

## **Relações públicas ativistas no espaço público digital durante a pandemia Estudo etnográfico da ‘Greve Feminista Internacional 2021’**

### **Resumo**

Os grupos ativistas estão a usar cada vez mais os media digitais para cooperar no âmbito de causas globais. Recorrem a processos dinâmicos híbridos - local-global, offline-online e pessoal-social - aproveitando o potencial de um ambiente em rede crescente que facilita a criação de novas dinâmicas de comunicação por grupos ativistas e por profissionais de relações públicas.

Pela lente teórica da perspetiva crítica em relações públicas, este artigo analisa como a organização portuguesa da “Greve Feminista Internacional 2021”, que decorreu a 8 de março (Dia Internacional da Mulher), se enquadra na definição de relações públicas ativistas para a mudança social, que inclui atividades de protesto e dissidência. A greve foi planeada por uma plataforma coletiva de ativistas preocupados em manter a participação e mobilização cívica num contexto de crise social e isolamento profilático devido à pandemia de COVID-19. Através de um estudo etnográfico de seis meses realizado com a UMAR (organização feminista portuguesa fundada em 1976), o artigo explora como os ativistas funcionam como intermediários interculturais em contextos transnacionais.

Inspirada nas iniciativas de grupos ativistas internacionais, a campanha portuguesa de promoção da “Greve Feminista Internacional 2021”, - # IfWeStopTheWorldStops - aplicou métodos criativos para o envolvimento ativo de novos públicos. Estes grupos ativistas produziram significados sociais, interferindo nas relações de poder que se geram no espaço público. Recorreram a instrumentos de relações públicas como a criação de eventos online em antecipação, o apoio de figuras públicas, um site específico, um kit de manifestação que convidava as pessoas a realizarem diversas atividades offline para serem posteriormente partilhadas em plataformas digitais, técnicas de relações com os media tradicionais, adaptações de linguagem e outros esforços de mobilização social.

**Palavras Chave:** Comunicação digital; ativismo transnacional; relações públicas; participação cívica; etnografia

## **Activist public relations in digital public space during the pandemic Ethnographic study of the Portuguese International Feminist Strike 2021**

### **Abstract**

Activists across the globe are employing digital media to cooperate on universal causes through hybrid dynamic processes—local–global, offline–online and personal–social—taking advantage of the potential of an unparalleled growing network environment in which new communication tools are being used and created by activist groups and public relations practitioners worldwide.

From a public relations critical perspective, this article investigates how the Portuguese organization of the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021,” which took place on March 8 (International Women’s Day), fits the description of activist public relations toward social change, including both protest and dissent activities. The strike was planned by a collective platform of activists concerned with maintaining civic participation and mobilization in a context of social crisis and prophylactic isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an ethnographic study conducted with UMAR (a Portuguese feminist organization founded in 1976), the article explores how activists function as intercultural intermediaries.

Inspired by the initiatives of international activist groups, the campaign to promote the International Feminist Strike—#IfWeStopTheWorldStops—sought to apply creative methods for the active engagement of new publics. These activists were producers of social meanings, interfering in the power relations that are generated in the public space. They used instruments such as the creation of specific online events, the endorsement of public figures, a specific website, a demonstration kit that invited people to carry out various offline activities to be shared later on digital platforms, media relations techniques, language adaptations and other social mobilization efforts.

**Keywords:** Digital communication, transnational activism; public relations; civic participation, ethnography

## Introduction

The human rights crisis in Afghanistan in August 2021, as the United States withdrew its remaining troops, particularly affected women and children.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, tweeted that “We watch in complete shock as Taliban takes control of Afghanistan (...) I am deeply worried about women, minorities and human rights advocates.”<sup>2</sup> Her tweet received more than 83,000 “likes” in the first 24 hours and was a source of information for different international mainstream media, like *The New York Post* (US),<sup>3</sup> *The Economic Times* (India)<sup>4</sup> and Rádio Renascença (Portugal).<sup>5</sup> This tweet, by a young activist on an international policy issue of prime global relevance, which was a source of information for the press on three different continents, illustrates well the role of digital technologies in circulating political causes globally.

The dominant analytical framework within which the construction of human rights has been studied classifies them as “transnational advocacy networks,” that is, networks that include relevant actors working internationally on an issue, united by shared values, a common discourse and consistent exchanges of information and services (Nash, 2015). From a public relations (PR) critical perspective, this study aims to determine how the Portuguese organization of the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021,” which took place on March 8 (International Women’s Day), fits the description of activist PR, including both protest and dissent activities. The strike was planned by various groups of activists concerned with maintaining civic participation and mobilization in a context of social crisis and prophylactic isolation due to the COVID-19

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations (2021) Afghanistan: Guterres urges restraint as Taliban reach Kabul; UN Security Council set to meet Monday. August 15. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097832> (Accessed: 17 August 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Yousafzai M (2021) Tweet. *Twitter*, August 15. Available at: <https://twitter.com/Malala/status/1426877173433094147> (Accessed: 16 August 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Brown L (2021) Malala Yousafzai breaks silence on Taliban, calls for “immediate cease-fire.” *The New York Post*, August 16. Available at: <https://nypost.com/2021/08/16/malala-breaks-silence-on-rise-of-taliban-which-shot-her-at-14/> (Accessed: 17 August 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *The Economic Times* (2021) Taliban–Afghanistan crisis shocks Malala; Activist says she’s “deeply worried” for women, minorities. August 16. Available at: [https://m.economictimes.com/magazines/panache/taliban-afghanistan-crisis-shocks-malala-activist-says-shes-deeply-worried-for-women-minorities/amp\\_articleshow/85367151.cms](https://m.economictimes.com/magazines/panache/taliban-afghanistan-crisis-shocks-malala-activist-says-shes-deeply-worried-for-women-minorities/amp_articleshow/85367151.cms) (Accessed: 17 August 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Rádio Renascença (2021) Poderes globais devem pedir “cessar-fogo imediato” no Afeganistão, defende Malala. August 15. Available at: <https://rr.sapo.pt/noticia/mundo/2021/08/15/poderes-globais-devem-pedir-cessar-fogo-imediato-no-afeganistao-defende-malala/249704/> (Accessed: 17 August 2021).

pandemic. Through an ethnographic study conducted with UMAR (a Portuguese feminist organization founded in 1976), the study explores how activists function as intercultural intermediaries, playing a mediating role concerned with (re)producing and challenging established cultural meanings. In this regard, activism and public relations are not antagonistic but occupy a fluid space influenced by cultural and economic forces (Ciszek, 2017).

The study begins to explore these topics through a literature review on the coexistence of “new” and “old” forms of activism during the pandemic and on the complex dynamics that exist within public relations, activism, and power. It then presents the case study and the methodological procedures followed to answer the research question on how activist groups used digital tools and public relations techniques to organize the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021” in Portugal.

### **“Old” and “new” activism during the pandemic**

The so-called media revolution brought about by Web 2.0 created new tools and possibilities for activism and collective action. Citizens in many countries are seeking to make their voices heard online. Optimistic visions have emphasized that these new communication technologies have the potential to revitalize democracy because they allow greater interactivity as well as facilitating new forms of civic and political activism (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2012; Shirky, 2008). However, online activism has also been criticized for not being followed or complemented by offline forms of participation and has sometimes pejoratively been named *clicktivism* or *slacktivism* (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2009), supposedly fulfilling only the desire for instant self-satisfaction and having little or no impact on actual political processes and social dynamics. Although there is evidence that the use of social media for political expression is positively correlated with some forms of offline political participation, the need for more research on these mechanisms has been recognized (Mazak and Stetka, 2016).

However, it is inescapable that the mandatory confinements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which much of this research was carried out, call for up-to-date reflections on the concepts of the public sphere and participation in the public space. The

dematerialization of the physical solidarity that unites activists in the defense of causes—and society in general in the pursuit of better living conditions—has had repercussions for the opposition theorized by Hannah Arendt ([1958] 2001: 242–249) about the “foundation of the polis” and on the relations between the space that is common to citizens (koinon)—the public sphere of politics—and their own space (idion) or the domain of the house (oikos)—the private sphere.

The disintegration of life as people knew it as a result of the pandemic accentuated the deep social inequalities that already existed (United Nations, 2020) and highlighted consumption dynamics during quarantine periods, which allowed companies such as Amazon to achieve their highest profits and revenues ever, above analysts’ projections, in 2020 (Owens, 2020).

From an individual and collective point of view, this fragmentation of reality and human relationships in physical presence has revealed ambiguities regarding civic involvement. On the one hand, the alienation that had been creeping into this culture based on virtual interactions from the comfort of each person’s home was accentuated. Isolation “contradicted the essential human condition of plurality, the fact that men act and speak together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization” (Arendt ([1958] 2001: 253), stressing the impotence of individuals before an invisible tyrant. However, the television and the Internet, which were blamed by Robert Putnam (2000) for the “social atomization” that provides an empty version of the human connection, was all there was during the pandemic to keep people connected to the public sphere and to each other. This context of global uncertainty calls for even more attention to be paid to “socio-spatial variations in the use of social media that both localize and help bridge transnational activism” (Mercea, 2020: 1).

Struggles for women’s rights and gender equality (goal 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals/2030 Agenda) are an example of a new culture and collective identity of protest that produces a “sense of ‘imagined global community’, through which the experiences of different countries are contaminated and inspired” (Soeiro, 2014: 56). This varied cultural mixture inherent to the idea of globalization does not lead to homogenization—as can be seen from the diverse approaches and cleavages in contemporary feminism and women’s rights movements—but allows reflection on how

activists across the globe employ digital media to cooperate on universal causes through hybrid dynamic processes (local–global, offline–online and personal–social) (Pieterse, 2015).

Similar to the situation in other countries, in the last 10 years, digital media in Portugal have played a relevant role in the scope of activist struggles, protests and the mobilization and participation of citizens. The Internet has become an essential component of internal or external communication processes, communication strategies and identity construction of contemporary activist movements. However, in Portugal, there are also some tensions between “old” and “new” forms of activism. The “traditional representation of the ‘street’” persists in Portugal as the main place for activism and political and civic participation, with the digital environment representing a type of secondary extension of the ‘street’ that is useful for convening and organizing (Campos et al., 2016: 43–45).

Arruzza et al. (2019: 22–23) pointed out that, since the feminist strike movement began in Poland in October 2016, when more than 100,000 women marched against the illegalization of abortion in that country, the world has witnessed a new global feminist movement around International Women’s Day. The movement, which started in Poland, quickly spread to Italy, Brazil, Turkey, Chile, and dozens of other countries. Having started on the streets, it was widely exposed by media and online social networks and quickly invaded other places in societies, such as schools, workplaces, entertainment, media, and politics.

Despite the lack of significant mobilization of Portuguese citizens for causes other than those that have a direct impact on their income (Corrêa d’Almeida, 2019; Estanque, 2014) and largely influenced by international strike movements around International Women’s Day (March 8) and mainly by the 2018 feminist strike in Spain, the first feminist strike networked in Portugal, qualified by some mainstream media as “an unprecedented stoppage,” (Almeida, 2019) took place in 2019 in several cities in the country.

Looking “at the way in which global issues are transforming local and national activism” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: xiv), this article focuses on the analysis of the communication and mobilization strategies of Portuguese feminist grassroots movements and their campaign around the 2021 International Feminist Strike in Portugal. This event

happened in a context of prophylactic isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic with public life in the country taking place mainly through technological mediation.

### **Public relations, activism and power**

“Communication saves lives” is how the international professional and academic associations of public relations and communicators recently addressed the need for ethical and effective communications to handle the COVID-19 pandemic (EUPRERA, 2021). Communication is a complex process that has “always been about power and exclusion and that transformative potential has constantly faced obstacles” (Lee and Vargas, 2020: 6). “Communication enables meanings to be exchanged, makes people who and what they are and motivates them to act” (Lee and Vargas, 2020: 18), and it is the “lifeblood of society” (Lee and Vargas, 2020: 24), which is why communication is so important for social change and for achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

Social systems are communication systems, and the main forms of communication are money in the economic field, power in the political field, influence in the social community domain and attraction in the cultural domain. In this context, public relations emerge as an example of applied communication sciences, such as corporate communication, organizational communication and strategic communication, among other designations that, despite their differentiating specificities, share a common idea: that the combination of scientific knowledge and the development of experience through training can generate better results in inducing influence, attraction or commitment, that is, that strategic communication management exceeds spontaneous communication (Verčič, 2008). The notion of “soft power” originally appeared in the realm of international relations and means the ability to obtain what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). As influence, attraction and commitment are intrinsic constitutive functions of public relations, they represent a way of exercising “soft power” (Servaes, 2012; Verčič, 2008).

Nevertheless, several areas of strategic communication, for instance public relations (PR), an area of increasing global economic relevance (Guttmann, 2020), did not recognize activism-related activities as an integral part of discipline and practice for a long time (Dozier and Lauzen, 2000; Dutta, 2009). Public relations are still seen as the defender of

corporate and capitalist interests and consequently as being resistant to outside voices, such as activists, NGOs, union members, protesters and whistleblowers (Adi, 2020). This is due to the dominant historical frameworks, which are “firmly rooted in the concerns of US capitalism” (L’Etang, 2009: 84). With PR historical models based on the corporate subject, the critical school of PR, which includes authors such as Coombs and Holladay (2012a, b), Demetrious (2006, 2013), Edwards and Hodges (2011), L’Etang (2009, 2015) and O’Brien (2018, 2020), has “argued that PR literature has, until recently, shown a tendency to privilege the corporate voice and overlook or marginalize non-profit actors” (O’Brien, 2020: 44).

Ciszek (2017) analyzed a transnational activist network for LGBT rights in 15 countries/regions, concluding that activists are producers of strategic communication for social change and that activism and public relations are not antagonistic but occupy a fluid space influenced by cultural and economic forces. The research demonstrated how activists function as cultural intermediaries, playing a mediating role concerned with (re)producing and challenging established cultural meanings. Sebastião and Vila Verde (2018) confirmed the importance of public relations functions for the communicative action of protest groups even without being effectively developed by professionals in the field.

There is recognition that activists have historically used PR tools (O’Brien, 2020). Demetrious (2011: 1) defined activist public relations as:

a focused view of communication activity by politicized third sector groups such as social collectives, community action groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to foster their public legitimacy as voices for social change. (...) This voice consists of activists employing strategies, tactics, and especially worldviews to challenge dominant positions.

Activist PR includes protest and dissent, the first being punctual and emotional and the second being more strategic and long term. The distinction between the two depends on the tactics that activists use. In protest PR, tactical repertoires are based more on actions, such as die-ins, sit-ins, occupations, strikes, marches and rallies, while discussions, fairs, books and debates are more likely to be attributed to dissent PR (Adi, 2020: 9).

Social media are being used to shift the balance of power and function as tools of resistance (Veil et al., 2015). Activist publics are resorting to social media to empower themselves (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a, b), taking advantage of the potential of an unparalleled growing network environment in which new communication tools are being used and created by activist groups and PR practitioners worldwide.

According to USC Annenberg's 2020 Global Communication Report, a new generation of activists, motivated by the lack of trust in political institutions, will become increasingly influential in the coming years. The study also mentioned that these new activists use modern public relations tools to raise awareness of a broad spectrum of social and environmental issues. They tend to be younger, non-white, urban, female, well-educated and tech savvy. They are also more likely to organize voters online than to protest in public. Notably, they are open to cooperation with brands and their values often align with good and responsible business values.

The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z Survey<sup>6</sup> highlighted that “digital natives’ ability to connect, convene, and create disruption via their keyboards and smartphones has had global impact” (Deloitte Global, 2021: 1). On the one hand, the lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic limited the performance of activities by these groups, but this study suggested that the “pandemic, extreme climate events, and a charged sociopolitical atmosphere may have reinforced people’s passions and given them oxygen” (Deloitte Global, 2021: 1). These generations, involved in movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, marches on climate change and the Arab Spring, are demanding eco-friendly products and challenging stakeholder<sup>7</sup> capitalism, mobilizing themselves’ to achieve real change in society and business.

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<sup>6</sup> As defined in the study, millennials were born between January 1983 and December 1994 and members of Generation Z were born between January 1995 and December 2003.

<sup>7</sup> A stakeholder is “an individual or group who can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives or who is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives” (Freeman and Reed, 1983: 91).

## **Methodology: The public relations ethnographic approach**

Although it is not yet a frequently used methodology, ethnography has been described as a methodology that can introduce significant developments to public relations research, specifically within the range of sociocultural traditions (Everett and Johnston, 2012; L'Etang et al., 2012; Xifra, 2012). L'Etang (2006) claimed that placing research in public relations more broadly as “cultural and ideological practice involved in complex intercultural processes and away from technocratic concerns can help in developing an understanding of public relations work in international society and its relations with the world of life and the public sphere” (p. 393). When researchers aim to make descriptive inferences to illustrate the interactions between an organization’s culture and its social environment, ethnography has been presented as a methodological imperative in public relations (Everett and Johnston, 2012). In public relations research, ethnography explores how a group understands, adapts to and experiences its environment (Sutton and Anderson, 2004; Winthrop, 1991).

This study intended to articulate the empirical data with the existing theories about the phenomena under observation. It adopted the methodological imperative in public relations ethnographic research presented by Everett and Johnston (2012); thus, the study’s analytical approach was based on ethnographic immersion in the communication dynamics of UMAR and the social collectives that came together to organize and carry out the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021” (@grevefeminista.pt). It resorted to participant observation, interviews, informal conversations with activists, social media monitoring and analysis of documents, compiled in a field diary (a document in which all the interactions and information are noted daily). Through this process of data collection and analysis, the study aimed to answer the following research question: How did activist groups use digital tools and public relations techniques to organize the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021” in Portugal?

## **Case study**

### *Ethnographic immersion: UMAR*

UMAR is a nonprofit NGO based in Portugal; it was founded in 1976 after the Carnation Revolution of 1974, also known as the 25 April, which resulted in Portugal's transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy. UMAR today is an association dedicated to awakening feminist consciousness in Portuguese society. For 45 years, UMAR has managed to unite several generations of women, open spaces for intervention for younger women with a feminist agenda of “new” and “old” causes, such as the rights to contraception and abortion, the fight against domestic violence, parity in political decision-making structures and international involvement in initiatives such as the World March of Women (UMAR, 2021).

UMAR works within the scope of human rights and the UN 2030 Agenda, namely on the fifth objective: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. UMAR's activity highlights the territories where third-sector organizations mix with social movements (Ferreira, 2004). UMAR's fieldwork includes involvement with women in their major concerns and social struggles but is also a way to build feminist daily lives and cultures, valuing the diversity of women's ways of understanding life and the world. In this way, the construction of the feminist agency is articulated with cultural activity, organizing events of a public nature, including pressure, denunciation, proposals, contests, protests and tributes as well as parties, gatherings, concerts, poetry sessions and so on (UMAR, 2021).

### **Data sampling and sources**

Within ethnography, the amount of time that a researcher should spend in the field has not been established, but some authors have defined a period from 3 months to 2 years depending on the research design (Everett and Johnston, 2012; Fetterman, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This study's data were collected over 6 months—January to June 2021—by the author as part of her doctoral study. The methods used for data collection were adapted to the organization's reality and the interviewees, considering the confinement and restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic during

the observation period. UMAR's teams and the interviewees worked from home, communicating through videoconferences on platforms like Zoom. UMAR does not have a formal communication team. Communication is handled more or less spontaneously by people from different nuclei. One person, who has no training in communication, has assumed this responsibility with regard to managing online social media (Facebook and Instagram) and media relations.

In this sense, the field diary was fed through online meetings and conversations with these persons, and the monitoring of UMAR's actions was undertaken via Facebook and Instagram and by attending online events, like live talks and conferences on different topics. Following the study by Everett and Johnston (2012), a qualitative method for data collection was used based on "participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying materials prepared by others (examining)" (Wolcott, 2009: 10), paying attention to the details in the expressions of culture framed in their context (Ybema et al., 2009).

Ethical considerations, mainly related to managing the observer-participant relationship, need to be addressed during all the stages of ethnographic research (Fetterman, 1998). The study addressed this issue by making the researcher's role explicit throughout all the interactions, asking for permission to record the conversations, quoting the people involved and reproducing these interactions for academic purposes. The researcher's role and the investigation's objectives were explained in the document of informed, clarified and free consent to participate in the study signed by Manuela Tavares and Sara Anselmo, members of the association's Board of Directors.

### **Data analysis and reduction**

Through ethnographic immersion and interviews, a very high volume of data was obtained, and that required a careful process of meaning unit selection. Converting data through description, analysis and interpretation is not a linear process in ethnographic approaches (Wolcott, 2009). In the first stage of description, fieldwork observation data were documented in the field diary, and all the recorded interviews were transcribed as they were undertaken (Baszanger and Dodier, 2004).

To select the information relevant to this study from the ethnographic approach to UMAR, two main selection criteria/categories (obtained from the literature review) were used: a) *principles of social mobilization*, according to the behavioral principles of social mobilization and associated strategies proposed by Rogers et al. (2018: 360–361); and b) *the potential of public relations for social change* (Daymon and Demetrious, 2013).

## **Findings**

### *Principles of social mobilization*

Rogers et al. (2018: 360) organized the behavioral principles of social mobilization into five intervention elements that have proven to be robust in the behavioral literature: 1) personal—social mobilization efforts tend to be more effective when they involve personalized interactions and relationships; 2) accountable—social mobilization efforts tend to be more effective when reputation-relevant behavior is observable by others; 3) normative—social mobilization efforts tend to be more effective when they convey what people with more responsibility and influence do or should do; 4) identity relevant—social mobilization efforts tend to be most effective when they align behaviors with the ways in which people actually see themselves or would like to see themselves; and 5) connected—social mobilization efforts tend to be more effective when they promote the structure of networks of relationships between people and with the platforms that maintain these networks.

The application of these principles by the activists who organized the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021” in Portugal were analyzed, and the results obtained are presented below.

#### **1) Personal**

Two activists explained that the impact of the pandemic and confinement on the intervention of collectives was felt at two levels: “First, an impact in practical terms on the organization of the Feminist Strike itself. Due to the confinement, it was necessary to adapt the conversations to digital format. However, it also seems that this format allows us to reach people from all geographical areas of Portugal. On the other hand, the biggest

impact is related to the impossibility of celebrating the 8th of March with a large protest march, as in previous years. This will be our main challenge, to mobilize society.”

On February 17, 2021, on its Facebook<sup>8</sup> and Instagram<sup>9</sup> pages, UMAR launched the #grevefeminista2021 campaign within the scope of the celebration of International Women’s Day at #8march2021 (Figure 1), with the following post:

March 8th join the International Feminist Strike! We are collectives and associations of intersectional feminism and believe that exploited and oppressed people are the protagonists of their own causes, lives, and experiences.

We defend a society free from oppression, which guarantees rights, equality, equity, and social justice. A democratic society with a State capable of guaranteeing that access to health, education, labor rights, housing, security, and self-determination is truly universal.

In these posts (which are partially transcribed), these activists explain what they understand when they talk about the struggles of women, meaning people who live or have lived through the same oppression, whether they are women (trans- or cisgender), trans men or non-binary people.

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<sup>8</sup> Facebook @UMARfeminismos. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/UMARfeminismos/>.

<sup>9</sup> Instagram umar\_feminismos. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/umar\\_feminismos/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/umar_feminismos/?hl=en).



Figure 1. Digital flyer calling for the Feminist Strike of March 8, 2021

The visual reference was intended to be inclusive and represent the diversity of people whose rights this coordinated strike aimed to defend.

## 2) Accountable

A cycle of feminist conversations was organized (Figure 2). Five online events were held on different dates to which various personalities of Portuguese public life, academics, politicians, activists (who shared stories in the first person) and other public figures were invited to legitimize and give credibility to the message of these activist groups.



Figure 2. Digital flyer of activities in anticipation of the Feminist Strike of March 8, 2021

### 3) Normative

The events and meetings in preparation for the 2021 International Feminist Strike continued to take place online (during the weeks between February 17 and March 8, 2021), organized by several UMAR nuclei and other collectives in different locations in the country, such as Madeira, Porto, Braga and Coimbra. There was plentiful advice about how people can protect themselves and others, keep themselves safe and healthy and still take part in this week of female resistance. As Rogers et al. (2018: 360) explained: “reminding people of shared values and beliefs about how the group expects them to behave can enhance mobilization efforts.”

These events involved a considerable amount of sharing of personal stories in an attempt to give voice to experiences and realities that are different from those that are taken as social norms; to that extent, these activists sought to “disclose behaviors (and their benefits) performed by others who are similar to or act in similar contexts to those targeted at behavior change” (Rogers et al., 2018: 360). However, the observation that only people who are already aware of and sensitive to these issues participate and follow these events

cannot be avoided. The big challenge for these activists is to spread the feminist message to other people outside of their network.

#### **4) Identity relevant**

The researcher participated in several activities and online events that anticipated the Feminist Strike. They were organized by various collectives that assumed the role of partners in feminist struggles, which, in turn, included causes such as fighting racism, xenophobia and homophobia, always in a logic of resistance from the oppressed (these activists and the people whom they represent) to the oppressive people, groups and/or institutions that perpetuate views and behaviors based on these biases. From the point of view of identity theory, this mobilization, which brings together different people and organizations, arises in the context of identity as a culture, which includes the concepts of identity and ethnicity (Carter, 2009).

One of the activists interviewed explained that “The pandemic has increased, or just made more visible, the need for care—whether in an institutional or domestic context. In the provision of formal care, the inequality between men and women is striking” and reinforced this by stating that “I hope that sharing my story as an informal caregiver who faces many difficulties will serve to give a voice to others in similar circumstances.”

#### **5) Connected**

Inspired by the initiatives of other national and international activist groups, this collective platform sought to apply creative ways to attract and involve more people actively in this strike (Harrebye, 2016). They created a document (which was also sent to the press) in which they selected 13 political and social demands as the priority for this strike. They also invited people to participate in a hybrid way between offline and online, that is, between physical and virtual<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> UMAR (2021) 8 de março | Juntas com a força das nossas reivindicações! [March 8th | Together with the strength of our claims!]. March 2. Available at: <http://www.umarfeminismos.org/index.php/component/content/article/15-noticias-e-comunicados/1158-2021-03-05-16-01-12>.

UMAR calls for a demand mobilization on social networks, which echoes these and other feminist protests for this 8th of March.

Embodying the slogan “if women stop, the world stops”, we appeal to the participation of the #SeEuParar campaign—free and spontaneous dissemination of a short video that explains “If I stop ... (what remains to be done)?”—which aims to enhance collective awareness of the productive and reproductive work carried out by women and create a feminist tide that will bring together all the activities that will take place on March 8th. Together, for freedom, with the strength of our demands!

On March 7, the “Manifestation Kit” (Figure 3) was launched on UMAR’s Facebook and Instagram pages:

We want everyone to know that the Feminist Strike is built collectively and with everyone. There is no correct way to show our struggle, so add yours to our voice and let’s show what the feminist movement is all about!

Participate, share, and scream!

Scream loudly for you, for us and for those who have no voice!

#grevefeminista2021#8marco2021#senosparamosomundopara

#grevefeministainternacional”<sup>11</sup>



Figure 3. Demonstration Kit—how to participate online at @grevefeminista.pt in the scope of the #IfWeStopTheWorldStops international campaign (UMAR, Facebook, March 7, 2021)

<sup>11</sup> Hashtags based on the international/global message alignment for the Feminist Strike 2021: #feministstrike2021; #8march2021; #IfWeStopTheWorldStops; #internationalfeministstrike.

The language used is informal and calls for unlimited creative online performances, such as: “take a photo with your poster and share it on social media; watch and share the live broadcast, put messages on windows and balconies, make a video dancing and singing and share it on social media.” Posts on social networks fundamentally focused on the appeal for online participation in the feminist strike, on sharing data from studies on the violence that still prevails against women and on paying tribute to inspiring figures such as Brazilian Marielle Franco, feminist and human rights defender, who was murdered three years ago.

UMAR and the feminist strike organization called on Facebook users to adopt a framework that expresses their support for this cause of the feminist strike (this is a frequent tool that activists, in the most diverse contexts, use to gather public support to their causes): “Join us and use this frame as a form of protest: if we stop, the world stops!” A feminist strike and online demonstration website was created—grevefeminista.pt—(Figure 4) that mixed English with Portuguese text.

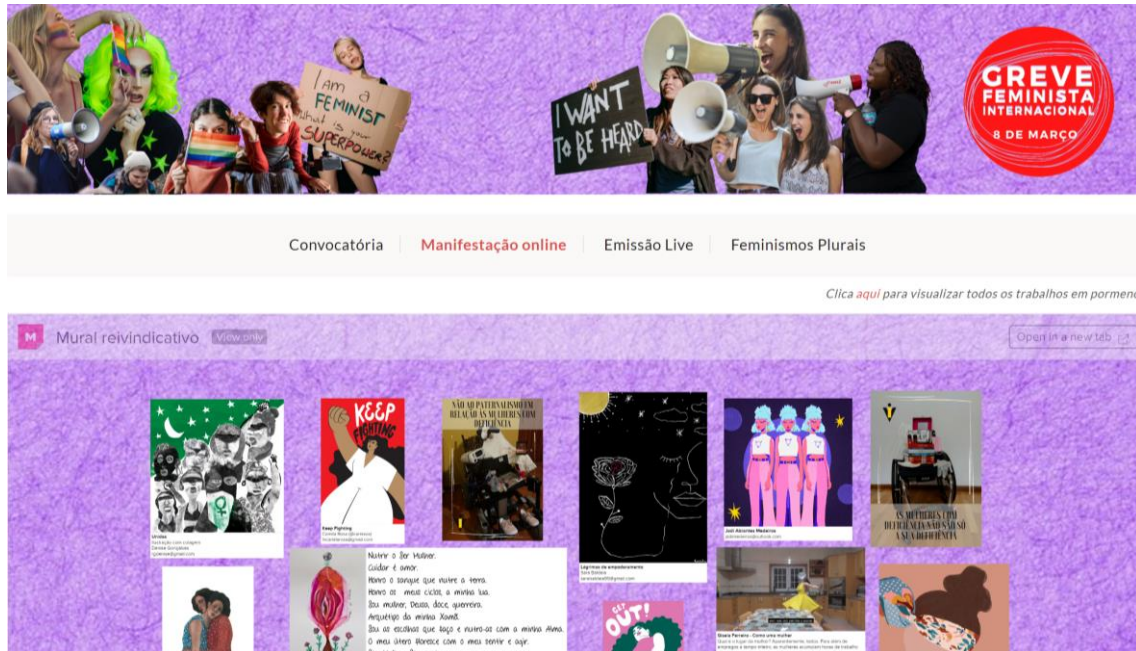


Figure 4. Screen print of the entrance page to the @grevefeminista.pt website (March 8, 2021)

It is a young and rebellious space, which exemplifies well the context of online activism and its possibilities, with a mural of a claim imitating a street wall painting, sharing

creative artistic works as a way to stimulate imagination and participation. In the tab “Plural Feminisms,” a series of texts “On the way to March 8” can be read.

### *The potential of public relations for social change*

According to Daymon and Demetrious (2013), the emancipatory, subversive and transformative potential of public relations for social change can be observed in different ways, as described below.

#### **1) Production of social meanings and their interference in power relations**

Due to the impossibility of holding demonstrations in the streets, these activists used the pandemic itself to frame the need to carry out the strike online and to mobilize support and awareness:

We can highlight the impact of the pandemic on the feminist struggle itself. The so-called front line in Portugal is composed mostly of female health assistants (92%), nurses (82%), physicians (55%) and caregivers (80%). However, women’s work remains less recognized than that of men. In these times of pandemic, several of the sectors most affected by the restrictions are mostly made up of women, such as the cleaning sector, hairdressers and beauticians (composed of 90% women) and counter service and commerce (comprised of 64% women).<sup>12</sup>

During the online anticipation events, there were also references to and explanations of the “interconnections that exist between the domination of women and the domination of nature,” which are generating serious problems related to climate change. Regarding this activist interference with power relations, on March 3, 2021, UMAR criticized the Business Confederation of Portugal (CIP) on its Facebook page (Figure 5): “CIP will hold on March 8th ‘a digital conference where the stage will be for men.’”

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<sup>12</sup> Esquerda.net (2021) Greve Feminista: “Queremos multiplicar vozes e construir pontes na sociedade” [Feminist Strike: “We want to multiply voices and build bridges in society”]. February 23. Available at: <https://www.esquerda.net/artigo/greve-feminista-queremos-multiplicar-vozes-e-construir-pontes-na-sociedade/72975> (Accessed: 30 August 2021).



Figure 5. Image used to criticize the CIP event for having only male speakers talking about Women's Day (UMAR, Facebook, March 3, 2021)

This episode generated protests on social networks with reactions from political leaders and other public figures, who accused the confederation of “sexism.” The president of the CIP then reported to traditional media that the organization had a “good intention poorly communicated (Sousa Dantas, 2021).”

## 2) Development of advocacy and activism campaigns for social and political change

This campaign was planned by and coordinated between several Portuguese collectives in advance; that is, it is clear that, even in a pandemic, there was careful planning of communication actions. The pandemic crisis required creativity and many online actions, but, even so, the protest of the “International Feminist Strike 2021” campaign also had expression in the public space, with representations in the streets of different cities respecting the constraints imposed by the pandemic (Figure 6).



Figure 6. UMAR activists on the streets of Porto, Viseu, Lisbon and Almada, March 8, 2021 (from right to left, top to bottom)

These offline expressions then circulated on social media platforms as an example of the type of public intervention that could be undertaken during a pandemic. The posters used inspiring quotes from national and international feminists, such as: “There are still many voices to be heard” by Maria Gil; “Let nothing limit us, let nothing define us, let nothing hold us. Let freedom be our own substance” by Simone de Beauvoir; “I am not free while any woman is unfree” by Audré Lorde and “Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women” by Maya Angelou.

### 3) Negotiation of cultural identities and practices

During the preparation of this strike, there were conflicts between groups of feminists in Portugal. For example, as one activist explained to us, there were groups of feminist abolitionists of sex work that excluded these people (sex workers) from their claims. UMAR and the collectives that organized this strike publicly took a stand as defenders of the rights of sex workers as well. From the standpoint of identity, the activists of this platform publicly assumed that they are “radically inclusive.” In addition, the fact that the concept of “woman” has been redefined to include trans men and non-binary people is illustrative of the type of negotiation of cultural practices and identities.

When analyzing the texts on the @grevefeminista.pt website, it was possible to see that language adaptations had been made to become truly inclusive in relation to social representations of sex and gender between trans and non-normative people. However, from the point of view of communication, this type of content communicates only within the community. There is no way to allow an inclusive content style for people outside the community. For example, there is no explanation of what the concept of “cisheteropatriarchal system”<sup>13</sup> means, and no bibliographical or other references to clarify it could be found. This type of content does not reveal the necessary empathy and real effort to simplify the language used to communicate and involve wider audiences (Grunig and Repper, 1992), which are unaware of these realities, but which may even have a tendency or predisposition to empathize and engage with the causes.

#### **4) Reputation management and political and media communication**

On March 2, 2021, UMAR issued a press release with the headline “13 claims—on a different March 8.” According to the best practices identified in the literature (Kopplin and Ferraretto, 2001; Ribeiro, 2014), the content of this press release contained several weaknesses in terms of formality and organization. Taking into account what respondents share about media relations processes, some dimensions of relationship building with journalists could be managed better through a professionalized approach to public relations. These activists rarely frame their content as human rights issues, as foreseen in the 2030 Agenda. In the attached two-page document sent to the press, the term “human rights” was never mentioned. This observation prompts reflection on the role that activists themselves have, or may have, in supporting the media framing of these claims as human rights issues within the 2030 Agenda. This agenda also exists to legitimize activists’ messages and encourage dialogue and the creation of bridges and common aspirations.

Even so, this platform of collectives of activists was considered to be a credible source of information for journalists with the publication of news in the mainstream media about the strike with the following transnational framework: “The International Feminist Strike platform, which brings together collectives and associations of intersectional feminism,

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<sup>13</sup> Cisheteropatriarchy is “an ideological system that naturalizes normative views of what it means to ‘look’ and ‘act’ like a ‘straight’ man and marginalizes women, femininity, and all gender non-conforming bodies that challenge the gender binary” (Alim et al., 2020).

called for Monday, International Women’s Day, the 2021 International Feminist Strike (...) The platform will be live at 4:30 pm, from two squares in Lisbon and Porto, and calls for participation in the online demonstration.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This case study contributes to the practical and theoretical understanding of the role of public relations in transnational dimensions in digital activism and protests during the COVID-19 pandemic. It allows reflection on the role of digital strategic communication in the present media ecosystem, enabling civic mobilization and leveraging the public legitimacy of social justice causes. Despite the obstacles to face-to-face communication during the confinement, because of the digital platforms, these activists managed to engage new people with their messages and activities.

The study also fits the description of activist PR as it features both spontaneous activities (protests) and long-term, planned ones (dissent) addressing multiple stakeholders (Adi, 2020). It was possible to observe how activist groups used digital tools and public relations techniques to create the “Online Demonstration of the International Feminist Strike 2021” in Portugal. UMAR and the collectives of intersectional feminism that organized this protest resorted to social media storytelling strategies that considered digital platforms as bridges between their online and their offline representation. It was possible to observe the coordination efforts among the participants that can improve social bonds and collective identities, making social mobilization efforts more effective (Rogers et al., 2018: 360).

The communication and PR tools used in this campaign confirmed Adi’s perspective that “both professional communicators and activists use similar tolls: from stakeholder analysis to media outreach” (Adi, 2020: 10). These activists clearly identified their priorities and political demands, inviting people to participate in a hybrid way between offline and online, that is, between physical and virtual actions. The research also described activists as producers of social meanings, interfering in the power relations that are generated in the public space online and offline, confirming Daymon and

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<sup>14</sup> TVI 24 (2021) Greve feminista internacional convocada para dia 8 de março. March 4. Available at: <https://tvi24.iol.pt/sociedade/feminismo/greve-feminista-internacional-convocada-para-dia-8-de-marco>.

Demetrious's (2013) perspectives about the emancipatory, subversive and transformative potential of public relations for social change.

However, the attempts of these activist collectives of intersectional feminism to adapt the language to include a greater diversity of identities often makes their communication efforts inaccessible to wider audiences. Public relations tools can support them in the processes of simplifying and clarifying their language and symbols so that more people can understand and empathize with their struggles for social justice.

Although journalists have recognized the efforts of these civil society organizations, it is a big challenge for this groups to place critical issues in the mainstream media, mainly because pandemic-related issues and stories dominate the agenda. This is yet another aspect in which public relations for social change can help activist groups to navigate the multiple dimensions that characterize their interaction with the media that they use at different times and for different purposes (Mattoni and Treré, 2014).

Rather than merely obtaining data that allow generalizable inferences, this case study intended to paint an accurate picture of the reality of how the pandemic situation of social crisis has affected the work of intercultural mediators, such as civil society activist groups, in their various spheres of action, allowing the researchers to observe and document how transnational activism is being shaped by digital action. The results show the practical application of the two main selection criteria obtained from the literature review regarding the principles of social mobilization and the potential of public relations for social change, strengthening the theory's validity.

These reflections also allow a claim for a broader role for public relations in society as a way to engage with human rights advocates. This understanding of PR is one that considers "protest and counter-protest movements from the perspective of their social context; it looks at concepts of PR as evolving from modernist, excellent models, to critical, postmodern positions, and towards a meta modern idea of strategic communication" that supports and drives organizational objectives by enabling stakeholder relationships in an increasingly complex and uncertainty environment (Stoeckle, 2020: 279).

Therefore, more research is still needed on how public relations for social change can support activist groups advocating for human rights such as gender equality. How can working in the field of public relations for social change become a more attractive career option for future communication professionals? How can activist organizations sophisticate their PR strategies and tools? How can strategic PR efforts and quality press coverage enable activist non-profit organizations to increase their fundraising? Answers to these questions will hopefully be found in future research on how transnational activists use modern public relations tools to raise awareness of human rights and social justice issues and to increase mobilization for social change.

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