage, analysis and report. Through the Software, coaches or local staff members are able to “capture data in the field” through their mobile phones with the young women as they participate in programs, and then “upload the data” to the main systems/dashboards when returning to their head offices, where data are “synched” from their phones to the INGO’s global monitoring and evaluation systems. This data are then plugged into an overall outcomes evaluation measured through a “framework of indicators” related to changes perceived in status, attitudes, conditions and behaviors. For example, successful sport programs that use this outcomes-based approach may be evaluated positively if young women report increased confidence in their ability to successfully access SRHR. The INGO is focused on promoting shared impact through the use of the Software technology by fusing evidence from local partners, creating a mutually beneficial agenda of priorities, sharing a communal monitoring and evaluation system (vis-à-vis the Software) and capitalizing on active cooperation.

Indeed, the INGO staff noted local program partners such as LNGO the had the opportunity to tweak and change the curriculum depending on local context. Still, local partners also had to find ways to feed their findings—or evidence of change and demonstration of impact at individual, organizational and community levels—into the “common measurement system.” As Staff Member 1 noted:

I’ve been really surprised to see the level of implementation of a kind of international tool. The uptake of that by a lot of partners in different places and how even without creating a completely new tool or localized version of the tool, they are really able to run a very effective life skills [and] sports program.

Staff Member 2 supported this contention through her observation that “there is quite a lot of possibility for them [local partners] to implement in the way they see to be most appropriate in their local contexts.” An example of an effort made to hone in on the cultural variability of sexual health care was evident in the Curriculum program modules. For instance, one module defines SRHR as including the “right to sexual health care for prevention” and for the “treatment of all sexual concerns problems and disorders” (INGO, 2011). However, and at the same time, the curriculum manual continues to note that although condoms are a reliable way of preventing HIV infection, that “in many cultures” there are still “taboos about girls [. . .] discussing condoms” (INGO, 2011). The Curriculum then provides guidance as to what the individual running this session should do to ensure cultural appropriate behavior. They are advised to verify the material with the “local partner” to ensure that “parents would approve” (INGO, 2011). Similarly, the same module highlights that “body language and non-verbal communication” varies by country, and cautions instructors to ensure examples are used that are relevant to the culture in which they are working. At the same time, it is suggested that “good ways to communicate” (for the young women) include, “look[ing] into a person’s eyes when talking to him or her” and “avoid[ing] excessive hand movements while speaking” (INGO, 2011).

In such instances, we see how—though these SRHR and ways of communicating may seem to be “globally accepted”—the emphasis on adapting them to local context is evident throughout the Curriculum modules (INGO, 2016). According to interviewees from the INGO, there is no formal requirement for local groups to “standardize curriculum;” on the contrary, partners are free to shape their own understandings of “challenging concepts.” Other nods to culturally specific ways of understanding gender relations were evident in additional modules of the Curriculum, where guidelines cautioned local facilitators to exercise some thoughtfulness in igniting girls to be agents of change in their communities.

Staff Member 1 further explained that, if the girls ended up retaining information on how to usefully deal with issues related to GBV (such as locating a safe space, or saying “no” to engaging in sexual relations)—and are subsequently able to share this positive story with INGO—then a successful narrative is tenable. Here, “narrative reporting” is one way that the INGO documents how young women retain information—and subsequently change their behaviours—as guided by the Curriculum. As Staff Member 2 put it, “what we’re really seeing with our partner organizations is that there are some indicators related to [GBV] and they can be very clearly related. Like girls knowing a safe place to go in their community or knowing where to go to report [GBV].” In essence, interviews with the INGO, in combination with the document analysis, revealed that if the young women targeted by their programs “retained information” and knowledge through their actions (i.e., knowing how to locate a safe space), then change was occurring. Sport is thus used as a “space where women can learn life skills or learn about their rights [. . .] those things can transfer more broadly into their organizations or into their communities” (Staff Member 1). Thus, information being deployed about GBV is implemented through the Curriculum guidelines, and then ultimately translated in “culturally appropriate ways” through: 1) regional staff members; and 2) the actions of the young women.

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themselves. But first, this information is vetted regionally by the RNGO, as outlined in the next section.

**RNGO: “We have a double personality”**. The RNGO’s role is to “translate” and disseminate the information—and the Curriculum—provided by the INGO to partner organizations such as the LNGO throughout Central America. In many ways, the RNGO ensures that the Curriculum is culturally relevant. As Staff Member 3 suggested, the RNGO had a “double personality” in that they constantly negotiated global activist movements and their campaigns to speak to “local realities.” She underlined this “double personality” through her suggestion that the RNGO acted, on the one hand, as “grantees of our donors,” but on the other side as “donors of our grantees.” Although based in Nicaragua and focused on regional work, the RNGO also participated in discussions about SRHR rights and GBV prevention through sport at the international level, for example, with the INGO. Staff Member 3 noted that the RNGO had a “unique expertise of being part of this grassroots movement at the same time that we are part of these other international spaces.” She argued that this allowed the RNGO to work with “a sense of reality” and “to bring these local voices to these spaces.” As she continued:

We understand that there are, you know, like these treaties and all of these global processes. This is something that happened back in 2000 [...] with the Millennium Development Goals [...] And the thing is that this important to check and also to follow-up at the more like global level. But also we cannot forget that we have a local reality.

As a women’s rights organization sitting at the regional/global nexus for the successful translation of the Curriculum to regional program partners, the RNGO staff reiterated that sport was a tool used to achieve women’s rights. As Staff Member 4 further elucidated:

[The girls] first defend their right to play. After that come a lot of other rights that they later also defend in their home and with their family. The challenge is to get permission to play and they are learning in their groups to negotiate with their parents and show them that girls also have the right to play sports [...] The [organizations] in Nicaragua are using sport like a strategy but the focus is on the reflection of their experience of life and their rights.

Here, the emphasis was clearly on the ways that the girls were to ultimately act as conveyors of social change, or as those responsible for promoting (and “defending”) their rights through their participation in sports (for example, by successfully obtaining permission from their parents). However, the RNGO staff pointed out that, as an organization, they did not want to work “on behalf” of groups like the LNGO, and the young women they worked with locally. Instead, the RNGO wanted “to support this population, these organized women that are facing and that are actually, you know, creating strategies to solve these problems that they see in their communities” (Staff Member 3).

**LNGO: “They don’t want to fund you to just go and play”**. Staff from the LNGO described how they benefitted from the information received through the INGO’s Program and Curriculum, and used a number of elements from the Curriculum to complement the work they had previously been conducting for decades (since they had been in existence since the late 90s, using sport to promote women’s rights and health). As Staff Member 5 confirmed, the Curriculum was something that the LNGO felt it had some influence on in co-creating with the INGO and the RNGO, and made the impact of their work more “visible”.

All three staff members from the LNGO agreed that there was a great deal of flexibility provided by the INGO, vis-à-vis the RNGO, in terms of the LNGO’s ability to supplement the Curriculum with extra activities that resonated locally. In the Curriculum, local NGOs were encouraged to hold the workshops on various topics at separate times, but doing so was unrealistic for the LNGO, as the young women often had to travel long distances. Instead, they would spend long hours holding multiple workshops on a range of topics. And yet, the flexible nature of the Curriculum was sometimes met by strict rules and a strong focus on products and outcomes. As Staff Member 6 noted:

Sometimes you need to restrict yourself because the donor will not allow you to do beyond that [...] Sometimes you might find problems of that kind. But usually the donors will know exactly what is it that they want to work. And once we know exactly what they want, what you are going to do—what products and outcomes you are going to achieve—you do it.

Other LNGO staff described how specific measurement tools culminated in some pressure to subscribe to, and uphold, the management of these interventions in very particular ways. For example, Staff Member 5 noted how the Curriculum only measured activities on a yearly basis instead of on a more long-term approach, such as every three years. Another staff member discussed challenges related to the time consuming nature of inputting data. The LNGO was primarily supported by volunteer (unpaid) staff, and the management of data was very arduous—but necessary in order to secure funding, as Staff Member 5 noted:

We have not developed that much expertise among the other volunteer girls that work with us, how to manage and how to use and fit the information into this platform system. And we do not have the funds to be paying somebody to input the information [...] It is a commitment that the RNGO tells us, you need to ensure that you need to fill in the information in all the fields with all the information from the very first session to the very last session. And you need to put the information for each and every single girl.

Social change, according to the LNGO staff, happened when the funds allocated to a particular project increased; but at the same time, if community “buy-in” was absent, and if the curriculum was not culturally relevant, the amount of funding provided was inapt. Indeed, there was a careful balance between securing funding for activities and ensuring the activities resonated with the community. In this sense, there was a distinct pressure to ensure the funding was allotted to specific, tangible and measurable activities where change could be easily quantified:

Staff Member 5: As I mentioned before, the donors—for them oftentimes it’s a lot more important to carry very specific activities [...] Sport is not a formal activity [...] A formal activity should be something like a camp activity, that it has workshops and with very specific, concrete outcomes, products.

Interviewer: What about a tournament?

Staff Member 5: Well, perhaps it could be in a specific activity. But the donors are not willing to give you funding for that. I mean [...] they don’t want to fund just you go and play!

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**Young Women: “La Ley 779 Es Justa”**. Many of the young women discussed the importance of learning information through the LNGO’s workshops, which built on the Curriculum and the broader Program. Indeed, they cited these sessions as an instrumental introduction to their understandings of SRHR and (their responsibility for) shifting gender relations across their communities. As Hazell clarified, before participating in LNGO’s sessions, the young women “didn’t have the knowledge about our rights. We didn’t have the knowledge about all the information that LNGO has provided.”

Many cited fútbol as ultimately enticing them to attend workshops and “information sessions” that followed practices or tournaments. While the workshops contained key messages based on the global Curriculum, each session was also interspersed with key local content, such as discussions of Law 779. Other topics addressed included “how to take care of our bodies”, “how to ensure our body is kept clean”, sexuality, HIV prevention, disease prevention, how to prevent pregnancy, “unwanted pregnancies” (Andrea, Maria, Claudia, Pettrilla). In particular, all of the young women who participated in interviews and photovoice activities (n = 19) highlighted how the LNGO had taught them about their SRHR, and how to promote and disseminate these rights among their friends and wider communities. In fact, this was a key finding illuminated through the collages and photovoice activities—such as Figure 2—where the LNGO program participant is wearing a t-shirt with the slogan “La Ley 779 es Justa” (Law 779 is fair): As Helen explained:

Law 779 is—it looks for justice for women because it’s a law that defends—in the defense of women and women’s rights. And that’s what we get empowerment. The law—we have been taught about our rights and how to deal in situations, for instance, a rape. How are you going to behave, what to do, how to act.6

Many of these young women learned about this law—and their rights—through workshops that took place before, after and during football tournaments in their communities. As Maria put it:

Through the workshops we receive advice, and we are able to communicate these to other people, our friends […] When they tell us about our rights and when we learn about the freedom that we should have. How to treat each other, how to protect ourselves, how to prevent pregnancies, how to protect yourself or how to defend yourself in the case of a rape situation […] Friends that perhaps have not taken any of the workshops and they are not aware of their rights or they don’t know how to protect themselves—I share the information with them.

Many of the young women wore t-shirts provided by the LNGO with various messages in support of SRHR and GBV prevention written on them (Figure 3).

For example, Leana referred to the photo she took of a bag (Figure 3) that stated “el machismo mata que el miedo no te paralice denuncia” (machismo kills, don’t let yourself be paralyzed by fear, make a complaint). She further explained the importance of ‘living’ this statement—despite the challenge that she and her friends knew that the law would not be enforced:

We are very remote, very far away from the city … And most people in our community are not aware of the law … However, we have learned about the law in the workshops, and the LNGO works with young people. Not many older people know about the law. And so if they have heard about it perhaps they have not paid attention to what the law says.

Lyndsay: Do you know friends that had used the law to protect them before?

Leana: No, not yet. I haven’t seen anybody that has used the law here in my community.

Throughout these interviews and poster collaging activities, there was a clear lack of access to resources through which these young women were able to take a course of action to support their rights. Other young women wore t-shirts with similar SRHR slogans during football tournaments, but the extent to which this communicated the women’s rights message beyond the tournaments was difficult to monitor. As Julissia explained:

Once, in a tournament, it was a football tournament and we were going to compete. We were going to compete at [tournament], and we won first place. And they gave us some T-shirts, and the slogan says, ‘I use a condom always.’

Lyndsay: Okay. The T-shirts you wore throughout the tournament?

Julissia: No, the T-shirt was the prize because we got first place. So we used that later at a fútbol game.

Lyndsay: Okay. And do you wear it now as — you wear it kind of just day to day?

![Figure 2 — Photograph by Helen.](Ahead of Print)

![Figure 3 — Photograph by Leana.](Ahead of Print)
Julissia: When I go to fútbol practice or when I go to play fútbol, yes.

Lyndsay: And how do boys and community members react when you wear that T-shirt?

Julissia: Some people, they think that is good. However, other people, they made fun because of the slogan.

Other young women confirmed that the workshops were critical in helping them to “learn about the freedom we should have” (Maria). And yet—perhaps unsurprisingly—simply having access to this information was often not enough to fundamentally shift the ways the young women were positioned in this community to ultimately change gendered norms. That is, though the young women actively responded to the idea that they should learn their rights through the Curriculum (for example, by learning their SRHR and when to “say no” to engaging in sexual relations), they still lacked the fundamental infrastructural, superstructural and procedural support through which enforce these rights. These structural barriers were consistently captured throughout their photos, as demonstrated in Figures 4 and 5. For instance, Petrilla described how patriarchal structures, including gendered divisions of labour, lack of time and responsibility—combined with the machismo culture—left young women in her community “feeling like prisoners in their own homes” (see also Hayhurst, 2017). As she noted:

You see in our pictures that women have dedicated themselves to domestic activities, you see a woman cooking, and a man simply sitting there waiting for the food to be taken to him (see Figure 5). And we as [young women] are taught that we need to be mothers. So usually in our communities we see young women who are 14 or 15 years old already pregnant…Another obstacle, if you see this pig. We know this is a domestic animal, so we are doing domestic chores. But if you can see, the pig is with a rope, tied up. It is as when our parents do not allow us to leave the house, and we are sort of prisoners in our own homes (see Figure 4).

Other photos captured infrastructural barriers, including lack of available transportation and blocked roadways (due to increased landslides in their communities, which many attributed to climate change). Thus, the young women consistently highlighted the challenge of transportation (many times, in direct relation to climate change) as a crucial barrier that prevented them from attending, for example, fútbol events that were paired with the SRHR workshops. As Gabriella explained in contextualizing the photo (Figure 6):

I took this picture in my community. One of the difficulties that we face on this road, there is a gorge which is very bad, very deep. And there are difficulties, many of them, because we transport ourselves in a vehicle and the lane is very narrow, so just passing through it is very difficult. And we have to pass through there if we want to play when we go far away.7

Discussion: Beyond “Flooding Them With Information”

By building on important work by feminist IR scholars focused on gender-based violence (e.g., Cloward, 2016; Merry, 2015; Sundstrom, 2005) and postcolonial feminist IR theory (e.g., Bilgin & Ling, 2014) this study makes two key interventions to SDP studies. First, this study builds on Cloward’s initial findings that norm change is about more than simply attitude change, but also about accounting for cultural context, as well as material and structural barriers that may impede ‘norm change’. Cloward (2016) study focuses on, and measures, “culture clashes” that occur between international and the local level norms with specific consideration on individual level norm change. Our study extends her focus by honing in on the individual micro-foundations of norm diffusion (i.e., exploring and prioritizing how norm change is experienced and perceived from the perspectives of ‘targeted beneficiaries’), with an eye to the role of international and regional NGOs involved as donors and ‘information disseminators’ vetting global (norm change) curriculum vis-à-vis the global “Curriculum” and Program circulated by INGO. Cloward emphasizes that information transmission alone is insufficient to lead to changed behavior and the enactment of norms that INGOs are attempting to introduce into new contexts:

Figure 4 — Photograph by Petrilla.

Figure 5 — Photograph by Petrilla.

(Ahead of Print)
Indeed, by assuming that information transmission alone will lead over time to social and behavioral change regarding GBV in Nicaragua, INGOs promoting SRHR, GBV and “empowerment” norms may be ignoring the cultural and material realities and structural barriers that the young women in their programs face, such as gendered divisions of labour, poverty and a lack of transportation mobility (cf., Hayhurst, 2017). That is, and in line with previous work on the rise of the ‘Girl Effect’ discourse in broader SDP programming (cf., Hayhurst, 2011, 2013), the onus continues to be on the girl to be an agent of social change (and norm change) who knows her rights in the face of sexual and structural violence. This approach falls in step with dominant feminist IR approaches that “place the geopolitical agendas of feminists (protecting women) as the feminist concern rather than addressing the larger geopolitical structures of violence that necessitate such constructions of protection” (Agathangelou & Turcotte, 2016, p. 47). Conversely, a postcolonial feminist IR lens draws attention to the ways in which Nicaraguan young women are positioned—and resist—relations of power and violence, and underlines how these relations attempt to regulate their bodies through the broader political economic structures (cf., Agathangelou & Turcotte, 2016).

While there is the possibility that gained awareness will transform into social (and behavioural) change with enough time—and indeed the famous “spiral model” (Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999) of norm adoption in IR suggests this kind of natural progression, we submit that this is not enough. Instead, we contend that SDP-focused GBV prevention and SRHR education interventions consider strategies for lobbying governments and public authorities to create concrete actions for addressing the material and structural inequalities that these young women face. Without paying heed to these approaches, it seems that violence in all its forms (gender-based and structural) is likely to continue regardless of whether or not young women believe it is a violation of their rights and dignity. Indeed, we submit that future SDP research engage with a postcolonial feminist IR approach to better “draw out the revolutionary possibilities within approaches to power that are systemic and grounded in racial, gender and sexual politics of location,” (Agathangelou & Turcotte, 2016, p. 47). Along these lines, we also support postcolonial feminist action research approaches to SDP, which emphasize material relations, issues of representation and knowledge, ethical engagements in research and practice and stronger considerations of both structures of injustice and practices of resistance by ‘targeted beneficiaries’ (see Hayhurst, 2016).

Promoters of global GBV norms, whether the INGOs from outside a country, or local “translators” (Merry, 2006), are constantly faced with a difficult tightrope walk. Ethically, as ‘feminist norm promoters,’ they do not wish to condone patriarchal local norms and practices; but at the same time they must provide culturally informed and relevant programming that genuinely matters to local audiences. Boyce, Zeledón, Tellez, and Barrington (2016, p. 631) note how the acceptance of “local narratives and normalized beliefs” could be integrated into health and human rights-related initiatives to bolster effectiveness. By extension, when transnational feminist movements attempt to denounce culturally specific understandings of, for example, GBV, it may decrease their ability to identify with the individuals they are attempting to reach. In a similar vein, Rhind, Brackenridge, Kay, and Owusu-Sekyere (2015, p. 5) contend that international standardized approaches to child protection in sport for SDP often collide with “culturally specific norms relating to childhood, youth, sexuality, and sexual abuse, and also organizational cultures and capacities, all of which can foster resistance.” However, our postcolonial feminist IR approach calls for these transnational feminist approaches to question and pry open the somewhat insular foundations of GBV prevention and SRHR education strategies. Here, we must be extremely sensitive to where damaging gender norms have emanated from, and attempt to decenter ‘global curriculums’ on GBV and SRHR, which would require strong recognition—and engagement with—the “multiplicity of works and subjectivities that make up these formations,” (Agathangelou & Turcotte, 2016, p. 42). That is, rather than focusing on a linear, uniform approach to norm and social change when it comes to GBV and SRHR which are often structured to alter the perceived ‘backwardness’ of gender relations and norms in contexts such as Nicaragua, we suggest that the interactions among stakeholders (e.g., the INGO, RNGO, LNSO and the young women) must emphasize, and prioritize, mutuality and multiple worldviews, voices and traditions that may be involved SDP-guided exchanges and ‘transactions’. As Bilig & Ling, 2014, p. 3 contend:

For an arena like world politics, where multiple traditions, practices and worldviews apply, such singularity and inflexibility can only lead to a war-like ultimatum: i.e., either you convert to become like us or we will annihilate you. In either case, the result is a losing one for those who have more in their historical and cultural legacies than a realist/liberal, Anglo-American-European colonial patriarchy.

These words of caution are pertinent for those organizations engaged in international-regional-local relationships in GBV and SRHR-focused SDP work. Not only is there a “tightrope walk” for Western feminist INGOs introducing new norms, but the dilemma applies to local NGO “translators,” albeit with additional considerations in mind. Local activists attempt to be locally appropriate and relevant while still meeting donors’ or international partners’ expectations. In this case, the RNGO’s statement about having a “double personality” highlights this dilemma, and echoes what has been found in Sundstrom’s examination of Russian NGOs in the 1990s in locations where local women’s organizations were strongly supported by foreign donors to promote development of democratic civil society, but there was little community
acceptance of global feminist norms. In those places, “decoupling of formal statements and policies [of local NGOs] from day-to-day behavior frequently results, as organizations are forced to speak and act in one style to foreign audiences but in a different style to their inhospitable political leaders and local population” (Sundstrom, 2006, p. 104). Without question, this kind of dilemma has been highlighted by scholars examining the behavior of NGO activists in other fields, from Russian environmental activists who are more drawn to urban contamination issues than Western donors’ focus on species biodiversity (Henry, 2010, pp. 164–169) to democracy promotion activists in the Middle East caught between the need to survive in difficult authoritarian circumstances and the desire to promote greater democratic freedoms (Bush, 2015).

Finally, the accounts of GBV program implementation in Nicaragua resonate with recent IR scholarship that has identified the power of quantification and indicators in today’s global policy world (Merry, Davis, Kingsbury, & Cambridge Books Online, 2015). In the world of INGO program implementation, we see here the “box ticking” nature that many transnational programs aimed at normative change almost inevitably acquire when they try to scale up to a number of global locales (cf., Kay, 2009; Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014). The RNGO and LNGO conveyed several challenges involved with transmitting the global INGO Curriculum to Nicaraguan young women in situations where the women might not be entirely engaged and receptive, either because the material was inappropriate, failed to account for the structural barriers and contextual realities of the young women’s lives, or perhaps because the young women “just wanted to play.” But as other critical accounts of donor grants to NGOs from other contexts have found, local funding recipients are often held accountable through their reports of, quantitatively, how many times they conveyed information to how many people, in how many places (e.g., Sundstrom, 2006, p. 163). And as Merry and Wood (2015, p. 207) argue, how and what we decide to measure is consequential. If we were able to peer through the cracks of these global frameworks of measurement, “box ticking” and evaluation, there is evidence—in this paper, and in others from SDP (cf., Mwaanga & Banda, 2014)—of resistance, survival and local knowledge that informs policy actions through PFPAR strategies to locate resources for survival and more culturally engaged approaches to social change.

Future studies that examine GBV prevention and SRHR education through SDP might explore how programming may better account for the material realities and structural barriers experienced by ‘targeted beneficiaries’ and be more contextually-driven. A PFPAR orientation grounded in the experiences of young Nicaraguan women in this particular SDP program better captures the nuances of global SDP work as these young women speak to, and represent, their experiences through their photos. If globally-driven GBV and SRHR programs that use SDP-focused curriculum in global South countries such as Nicaragua are to continue, we suggest that using PFPAR approaches to inform programming and international-regional-local relationships may heighten and prioritize cultural nuances, material realities and structural inequalities as experienced by targeted beneficiaries in SDP.

Notes

1. The revolution, led by the Sandinista Party (or the FSLN) ended a 40-year military dictatorship, sparking a radical state which subsequently lasted from 1979–1989 (Collinson, 1990). Throughout this period, women held central positions in the revolutionary government, and led a movement that resulted in improved social and economic policies to better protect their rights. And yet, this progress was undone by a lack of systemic efforts to contest the entrenched patriarchal gender order resulting in deep gender inequalities in Nicaraguan society (Collinson, 1990). In other words, “many of these laws and others that might have changed patriarchal relations were implemented poorly, if at all,” (Ewig, 1999, p. 82).

2. We have kept the names of our case study organizations confidential to avoid any harm to participants.

3. We are using the term ‘the Software’ and ‘the Curriculum’ in order to protect the identity of INGO.

4. In order to safeguard the anonymity of the INGO, we have paraphrased some of the Curriculum material, and/or ensured that all direct quotes from the Curriculum modules are not revealed when searched online.

5. We have used pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the young women.

6. Following the work of Barker and Smith (2012, p. 98) on navigating the challenges of anonymity, the ownership and copyright of photographs and research with young people, we decided to “source photographs” in this paper by using a pseudonym. We believe this approach was in line with our PAR methodological orientation by focusing on the young women’s experiences as active collaborators in this research and upholding their “moral ownership” over photographers.

7. This quote is also used in Hayhurst, 2017.

Acknowledgments

The research team sincerely thanks the young women and staff who took the time to collaborate on this study and share their stories, images and experiences. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Any opinion, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors. This article draws on research that was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship (BPF-SSHRC-00022) to the first author.

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