

# An unspoken truth: faculty (in)equity in the context of invisible violence: virtual exchange case studies

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## Abstract

International Virtual Exchange (VE) can be a valuable addition to the AIDE (Access, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity) toolbox, particularly at higher education institutions in the Global North. However, an interesting dynamic emerged in certain partnerships created by faculty from Venezuela, Yemen, and the USA. With benefits to the students rightly being the main goal of the exchange, the issue of faculty inequity, created by the forces of invisible violence in the Global South participants' societies, was brought to light only much later. The inconvenient truth is that traditional power structures and invisible privileges can easily color a VE, particularly when faculty from the Global North are not fully cognizant of the sociopolitical realities being experienced by their partners in the Global South. The solutions should go beyond practicing cultural humility. VEs should be grounded in the ethical responsibility of honoring the human capital that *both* partners bring to the partnership.

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**Keywords:** global education; international partnerships; virtual exchange; equity; faculty.

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**How to cite this article:** Jiménez Figarotti, J. L., Subbarao, S., & Bagatelia, E. (2022). An unspoken truth: faculty (in)equity in the context of invisible violence: virtual exchange case studies. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 5(SI-IVEC2021), 42-53. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.38199>

## 1. Introduction

VE is increasingly being viewed as a tool to promote not just intercultural learning but also AIDE among students in higher education in the US. Prior to the pandemic, the number of US students studying abroad during their undergraduate career seemed to be discouragingly stagnant at under ten percent (IIE, 2019), and in 2019-2020 numbers of students studying abroad declined by 53% (NAFSA, 2020). VE thus offers an exciting alternative to expose many more students to global experiences, albeit at a distance. According to the Open Doors Report (IIE, 2021), 45% of US institutions are pivoting to offering online global learning experiences.

An interesting dynamic emerged in some recent VEs set up by participating faculty from a university in Caracas, Venezuela, a community college in Michigan, US, and a university in Yemen. The participating faculty, American and foreign, all focused rightly on the benefits they could bring to their students. However, what almost got lost behind the professionalism of the Global South instructors was the fact that while striving to bring an equitable opportunity to their students, they themselves in many cases struggled with severe inequities in their own society, and even in the supposedly-neutral ‘third space’ offered by the VE, these inequities persisted but were not acknowledged.

It is widely accepted that an equitable VE partnership must navigate several differences – in time zones, culture, language, technology access, and assessment practices. It is also acknowledged that “uneven global positioning” (Ramaswamy et al., 2021, p. 389), and “unequal North/South power differentials and global-local dynamics” (Milton, 2020, p. 105) can distort the internationalization of higher education. The current literature on equity in VEs cautions that project design, particularly in global health, must reflect ‘ethical responsibilities’ and ‘mutual and equitable benefits’ with ‘bi-directional programming’ suggested as a way of erasing any disjunction between those who are perceived to give and those who are perceived to receive (Bowen et al., 2021). Satar and Hauck (in press) promise to go further in their upcoming publication in asserting that “equity in digital space is multifaceted and includes intercultural equity, participatory and relational equity, and semiotic equity to name but a few of its dimensions” (quoted in Satar, 2021, p. 11). Best practices regarding creating equity in global and local community engagement projects center around “equitable access to decision-making processes [and] resources” (Blostein, 2020, p. 10) and embracing ‘cultural humility’ (Virtual Exchange Coalition, 2020).

However, even when the presence of “context-specific factors” (Healy & Kennedy, 2020, p. 131) or “the realities a partner teacher is facing” (Sylla, 2021, n.p.) are mentioned, the notion of the ‘equity iceberg’ in VE seems to focus mostly on the partnership logistics. Even when the possibility of ‘traditional power dynamics’ interfering in a VE is addressed, the discussion focuses largely on

institution-level or student-level solutions (Kastler & Lewis, 2021). The current pandemic seems to be bringing greater attention to global inequities, which, it is hoped, will result in VEs designed to function in “an equitable, accessible, and just way” (Stevens Initiative, 2021, p. 13).

Nonetheless, most attempts to foster equity in VEs seem to typically focus only on students. But what about equity between participating faculty when they are from the Global North and the Global South? It is assumed that access to technology or facilities with the language of exchange is the only barrier. Unfortunately, this notion of equity does not seem to extend to those other unspoken-of differences and inequities caused by economic or political stress in the Global South. For instance, several of the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a popular thematic focus for a VE. However, designing a project around them could be ironic when the instructor from the Global North is oblivious to the fact that their Global South partner could, at the same time, be victim to the very conditions that the UN is determined to address. Like good instructors everywhere, the Global South instructors, too, strive for the betterment of their students – but they often do so while struggling in their own lives. For them, the very act of teaching could be activism, a fact sadly overlooked or unrevealed when a VE partnership is being set up. The unspoken-of issue of faculty inequity in VEs deserves further exploration, and the questions below are offered as starting points.

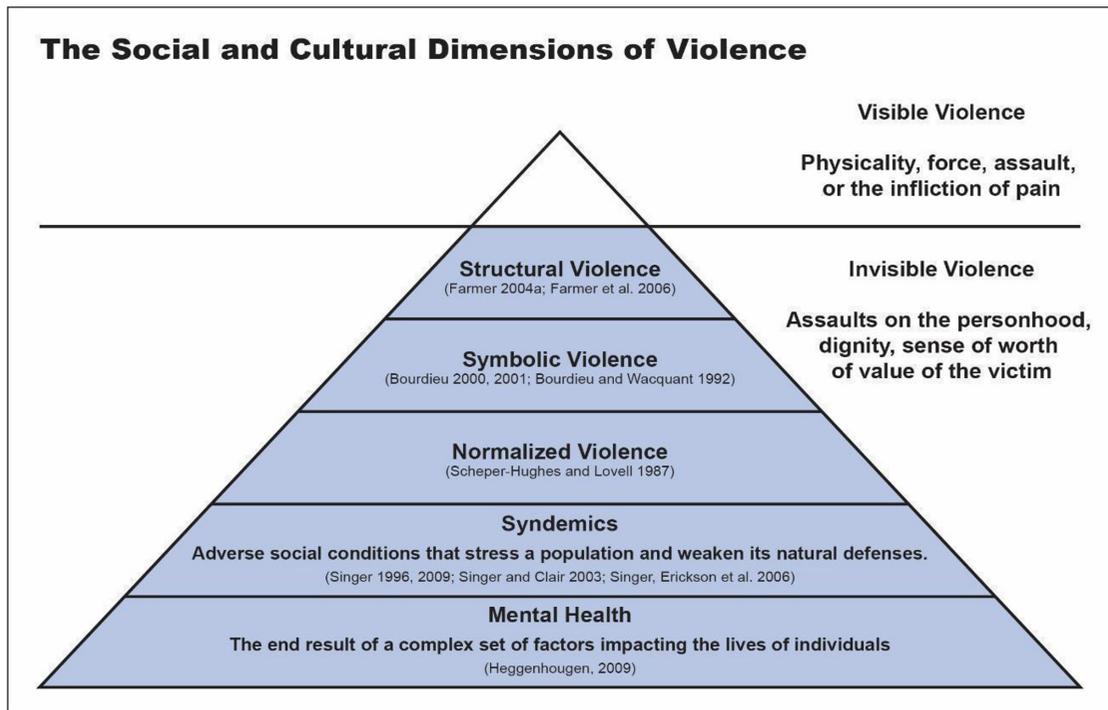
- Are Global North faculty fully cognizant of the sociopolitical realities being experienced by their partners in the Global South?
- Is the bar set so high with Global North standards and expectations that our Global South partners are feeling uncomfortable sharing their actual reality?
- How can VE partnerships add equity, meaning, and support for *both* students and faculty?

## **2. The social and cultural dimensions of violence and their potential effect on an educator’s disposition to teach**

A brief examination of the nature of invisible violence will help in gaining a broader understanding of the social conditions in which a Global South instructor might be living and working. Revolutionary violence, community-based massacres, and state repression are often painfully graphic and transparent (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). However, as shown in Figure 1, this is just the tip of the iceberg. The everyday violence – of infant mortality, slow starvation, disease, despair, and humiliation that destroys socially-marginalized humans with even greater frequency – is usually invisible or misrecognized (Scheper-Hughes, 1996; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Philippe Bourgois argues that the continuum of violence is closely related to the unequal distribution of

resources and classifies it into three main categories: structural violence, symbolic violence, and normalized violence (Rylko-Bauer, Whiteford, & Farmer, 2009).

**Figure 1. The social and cultural dimensions of violence**



Despite its invisibility, ‘structural violence’ is shaped by identifiable institutions, relationships, force fields, and ideologies, such as discriminatory laws, gender inequity, and racism (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2009). Paul Farmer, an eloquent proponent of focusing on structural violence in anthropology and social medicine, “emphasize[d] the way historically engrained, large-scale, political-economic forces wreak havoc on the bodies of the socially vulnerable” (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2009, p. 9). Structural violence manifests visibly in health disparities across class, ethnicity, and citizenship status (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2009). The global healthcare disparities, currently exacerbated by the pandemic, might seem irrelevant to a VE, particularly not one focused on healthcare, but they could well be impacting the participation of students *and instructors* from the Global South.

The concept of ‘symbolic violence’ was initially developed by Pierre Bourdieu and refers to the way the socially dominated naturalize the status quo and blame themselves for the domination, thereby

rendering it legitimate ( Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu et al., 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Symbolic violence exists, for example, when individuals internalize stigmatization or blame themselves for being poor. In a VE between the Global North and the Global South, participants from the latter might feel that because they are resource-strapped, they cannot lead the design and execution of the collaborative project.

The third kind of violence, ‘normalized violence’, as Bourgois describes it, is adapted from Scheper-Hughes’s earlier concept of everyday violence, and was inspired by Franco Basaglia’s critique of the indifference to institutionalized brutalities (Scheper-Hughes & Lovell, 1987). The prevalence of brutality and human rights violations, according to Bourgois, creates a ‘space of death’ that normalizes murder and torture and silences opposition (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2009; Taussig, 1984). In creating a VE with a partner from a country where human rights violations are said to exist, how should instructors proceed?

### 3. Case studies

The question of faculty inequity arose in debriefing after 18 successful VEs created at the university in Venezuela, with Global North in the fall of 2021, and two VEs created at the college in the US, with two universities in Yemen in the fall of 2019 and the winter of 2020.

#### 3.1. Experiences of VE partnerships and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) coordination in Venezuela

Venezuela ranks as the poorest country and the second most unequal in Latin America and the Caribbean. Repression by government forces in Venezuela occurs daily and is recognized by international organizations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in March 2021 that “extrajudicial executions are frequent in the context of security operations” (Bachelet, 2021, p. 1). In addition to such overt violence, the forces of invisible violence are very much in play. Multidimensional poverty (related to indicators such as education, the standard of living, employment, public services, and housing) affects 64.8% of households and grew by 13.8% between 2018 and 2019 (ENCOVI, 2019-2020). Additionally, almost 1,000 deaths have occurred in the country due to a lack of antimalarial drugs (OAS General Secretariat, 2020). The price of the food basket is estimated to have increased by 1,800% over the last year, leaving almost a third of Venezuelans food insecure (Bachelet, 2021). When the variables of political instability, GDP, and extreme poverty are put together, Venezuela places second in a list of 12 distressed countries worldwide (ENCOVI, 2019-2020).

VE educators in Venezuela, committed to training global citizens, are aware of their responsibility as agents of social change. For them, VE affords students the opportunity to transform knowledge into action and grow as leaders committed to promoting civic engagement, democratic values, human rights, and environmental awareness. But what happens when these educators themselves struggle to meet even minimum basic needs of not just food, water, clothing, and shelter, but also sanitation, security, education, and healthcare?

The Survey of the Observatory of Universities on the Living Conditions of the University Population in Venezuela (Enobu, 2021) offers a panoramic view of how the university sector has been greatly impacted by economic shortages and the humanitarian crisis amid the historical indifference of the government toward education. In 2001, a full professor could earn up to \$2,456.12 a month. Twenty years later, the maximum she/he can aspire to is \$11.14 a month. An associate professor's situation is much worse: full-time she/he can earn a salary of \$5.65 a month (Enobu, 2021). Such conditions have led to the resignation and mass migration of academics, and seven out of ten of those remaining have been forced to seek supplemental employment (Enobu, 2021). Despite this, the teachers' monthly family income does not cover adequate food. Three out of ten families have a monthly income of between one and ten dollars (Enobu, 2021).

Despite the deterioration of their working conditions, personal finances, and even their physical and emotional health, Venezuelan professors are still finding spaces of activism through new pedagogical strategies such as VE. In 2018, the Office of Global Affairs of the System of Universities and Colleges of the State of New York (SUNY Central) began an integration project with six of the most prestigious universities and over 60 faculty in Venezuela, to promote international collaboration and establish inter-institutional internationalization strategies to support Venezuelan higher education through the COIL methodology. In-person training was set to take place in Cuernavaca, Mexico. However, the Venezuelan regime was heavily restricting the free travel of citizens. By the time the training started in the spring of 2019, the Venezuelan professor was not able to enter Mexico even though his partner from a US university was already there.

As a result, the two professors trained together virtually, using WhatsApp and cell phone data to develop their COIL instructional design. In the fall of 2019, both partners implemented their first COIL module entitled 'Popular culture and contemporary media' which became a model of good practices for the establishment of future VE experiences in Venezuela.

During the implementation, the project participants faced many challenges such as poor internet connectivity in Venezuela, which sometimes resulted in communication failures. Venezuelan students missed some meetings and could not always promptly send and receive messages. Also,

while according to the participants Spanish was spoken and understood by almost all students, participation by the American students dwindled. Disagreements relating to “cultural and generational differences, varying levels of commitment, and surprisingly, divergent perceptions regarding popular culture” were also observed (Ruiz, Hernández, García, & Chacón, 2021, p. 133).

Despite these limitations, the project demonstrated that regardless of the apparently adverse circumstances, internationally shared academic objectives can be achieved when working with a clear and flexible plan of action and upholding the values of responsibility, commitment, yearning to learn from other cultures, and resilience. Some Venezuelan students even remarked that the project “promoted student leadership and proactivity” (Ruiz et al., 2021, p. 138).

It was also found that the project’s focus on popular culture worked exceptionally well as a reflective base for a dynamic multicultural experience. It helped students represent their everyday realities and build empathy and cross-cultural understanding through written reflections, interviews, and joint final projects in the form of documentaries that included samples of life in the two cultural contexts. Though small in scale, these efforts helped students to discover new ground within their cultural contexts and actively create a shared ‘third’ culture of collaboration (Jiménez & Kressner, 2021).

This promising beginning led to the establishment, in 2020, of the COIL Project Coordination Office at the Venezuelan university to design, manage, promote, disseminate, and monitor comprehensive internationalization processes in the context of the university’s mission. It trains faculty to help students become interculturally competent professionals, capable of performing successfully in globalized, multicultural, and highly competitive environments.

In all, however, the project did not develop as originally planned. Due to the harsh conditions in the country, only three of the 60 Venezuelan faculty who were initially interested have continued with COIL, and only one of the three institutions which originally signed on has created a COIL coordination office. Most of the Venezuelan universities were not able to keep up with the technology requirements that COIL entails, and faculty were overwhelmed by their deteriorating working conditions.

### **3.2. VE partnership with Yemen**

Ranking first in the Fragile States Index for the past three years, Yemen is one of the Arab world’s poorest countries (The Fund for Peace, n.d.). The armed conflict that has escalated in Yemen since 2015 has not only led to the “world’s worst man-made humanitarian disaster” (Yemen, 2018) but

also to a “prolonged sense of fear and horror among citizens” (Muthanna & Sang, 2018, p. 301). An estimated 4,400,000 Yemenis are internally displaced. Recent assessments place nearly 50,000 Yemenis in famine-like conditions. Almost 21 million people (more than 66 % of the population) require humanitarian aid and protection (UNICEF Report, 2021). Education at all levels is suffering, with explosions destroying buildings or disrupting routines, the content of research and instruction often subject to political interference, and teachers even being threatened with physical violence (Muthanna & Sang, 2018, p. 302).

And yet, in the 2019-2020 academic year, small-scale VE partnerships were created between students from Yemen partnered with students at the community college in the US. The exchange was proposed by the community college instructor to enrich her Academic Literacy students’ understanding of the setting of the book they were required to read – Dave Eggers’ *The Monk of Mokha*. The instructor simply ‘cold-called’ instructors of English in Yemeni universities, and found two willing partners. The instructors then collaborated to set up a simple VE, with the goal of gaining mutual cultural understanding. Students were given a list of ten perceived values of their respective cultures (values such as self-reliance/parental authority, competition/compromise, etc.) and asked to share what to them was the most important value of their culture. Classroom space was set up on the platform Linkr for students to share their writing and images (a particularly lively discussion grew around the topic of gun culture, with Yemen being only second to the United States in the number of guns owned by residents!). The design of the VE was kept deliberately simple, to accommodate the technology and time constraints that both groups of students were expected to experience.

While the participating students from both groups gained some cultural awareness, more gains seemed to be made by the American students simply because they briefly encountered a culture they otherwise would not have explored. One Yemeni student observed privately to the instructors that their American counterparts did not seem to care, even though all the students dutifully made the required postings during the collaboration. As for the faculty angle, it was simply assumed by the American instructor that the Yemeni faculty would participate once the exchange logistics were ironed out. This instructor’s own experience living and working in the Global South led her to plan for slow internet connections, frequent power outages, the difficulties of using both audio and video simultaneously, and other technological challenges. The American students also knew from their reading of the class text about the ongoing war in Yemen – and there were bombings in both Aden and Sana’a while the VE was conducted. However, only much later was the situation in Yemen described in more detail by one of the participating Yemeni professors. Many Yemeni educational institutions do not have internet access. Older faculty are less technologically savvy and thus unable to guide their students. A great number of students and faculty do not have their own mobile phones or computers, and even many faculty simply cannot afford to have an internet connection. Some

faculty also cannot afford the transportation to get to their classroom. All this is exacerbated by the constant stress of war and the grinding challenges of daily life. The Yemeni instructor mentioned none of this during the VE. Only months later did he explain that he was tired of the situation and was seeking a better life in another country. He now cannot be reached, which prompts concerns for his well-being. This project was simple in technology and limited in scope, and seems almost frivolous, in retrospect. The grace with which the Yemeni faculty and students still participated in the VE is astonishing and humbling.

#### **4. Discussion**

Global experiences in the classroom can prepare students to be productive and responsible citizens in a changing world. VEs can democratize global competency opportunities for students, including traditionally underrepresented groups such as minority students, students with disabilities, and students with significant job or family obligations. However, faculty from the Global North must also understand the complexity of life and education their VE colleagues might be experiencing. Therein lies the ethical dilemma: Why should the VE global community care about faculty equity?

Educators would agree that all educational partnerships, including VE partnerships, should always be mutually beneficial and respectful to each other. However, it must be acknowledged that it is often the Global North partners who stand to gain a lot more, opening the window to a world not often accessible to their faculty or students, as opposed to faculty and students from the Global South who, through the media, get to see a world that may never be theirs.

In a well-designed VE, students are guided into trying to understand their partners' culture. The faculty's own environment is an equally important factor and should also be explored at the beginning of the professional collaboration. Often, some of the most striking inequities are not only unseen but at times ignored by the Global North partners. The authors encountered the example of a female instructor in the Global South whose husband was dismissive of his wife's virtual teaching and would interrupt her during class. For many faculty in the Global North, gender equality and gender roles would not be a necessary constraint to overcome; however, that might not be the reality for female faculty living under patriarchal social norms. Food insecurity is something even many faculty in the Global South are facing daily, but unfortunately, it is easy to be unaware of it. A Global North faculty's joke about going to bed hungry because of having to be on a diet would seem insulting to a genuinely food insecure colleague. Getting the COVID vaccine may be an act of activism to Global North faculty, but flaunting vaccine status to someone who simply does not have the same access to the vaccine would be cruel.

VE can, and often does, create a ‘neutral third space’; however, traditional power structures can still influence the interactions between the Global North and Global South. The social context of invisible violence can cause great stress to the partner with fewer resources. Even a decision on adopting a particular technology tool to facilitate the exchange can create hurdles, not just for the participating Global South students but for their faculty, as well. If the VE community settles on just Global North practice standards, then the professors will not have the opportunity to build together a truly equitable third space.

The problems faced by a partner from the Global South cannot be solved in a single VE, but more thought could be put into creating a context of trust and understanding for the partnership. It would be interesting to explore whether an attitudinal equivalent of what [Levine, Reypens, and Stark \(2021\)](#) find in the American workplace – ‘a racial attention deficit’ – crops up in international VE, too, among both students and faculty. Nevertheless, greater awareness and a conscious understanding of challenges can strengthen a VE, as some successfully-implemented solutions have proved.

## 5. Conclusion

A VE can indeed be an equitable, cost-effective strategy for helping students gain intercultural competence and other 21st century skills. However, *faculty* inequity in international VE is, unfortunately, often papered over by addressing only issues such as the digital divide or linguistic hegemony. The truth that must be acknowledged is that for most Global South faculty, the very act of teaching could be activism, given that teaching does not often provide for them but is rather done out of conscious choice to continue educating new generations, recognizing the significance of education for the future of their countries. Sadly, the human capital Global South educators bring to a partnership could be unintentionally overlooked.

While the benefits to students must be the foremost consideration, the issue of potential faculty inequity, particularly in a partnership between an institution in the Global North and an institution in the Global South, also deserves attention and action in the creation of VE.

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Published by University of Groningen Press | UGP, a not-for-profit press  
Groningen, The Netherlands | UGP@rug.nl

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Journal of Virtual Exchange 2022  
Special issue edited by Alice Gruber and Mona Pearl

Publication date: 2022/10/21

Journal of Virtual Exchange (JVE) is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal aimed at practitioners and researchers in the field known variously as virtual exchange, telecollaboration, or online intercultural exchange. It is the official journal of UNICollaboration (<https://www.UNICollaboration.org/>), the international academic organisation dedicated to supporting and promoting telecollaboration and virtual exchange in higher-level education.

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ISSN: 2647-4832 (online only)