

TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?

*The Female Face of
Right-wing Populism
and Extremism*

07

Case Study Brazil
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**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
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Forum Politik
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TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN? THE STUDY SERIES

All over the world, right-wing populist parties continue to grow stronger, as has been the case for a number of years – a development that is male-dominated in most countries, with right-wing populists principally elected by men. However, a new generation of women is also active in right-wing populist parties and movements – forming the female face of right-wing populism, so to speak. At the same time, these parties are rapidly closing the gap when it comes to support from female voters – a new phenomenon, for it was long believed that women tend to be rather immune to right-wing political propositions. Which gender and family policies underpin this and which societal trends play a part? Is it possible that women are coming out triumphant here?

That is a question that we already raised, admittedly playing devil's advocate, in the first volume of the publication, published in 2018 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung *Triumph of the women? The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe*. We are now continuing this first volume with a series of detailed studies published at irregular intervals. This is partly in response to the enormous interest that this collection of research has aroused to date in the general public and in professional circles. As a foundation with roots in social democracy, from the outset one of our crucial concerns has been to monitor anti-democratic tendencies and developments, while also providing information about these, with a view to strengthening an open and democratic society thanks to these insights.

The *Triumph of the women?* study series adopts a specific perspective in this undertaking: The country-specific studies examine right-wing populist (and occasionally right-wing extremist) parties and their programmes concerning family and gender policy. The analysis highlights the question of which political propositions appeal to women voters, making parties in the right-wing spectrum seem electable in their eyes. How do antifeminist positions gain ground? In addition, individual gender policy topics are examined, the percentage of votes attained by these parties is analysed and the role of female leaders and counter-movements is addressed.

While the first volume of studies focused on countries within Europe, the new study adopts a broader view and analyses individual countries and topics worldwide. Where do right-wing populist parties manage to shift the focus of discourse or even shape debates on family and gender policy, in addition to defining the terms of engagement when dealing with issues relating to flight and migration? And do their propositions concerning social policy respond to the needs of broad swathes of the electorate for greater social welfare?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is important to us that progressive stakeholders agree on these challenges and work together to combat the growing fragmentation and divisions within our societies.

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CASE STUDY

BRAZIL

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// In Brazil, a New Right combining economic ultra-liberalism and moral conservatism has recently become popular. The multiplication of right-wing think tanks defending the »free-market« (Rocha 2019) and the increasing presence of Christian conservative religious actors in politics (Machado 2018) were the basis for renewed political divides in public disputes. However, the groups converging in the support of this New Right could hardly be described as a political coalition until the second decade of the 2000s. That is when the concept of a »liberal conservative« alternative to a supposed hegemony of the left became a successful framework for the mobilisation of different sectors of the population. It was also through this process that gender came to the forefront of political disputes.

Previously dispersed actors regrouped after massive street protests in 2013, which started as demonstrations against the rise of public transportation fares, but soon transformed into a stage for new right-wing actors protesting against corruption. The campaign for the impeachment of Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff, approved in Congress in 2016, was also significant for the regrouping and visibility of what is now seen as a »new right«. It put an end to the fourth consecutive term of the Worker's Party (PT)—the second term of president Dilma Rousseff, who had been reelected in 2014. //

A substantial part of the agents who advocated for the impeachment of Rousseff would end up supporting a far-right presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, in 2018. He was seen as the one who could defeat the PT in the national elections—an expectation that would become reality. Bolsonaro was elected by a very small party, the PSL (Social Liberal Party), which he left in his first year of government. He still does not have a party and subsequently deals with many challenges in Congress as Brazil has a very fragmented party system, with 24 parties currently being represented in the Chamber of Deputies. Thus, the far right is better represented by a phenomenon, the *bolsonarismo*, than by a specific political party. This way, it has been able to activate moral conservatism, a »law and order« agenda, as well as a neoliberal economic programme consisting of limiting labour and social rights, and reducing public spending.

In its course, privatisation was increased under different definitions. According to the neoliberal perspective, it meant limiting the scope of the state and its role in the Brazilian economy. But it also meant returning the »right« of families to raise their children as they wished, independently of what was (and still is) considered »foreign« and imposed by elites influencing the state: educational guidance for social justice, gender equality, and respect for sexual diversity. Under both definitions, privatisation correlates with what Wendy Brown (2019: 108) described as the extension of the private sphere: an agenda that »marketises« and »familialises« challenging principles of equality, secularism, pluralism, and inclusion. Insecurities regarding urban violence also played a role in the making of Jair Bolsonaro, who transitioned from a previously underrated far-right politician into a viable presidential candidate by framing himself as the best alternative to moral disorder and the best antidote to a leftist turn. »Moral panic« and the »moralisation of insecurities« were strategically mobilised in the 2018 campaign. Once elected, Bolsonaro expanded the direct participation and influence of religious conservative groups acting against gender equality and sexual diversity at the federal political level.

This study analyses the role of anti-feminism in the rise of the far-right in Brazil, with special attention to women's participation—as part of right-wing politics, but also as part of the resistance to its rise/growing influence.

The first section explains the role of the opposition to women's rights and gender politics in the rise of the far-right in Brazil. Here, it will be elucidated how, in a context of political crisis, a law and order approach to crime, anti-corruption claims focusing on centre-left parties and politicians, and anti-feminism formed the right-wing anti-systemic perspective that won the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil. Section two analyses the role of women in far-right movements and parties in this context, discussing their participation as both politicians and voters. I address the gender gap among the voters and supporters of Bolsonaro as well as significant religious differences, in accordance with data from polls and public opinion surveys.

Since 2016, women and feminist movements have increasingly played a role in the resistance to right-wing politics in general and to the rise of the far-right as an electoral alternative in particular. Hence, the last section is dedicated to the analysis of that role and will briefly reflect on its potential and its limits.

I. Far-right politics and their path to political power—objections to women's and gender politics

Since 2016, Brazil has undergone major political changes. The impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff was considered a parliamentary coup that put an end to the balance of the democratic political cycle established in the 1980s (Santos and Guarnieri 2016) after the end of the military dictatorship. In 1988, a new constitution was adopted, reflecting the political demands for guarantees for a large scope of individual and social rights.¹ Social activism and the significant presence of centre and centre-left parties in Congress and presidential elections during this period brought inequalities and human rights to the core of the political debate. This had an impact on many public policies adopted by the governments led by the centrist party of the Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB, 1995–2002) and the centre-leftist Worker's Party (PT, 2003–2016).²

¹ Brazil did not adopt a transitional justice policy and did not punish the crimes committed by state agents during the dictatorship. In 2011, a National Truth Commission was instituted by president Dilma Rousseff (who was herself arrested and tortured during the dictatorship), with great opposition from the military.

² Both parties were created in the 1980s and originated from political and social sectors opposing the dictatorship inaugurated in 1964.

Despite this, democracy was consolidated amid a context of deep inequalities and violence. After 30 years of democratic rule, Brazil is especially violent with regard to women³ and young black men living in poor areas⁴. Women are also directly affected by the criminalisation of abortion, which limits their autonomy and puts their lives at risk.⁵

Not only political participation but also the very guarantees for physical integrity vary according to gender, race, and class. Brazil has one of the lowest rates of women's representation in the world. And even during its period of greatest democratic stability, there were never more than 10 per cent females of those elected to the Chamber of Deputies—the Brazilian Lower House—, despite a quota law was passed in 1997 ensuring that at least 30 per cent of the places on electoral party lists were reserved for women.⁶ That notwithstanding, women participated in the building and consolidation of Brazilian democracy and advancements could be made. From the resistance to the 1964 dictatorship onwards, women's and feminist organisations advocated for a democratic regime in which women could be equal citizens. In a favourable international context, women's rights councils and women's policy agencies were created on national and sub-national levels, starting from the 1980s.

3 According to a survey conducted by the Brazilian Public Security Forum in 2019, 27.4 per cent of women over the age of 16 suffered some kind of violence in 2018, the majority (76.4 per cent) of which said the aggressor was someone they knew, and most cases (42 per cent) occurred at home (see: <https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/relatorio-pesquisa-2019-v6.pdf>, last accessed on 8.9.2020). Among the cases of violent death in 2018, 6–8 per cent were »femicides«, which is what lethal violence against women has been legally defined as in Brazil since 2015 (see: https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FBSP_Atlas_da_Violencia_2018_Relatorio.pdf, last accessed on 8.9.2020).

4 They are the majority among those murdered in connection with conflicts between criminals and those between criminals and the police. Among the fatal victims of police interventions in 2018, 75.4 per cent were black (even though they make up for 55 per cent of the Brazilian population) and 77.8 per cent were between 15 and 29 years old. In 2019, 5,804 people were killed in police interventions (see: https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FBSP_Atlas_da_Violencia_2018_Relatorio.pdf, last accessed on 8.9.2020). This means that black women are also indirectly affected by violence, in particular if they are black, poor mothers.

5 One in every five women in Brazil has had at least one abortion before the age of 40 (Diniz et al. 2017). In Brazil, there are three exceptions to the law criminalising abortion: pregnancy resulting from rape, risk of death for the mother, and fetal anencephaly. Most of the abortions are performed in clandestine conditions, resulting in further health implications.

6 Brazil has an open-list electoral system with no determinate position for candidacies. Furthermore, until 2009, parties could not be punished for only »reserving« 30 per cent of the places on the electoral lists, instead of effectively including female candidates.

The election of president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) in 2002 opened a period of »unprecedented permeability of the state« to social movements (Abers, Serafim and Tatagiba 2015), bringing with it a new context of opportunities for feminist movements. Participation mechanisms already included in the 1988 constitution became more effective and the inauguration of the Special Secretariat of Policies for Women in 2003 marked a new stage for state feminism in Brazil. Four National Conferences on Public Policy for Women (2004, 2007, 2011, 2016) were organised, resulting from which three National Policy Plans for Women (2004, 2008, 2013) were proposed. In this context, public policies, but also laws and judicial decisions, addressed gender inequalities in labour as well as reproductive rights and violence against women and LGBTQ people.⁷ At the same time, a »horizontal flow of discourses and practices« made feminist actors and agendas present in different spaces of Brazilian civil society (Alvarez 2014: 17).

This expansion met the active opposition of conservative, religious political groups which were part of an alliance supporting the PT government. Although the Evangelical caucus in Congress increasingly voiced its opposition to this, the Catholic Church maintained its historical influence. The National Confederation of Brazilian Bishops, the highest hierarchical Catholic instance in the country, acted to undermine governmental support of abortion rights in exchange for its support of PT in a crisis involving allegations of corruption in 2015 (Zanotta Machado 2016). In the second decade of the 21st century, conservative Evangelical and Catholic agents came together to fight against the so-called »gender ideology«. At the same time, landowners, policemen and pro-gun groups increasingly converged with religious conservative agents in an informal coalition known as Bible, Beef

7 Some examples are the norms and policies introduced to guarantee reproductive rights, and to put into place the exceptions to the criminalisation of abortion in Brazil (Technical Norms of the Ministry of Health, published in 2005 and 2011); the adoption of educational guidelines and policies to encourage a more egalitarian socialisation (Brazil Without Homophobia, 2004, and Women and Science, 2005, within the scope of the Ministries of Education and Science and Technology); a law consolidating labour rights for domestic workers (Constitutional Amendment 72, regulated in June 2015); laws to combat and criminalise violence against women (Maria da Penha Law, 11.340/2006 and the Femicide Law, 13.104/2015, the latter sanctioned in March 2015); the 2011 decision by the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF) legalising same-sex marriage; and the decision by the same court that, in 2012, adding a third exception to the law criminalising abortion in Brazil (fetal anencephaly).

and Bullets (Almeida 2017; Biroli 2018: chapter 4; Cowan 2014; Lacerda 2019). They forced the gradual dismantling of gender policies going back to at least 2014, two years before the deposition of Rousseff.

Anti-corruption claims were key to weaken the PT government and legitimise Rousseff's impeachment.⁸ They were also at the core of the rise of right-wing politics. In addition to that, the framework defining the far right as capable of an effective stand against corruption, moral disorder and violence was successful in the 2018 election. How did it come to that? And how did feminism and gender politics become the far right's preferred targets?

Following grass-root waves of protest, such as the Arab Spring (2010–12), Occupy Wall Street in the United States, Indignados in Spain, student protests in Chile and the protests against police violence in London (all of them in 2011), Brazil saw thousands of people taking to the streets in 2013. Starting with protests against the rise of public transport fares in São Paulo, they attracted a variety of groups with different ideological profiles. Encouraged by Brazilian media corporations interested in weakening the PT government, they were soon framed as anti-corruption protests.⁹ Following that, the »Operation Car Wash«,¹⁰ launched in 2014, revealed details about illegal funding of electoral campaigns by construction companies, making everyday news with a major focus on PT.

During these developments, anti-corruption movements and religious conservative actors strengthened their ties. Their opposition to the PT government was rooted in ideological and economic divergences, expressed as moral issues. For example, many declared their votes in favour of Rousseff's impeachment to constitute a »defense of the family«. Her expulsion from office, in contrast, put an end to previous patterns of participation by social movements within the state.

8 Even though Rousseff was impeached for fiscal responsibility crimes, not for corruption (and there is still no proof of corruption against her).

9 After the protests of June 2013, the approval rating of president Dilma Rousseff dropped from 65 per cent to 30 per cent (Tatagiba e Galvão 2019).

10 The Operation *Lava-Jato* (car wash) was a set of investigations into money laundering and diversion of public funds brought together by public prosecutors and the Federal Police under the informal coordination of the federal judge Sérgio Moro, who was later made Minister of Justice and Public Security under the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro.

The women who formed the National Council for Women's Rights resigned as a block on 6 June 2016 in a decision that involved the movements and organisations that they represented. In their letter of resignation, they denounced the »parliamentary-judicial-media coup« and stated that they did not recognise the legitimacy of the interim government. The previous »Special Secretariat of Policies for Women« lost its ministerial status, which it regained under Bolsonaro's government as the »Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights«, led by the pastor and lawyer Damares Alves. During the PT governments, the Special Secretariat offered an opportunity for feminist movements to participate in the building of public policy for women. Under Bolsonaro, however, the Ministry became a privileged space for anti-feminist agents connected to religious conservative groups.

During the 2018 electoral campaign, the far right was able to connect feminism to the center-left in power, so that anti-PT trends were framed as anti-feminist trends and vice versa. A supposedly corrupt political elite was accused of instrumentalising the state for its own ideological purposes—and promoting gender perspectives was said to be one of these purposes. Originally active in issues that were not connected to religious conservative groups, Bolsonaro and the far right reinforced the anti-gender perspective as a way to expand its alliances with them.¹¹ This movement also helped Bolsonaro gain the support of religious voters already involved in the campaigns against abortion and »gender ideology«.

Bolsonaro's political career developed during the recent democratic cycle, but it was clearly outlined by his publicly expressed aversion to democracy and human rights. A retired captain of the Brazilian Army, he was first elected city councillor (a municipal legislator) in the city of Rio de Janeiro in 1988 and was subsequently re-elected as Federal Deputy for seven consecutive terms, a position he held between 1991 and 2018. He was affiliated with eight different political parties, although never with any of the major parties of the democratic cycle inaugurated in the 1980s, after the military dictatorship had ended.

11 In a symbolic gesture, Bolsonaro, who is originally a Catholic, was baptised an Evangelic by a Brazilian Pastor in the Jordan River in Israel in 2016.

At first, in the 1990s, he acted on two issues to which he dedicated the large majority of his proposals as a deputy: the defense of the 1964 dictatorship and the military on the one hand and the vindication of police violence, more flexible gun ownership laws, and stricter criminal laws as answers to crime on the other hand. To draw a positive picture of the military dictatorship and to support those responsible for the crimes committed by the state in that period, he underlined the supposed risks of communism and banalised torture and the assassination of opponents. This is directly connected to his second focus: transgressions of the rule of law against »criminals« at the cost of their lives are justified to protect »good people«.

A third subject would soon come to Bolsonaro's attention as he began working against the human rights agenda by voicing loud opposition to sexual rights. After 2013, he presented several proposals (bills and requirements of information) aiming at the suspension of policies adopted by the federal government promoting gender equality and the acceptance of sexual diversity, particularly in relation to education. He focused on working against educational content against homophobia and the promotion of gender equality, gender identity, same-sex marriage and adoption.

In 2010, right-wing politicians adopted the strategy of framing the PT government's efforts against homophobia as »sexualising children by distributing inappropriate indecent material« (pejoratively nicknamed »gay kit« by Bolsonaro). Bolsonaro also used this strategy during his presidential campaign in 2018, which was indeed very important for the formation of the current identity of the far-right in Brazil.

Also in 2010, he opposed a bill assuring the right of children to be raised free of »corporal punishment and cruel and degrading treatment« (Bill 7672/2010). To justify his opposition, he said that »if your son becomes a little queer, you beat him up and he changes his behavior.«¹² He also supported the right of parents to raise their children as they wish; the state, in contrast, must not »impose« school content conflicting with the religious beliefs of the parents.

¹² See: <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/144388-comissao-vai-debater-declaracao-de-bolsonaro-sobre-punicao-a-filho-gay/> (last accessed on 13.5.2020). Original text in Portuguese: »se o filho começa a ficar assim meio gayzinho, leva um couro e ele muda o comportamento dele« (translated by the author).

This approach was disseminated throughout Latin America under the label #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (Don't mess with my children), a movement founded in Peru in 2016 (Biroli 2020). In Brazil, the most outstanding movement advocating for this agenda was the Escola Sem Partido (School Without Party). Created in 2004 and initially focused on what its organisers saw as the hegemony of leftist and Marxist thinking among teachers, it joined forces with religious conservatives acting against gender rights from 2014 onwards. It has ever since been a protagonist in the promotion of bills at national, state and local levels to prohibit political debate and criticism, sexual education, and mentions of the term »gender« in Brazilian schools. Aligned with Bolsonaro's candidacy in 2018, it became part of the government's perspective on Education. At the same time, by connecting PT to feminism, the far right was able to promote the opposition to »gender ideology« as an electoral framework and subsequently assume it as the perspective approved by the majority of the electorate.

II. Women, right-wing politics and the far right

In 2018, Bolsonaro was elected president for a minor party, the PSL (Social Liberal Party). At that time, the national executive board of the party had seven men, and one woman acting as secretary-general of the party. Being a lawyer and federal police officer, she is part of a family of politicians. In 2020, her husband in turn held the same position and the party still only has one woman on its board, now holding the position of financial secretary.

In its 20 years of existence, PSL has never elected more than one representative per legislature to the Chamber of Deputies. This is important as it reveals that the far right, which is now at the centre of Brazilian politics, was not effectively grounded in the Brazilian political system. Thus, the alignments and electoral preferences cannot be explained from an institutional perspective or described based on their historical patterns.

This choice gave the Bolsonaro family (the president and his sons) the opportunity to control the party for

the benefit of his election.¹³ Due to Bolsonaro's bandwagon effect, PSL elected 52 deputies in 2018, second only to PT, which elected 56.¹⁴ Among these 52 deputies, nine (17 per cent) were women, a percentage slightly above that of women elected to the Chamber of Deputies that year (15 per cent).¹⁵ The largest share of these deputies (of the Chamber of Deputies) consisted of former members of the military and policemen.¹⁶ The current government also has the highest number of members of the military in office since the dictatorship, including the vice president and eight of his 22 cabinet ministers.

Gender came to the core of the party's programme as Bolsonaro became its presidential candidate. Although conservative positions against the right to abortion had been part of recent national disputes (in 2010 and 2014), this was the first time that an explicit anti-gender and anti-feminist approach was stressed in more general terms by one of the main candidates

¹³ Soon after that, in November 2019, he left PSL and announced the creation of a new party under the name »Alliance for Brazil«. At the time this study was finished, in September 2020, the party had not been registered yet and he was still a president without a party.

¹⁴ In Brazil, presidential elections happen every four years and coincide with the elections for the Lower and the Upper House (Chamber of Deputies and Senate), State Assemblies and State Governors. Municipal elections also happen every four years, alternating with the national and state ones, so there are electoral races every two years. The Brazilian political representation system combines majoritarian rule (for executive positions and senators) and proportional rule (for federal deputies, state deputies and municipal councilors). In the last case, electors choose from among the candidates in open party lists, with no determinate position. Since 1997, a quota law establishes that at least 30 per cent of the places in the lists must be reserved for women, but only since 2009 have political parties in fact been obliged to actually fill the vacancies and, after a resolution published by the Superior Electoral Court in 2011, can be punished if they do not comply with the law.

¹⁵ At the left of the political spectrum, PT elected the largest number of deputies that year and also the largest number of women (10, that is 17.8 per cent of 56); on the center-left, PSDB had the largest number of women elected (eight, that is 27 per cent, of 29). Two left-wing parties, PSOL and PCdoB, elected the highest percentage of women, reaching numerical parity (five of 10, and four of nine, subsequently). There was a balance in the percentage of the women elected that had declared their support for Bolsonaro, declared their opposition to his candidacy or kept neutral, approximately 1/3 in each case (see <http://www.generonumero.media/com-bolsonaro-presidente-bancada-feminina-eleita-para-o-congresso-reflete-polarizacao-politica-expressa-nas-urnas>; (last accessed 18.3.2021).

¹⁶ The successful strategies of the Bolsonaro campaign helped to increase the number of members of the military elected to the Chamber of Deputies and State Assemblies around the country (see: <https://www.nexojournal.com.br/grafico/2018/10/31/A-expansao-per-cent3per-centA3o-dos-militares-e-policiais-entre-os-polper-cent3per-centAdticos-eleiticos>; last accessed on 26.2.2021). Women make for 8.7 per cent of the military in Brazil. Only one woman ever became general-officer, the highest achievable position in Brazilian military (see: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2018/03/18/sobreelas-mulher-forcas-armadas/>; last accessed on 26.2.2021). All of the ministers with a military background appointed by Bolsonaro are men.

in the dispute. During the electoral period, PSL announced as part of their programme the »combat against the defense of the gender ideology«, the »combat against the early sexualisation of children«, as well as the »combat against the censorship, the restraint, and the moral and social imbalance resulting from the »political correctness« discourse«. They were also against any kind of »quotas dividing people due to gender, sexual orientation, colour, race or religion«. Their opposition to diversity and equality was stated as they highlighted free market rules. At the same time, they expressed their alignment with the interests of the police and the military, their focus on public security and the security of national borders, as well as their advocacy for the expansion of gun rights.¹⁷

The merging of moral conservatism, economic neoliberalism, and militarism was not common in Brazil until very recently.¹⁸ Once elected, Bolsonaro's government took on this framework to evoke the combat against »cultural Marxism« and »gender ideology«, while he denounced the influence of »foreign interests« acting through the United Nations Organization. In his inaugural speech on 1.1.2019, he expressed his intention to »unite the people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, combat gender ideology, preserving our values«, claiming that Brazil would »be once again a country free of ideologies«. ¹⁹ For the first time since the process of democratisation in the 1980s, poverty or inequalities were not mentioned in the inaugural speech as concerns for the new government, while »moral« issues were emphasised. In his government, at least three Ministries are dedicated to the opposition to »gender ideology«: the Ministry of Woman, Family, and Human Rights; the Ministry of Education; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first is led by Damares Alves, an Evangelical woman who is a protagonist in

¹⁷ See: https://psl.org.br/?page_id=27 (last accessed on 27.5.2020).

¹⁸ Added to these axes, the support by land owners is key to dismantling environmental policy in the future and to strengthen disbelief in data regarding climate change to official grounds. Beyond this issue, the anti-scientific approach is one of the characteristics of current far-right politics in Brazil. It has clearly shown its harmful ways throughout the Covid-19 pandemics, in 2020.

¹⁹ For the entire speech, see: <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/pt-BR/discursos-artigos-e-entrevistas-categoria/presidente-da-republica-federativa-do-brasil-discursos/19887-discurso-do-presidente-da-republica-jair-bolsonaro-durante-cerimonia-de-posse-no-congresso-nacional-brasilia-1-de-janeiro-de-2019> (last accessed on 14.5.2020).

the backlash against the agendas of gender equality and sexual diversity, as well as a pronounced enemy of feminism. In 2019, the government decided to exclude the Goals for the Sustainable Developments of the United Nations from the Plan for Policy 2020–2023 and justified it by underlining the need to eliminate the »maleficent gender ideology«.

Bolsonaro's government is an elected authoritarian government with a relatively stable popular support from 1/3 of the electorate.²⁰ This support is stronger among men—in particular white men—and religious people—in particular Evangelicals. The votes won by Bolsonaro and his government's approval rates are not homogeneous throughout the country. They are both higher in the South and lower in the Northeast of the country in particular. This region saw an improvement in development indices and people's opportunities under the PT government. It is also the region that has the largest percentage of beneficiaries of the main income programme implemented by the PT government after 2003, the *Bolsa Família*. Aimed at families with children (with the conditioned of keeping them at school), the benefit holders were always women.

From the beginning, electoral polls and surveys indicated that more women rejected Bolsonaro than men. In December 2019, his government having completed one year, 35 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women said that the government was »great« or »good«. Inversely, 32 per cent of the men and 41 per cent of the women considered it to be »bad« or »terrible«, while the rating for »regular« were 33 per cent for men and 31 per cent for women.²¹

That said, it is important to understand which women voted for the far right, represented by Bolsonaro, and why they did so.

Electoral polls carried out right before the second round of the presidential elections showed that 55 per

cent of male voters and 41 per cent of female voters intended to vote for Jair Bolsonaro.²² The main reason presented by women to vote for him was the wish for change, as they saw him as a stranger to party politics, and their rejection of the Worker's Party (PT), which they saw as corrupt. Together, these motivations were indicated by 56 per cent of women and 54 per cent of men from this group.²³ Most Bolsonaro voters were among those with higher levels of education (medium and superior) and with higher incomes. The support for Bolsonaro was also higher among the white (60 per cent) than among the black (47 per cent) population.²⁴

Religion is an important dividing factor and a key to understanding the support for the far right. It is also important to understand the anti-feminist approach adopted by Bolsonaro since 2018, as it represents an alignment with conservative Evangelical churches and conservative sectors of the Catholic Church.

Brazil's population has gone through significant changes with regard to its religious profile, becoming less Catholic and more Evangelical. In 1980, 89 per cent of the population declared they were Catholic, 6.6 per cent Evangelical. Thirty years later, in 2010, the share of Catholics had decreased to 65 per cent, while that of Evangelicals rose to 22.4 per cent of the population.²⁵ Recent data confirms that this trend is persisting, with 50 per cent identifying as Catholic and 31 per cent as Evangelical.²⁶ Among the Evangelical, 58 per cent are women—reaching 69 per cent when only the Neo-Pentecostal churches are considered.²⁷

²² DataFolha, Eleições 2018, 26–27.10.2018. See: <http://media.folha.uol.com.br/datafolha/2018/10/28/b469d4556e176c907bad8986ccc459cd.pdf> (last accessed on 4.6.2020).

²³ DataFolha, Eleições 2018, 17–18.10.2018. See: <http://media.folha.uol.com.br/datafolha/2018/10/22/86573009cfde5a6de64bd00cc1bd94a3.pdf> (last accessed on 8.9.2020).

²⁴ Ibope Inteligência, Pesquisa de Opinião JOB0011-10, October 2018. See: https://www.ibopeinteligencia.com/arquivos/JOB_0011-10_BRASILper cent20-per cent20Relatper centC3per centB3rioper cent20deper cent20tabelas.pdf (last accessed on 15.10.2018).

²⁵ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), Censo 2010. See: https://censo2010.ibge.gov.br/apps/atlas/pdf/Pag_203_Religioper centC3per centA3o_Evang_missper centC3per centA3o_Evang_pentecostal_Evang_naoper cent20determinada_Diversidadeper cent20cultural.pdf (last accessed 8.9.2020).

²⁶ The other 19 per cent are divided between those who declare not to have a religion (10 per cent) or declare to be atheists (one per cent), and those declaring their religion to be Spiritism (three per cent), Umbanda (two per cent) and Judaism (0.3 per cent).

²⁷ See: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/01/cara-tipica-do-evangelico-brasileiro-e-feminina-e-negra-aponta-datafolha.shtml> (last accessed on 8.9.2020).

The number of Evangelical deputies elected to the Chamber of Deputies has almost tripled since the 1980s (33 in 1986; 84 in 2018), with their most active leaders in Congress standing against reproductive and sexual rights and framing their anti-feminist position as a defense of traditional family values. They stood out as the authors of the bills against women's and LGBTQ rights in the last decade, in particular those related to abortion, same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex couples, and gender identity; they are also at the frontline against the so-called »gender ideology« in Congress and state assemblies (Machado 2017).²⁸ Among the 77 women elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2018, 28 are currently members of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front—the Evangelical caucus in the Chamber of Deputies—and 25 are members of the Parliamentary Front in Defense of Life and the Family—the pro-family caucus.

Evangelical voters were crucial to the election of Bolsonaro. Right before the second round of the presidential elections, while 46 per cent of Catholic electors said they would vote for him, this percentage rose to 61 per cent among Evangelical electors. The director of one of the main Brazilian poll institutes wrote that poor Evangelical women were »decisive« for Bolsonaro to be elected, as they were the ones who decided to support him at the last moment and were in disagreement with women demonstrating against his candidacy.²⁹ This change of heart happened as the leaders of the main Evangelical churches of the country declared their support for his candidacy.

One year after Bolsonaro's inauguration, they kept a positive assessment of the government, which was higher than the average among Catholic and non-religious groups. While 30 per cent of voters in general evaluated the government as »great« or »good«, among Evangelicals 36 per cent of voters did so, as well as 29 per cent of Catholics, and 20 per cent of non-religious. On the other hand, whereas 36 per cent of the voters in total said the government was

²⁸ The doctoral thesis and master's dissertations in Political Science developed under my coordination, at the University of Brasília, by Rayani Mariano, Raniery Parra, Daniel Jacó and João Victor Martins present data confirming this.

²⁹ Marcos Coimbra: Mulheres Evangélicas pobres definiram vitória de Bolsonaro. See: <https://www.brasil247.com/poder/marcos-coimbra-mulheres-evangelicas-pobres-definiram-vitoria-de-bolsonaro> (last accessed on 8.9.2020).

»bad« or »terrible«, this negative evaluation was at a low 27 per cent among Evangelical voters, and rose to 38 per cent among Catholics and 50 per cent among non-religious people respectively.³⁰

According to an Index of Brazilian Conservatism measured since 2010, men are more conservative than women and Evangelicals are more conservative than Catholics and other groups of the population. Between 2010 and 2016, Brazilians became less conservative regarding moral issues (lowering their opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage) and more conservative with regard to criminal law (approving of the death penalty, the reduction of the age of criminal responsibility, and life imprisonment for heinous crimes). However, there was a tendency towards a greater degree of moral conservatism in 2018. In the period of the far right's most substantial rise, both men and women became a little more conservative. In 2018, women expressed their opposition to the decriminalisation of abortion in slightly higher rates than men, whereas they approved of same-sex marriage in higher rates than men did (42 per cent among women, 35 per cent among men).³¹

A qualitative study based on in-depth interviews indicates a desire for »order« as the major common denominator in the views expressed by those who were interviewed. The idea of a general moral decay connects politics to the domestic realm. Corruption, violence, and the lack of discipline and respect for inter-generational hierarchies are mentioned along with the claim that the family should »again« have a central role in children's moral and sex education, limiting the role of the school (Fundação Tide Setubal 2019). Although this is the general picture presented by the study, it points to interesting differences between men and women. With regard to family values, men point mostly to the loss of hierarchies, whereas women highlight the difficulties of reconciling motherhood with their work routines. When asked about gender and LGBT issues, men showed discomfort with female

³⁰ Data from the DataFolha polls mentioned before in this article in the discussion on the gender gap among supporters of the far-right (last accessed on 8.9.2020).

³¹ Ibope, Índice de Conservadorismo 2018; see: <https://www.ibopeinteligencia.com/noticias-e-pesquisas/cresce-o-grau-de-conservadorismo-do-brasileiro-em-alguns-temas/> (last accessed on 8.9.2020).

independence and male homosexuality, while women highlighted advancements regarding their empathy for LGBT people. Criminality and insecurity were also approached differently. Men reacted to these issues by defending tougher laws and punishment. In contrast, women said they were afraid to walk on the streets alone and feared for their children's safety.

In this context and considering the different data available, anti-PT trends are a central conjunctive factor. From a longer-term perspective, the convergence between the defense of a family-centred order, the opposition to reproductive and sexual rights, and a law-and-order approach to insecurity and violence plays an important role. However, women and men seem to differ in their appreciation of gender equality and their perception of violence, as shown by the aforementioned qualitative study, which goes beyond the quantitative »for or against« debate.

Right-wing female politicians, in particular those elected along with anti-PT trends and Bolsonaro's bandwagon effect, show a clear alignment with the most conservative positions.

Amongst the 77 women elected as federal deputies in 2018, 22 expressed their support for Bolsonaro during his campaign for the second round of the presidential elections. I have already mentioned the fact that 25 of them are members of the Parliamentary Front in Defense of Life and the Family, the pro-family caucus. This shows once more that religion is an important divisive factor.

All of the nine women elected 2018 for the PSL (Bolsonaro's party) are in a political office for the first time. Their candidacy resulted from their activism against corruption and for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. They are all Christian, Catholic and Evangelical, none of them self-defined as feminist, and most of them clearly expressed their contempt and opposition towards feminism. In interviews and social networks they reveal that they are against abortion and stand for »life and the family«. Most of them—seven in nine—have proposed bills against abortion, against trans rights, for the prohibition of »gender ideology«, sexual education and critical debates on politics and social justice at school. Considering all the deputies elected in 2018, only two women, who were not elected on behalf of PSL, presented bills against these

rights: one was elected for another small right-wing party (allied with Bolsonaro since the campaign), the other is a member of a centrist party and a pastor of a Neopentecostal Church.

It is also important to consider the participation of Women in the Federal Government. Bolsonaro appointed only two women among his 22 ministers. One of them is the chief of the Ministry of Agriculture. She is a politician and businesswoman connected to the interests of land-owners and the so-called agribusiness. The other, whom I have already mentioned, is the Evangelical pastor and lawyer Damares Alves. Before being appointed to lead the Ministry of Woman, Family and Human Rights by Bolsonaro, she worked as an advisor for the Evangelical caucus in the Chamber of Deputies. She is experienced in the advocacy against gender rights and was also engaged in Christian organisations focused on indigenous communities. Since the appointment of the government, she has been the main symbol of the far-right's anti-feminist and anti-gender activities. She has many times repeated that »the State is secular, but she is terribly Christian«, performed public rituals repeating that »girls wear pink and boys wear blue«, and spoke of supposed female preferences for staying at home and taking care of their children and husbands. Recently, in August 2020, she took a stand against the rights of a young girl who had been raped by a family member since the age of ten, even though Brazilian law allows for the interruption of pregnancy when it results from violence and puts women's lives at risk. Her ministry is formed by Evangelical conservative women and men, but also by a Catholic woman lawyer whose father is a prominent conservative jurist, member of the Catholic Opus Dei and author of books against the right to abortion.

The Ministry discontinued the gender equality policies developed by the past Secretary of Policy for Women (2003–2016) but also reframed some of them as family-oriented policies, in particular those related to domestic violence. It is important to highlight that it brought conservative women to the centre of the governmental anti-feminist approach to gender relations.

The religious field is heterogeneous and so is the Evangelical one (Almeida 2017). In Brazil, conservative Evangelical leaders stood out through their opposition to gender rights in the last decades and opened

political opportunities for conservative women. The far right strove for their support both as voters and politicians. Machado (2005) argues that Pentecostal churches conferred moral authority to women, opening opportunities for their participation in the public sphere and also for political careers. In these cases, a selective appropriation of feminist values took place. Of course, as the author argues, discursive and symbolic resources put in circulation by the feminist movements could be appropriated by women in very different fashion—including the possibility to set them against feminism. This is true, for example, when policewomen appear as candidates or are elected, using both their strength and capacity to deal with challenges as well as men and to reinforce their opposition to feminism. For feminist and other progressive political agents it is important to understand these differences/divisions, the values and ideologies which are activated by religious leaders, and also the multiple reasons for the significant (but partial) alignment of women voters and politicians to right-wing politics.

III. Counter-movements and strategies

The far right, which has expanded its influence in Brazilian politics and society in the last years, framed feminism as immoral. That notwithstanding, feminist movements were successful in the framing of Bolsonaro and the far right as enemies of women. The violent rhetoric assumed by him in the 2018 campaign, and the military elements that it carries, are important to understand why the voters (and women, in particular) in the poorest strata of the population rejected his candidacy in higher rates than amongst the more wealthy. The law-and-order policies that are considered protections by some could, in an unequal country, also be framed as restrictions to the rights of others.

In 2018, the march #EleNão was the main social protest against Bolsonaro's candidacy. Organised through social media, the movement did not originate from well-known organised feminist groups, although they soon began supporting it. This included labour unions, the Unified Workers' Central (CUT), human rights organisations and left-wing parties. The active support from celebrities, who recorded videos and

participated in protests, helped to expand the movement. This multi-party movement challenged the framework for electoral dispute, displacing it from the antagonism between the right and the left to frame it as a choice between authoritarianism and democracy—or civilisation and barbarism. It allowed to connect authoritarianism, militarisation, violence and hatred to misogyny, homophobia, and the devaluation of women's lives.

Since the ousting of Rousseff in 2016, Brazilian feminist movements voiced their agenda as both a vindication of women's rights, gender rights, and of democracy itself. At the same time, during the municipal elections of 2016 and during the state and national elections of 2018, the country saw the rise of movements supporting the election of women, of which some specifically focused on the election of feminist and anti-racist women. Together with the already mentioned increase in the presence of feminism in the Brazilian public sphere, these factors help to explain the election of young feminist women as councillors and deputies, parallel to the rise of the far right. Although still a clear minority, they are an active voice for gender rights, joining some more experienced politicians who stand for women and LGBTQ rights. Elected for left-wing parties, they bring together economic and moral issues, labour rights, and sexual and reproductive rights.

There are at least four characteristics of the present political balance in Brazil that should be highlighted to understand the present challenges.

First, in Brazil the executive government strongly depends on alliances in Congress to govern. A very fragmented party system (with 24 parties represented in Congress in the current legislature) brings extra difficulties. At the time of writing, even a highly conservative Congress, with the majority of the house consisting of centre and right-wing politicians, does not automatically align with the far-right government of Bolsonaro. They have partially followed the government's guidance on the withdrawal of labour and social rights, in particular social security rights, in committing to the ultra-liberal agenda that won the 2018 elections. Yet, individual rights of expression and gender rights have not suffered significant changes for the negative in the legislative period until now.

In the judiciary, law operators assess gender issues and conflicts differently. Recent decisions made by the Supreme Court (STF) show that these approaches can also vary if sexuality or reproduction rights are considered. In June 2019, the Court determined that homophobia and transphobia are crimes (framing them as racial crimes until the Brazilian Congress approves a specific law). President Bolsonaro publicly criticised that decision, calling it a mistake³² and it was indeed seen by many as a demonstration by the Court that they would not allow setbacks to fundamental rights. In 2020, the Court also ruled municipal laws to prohibit mentioning of gender diversity, gender equality and sexual diversity in public schools to be unconstitutional; it also ruled the regulations enforced by the Health Ministry restricting blood donations by homosexual men to be unconstitutional. These are favourable decisions regarding sexuality and freedom of expression, but they do not expand to cover reproductive rights. In May 2020, the Court rejected a Direct Action of Unconstitutionality (ADI 5581/2016) that could have expanded those exceptions to the criminalisation of abortion in the country. An action to decriminalise abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy presented in 2017 (ADPF 442) was the object of a public hearing summoned by the Court in August 2018, but it is still awaiting a decision.

Furthermore, after years of continuous action at the state level, even the many obstacles feminist movements had to overcome and their agendas did not prepare them for a political situation in which the state turns against feminism, nor to develop strategies to fight this. There is a clear difference between a limited influence and an open antagonism. It is not clear yet what course feminist movements will pursue when it is not possible to dispute the state—or at least the federal government—from within. Since the election of Bolsonaro, feminist movements and organisations have shown a limited capacity to stop the dismantlement of public policy promoting gender equality. As anti-feminist actors became part of the government and their influence increased, feminism became mostly circumscribed to public criticism and

³² See: <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2019-06/bolsonaro-critica-decisao-do-stf-de-criminalizar-homofobia> (last accessed on 8.9.2020).

strategies to stop setbacks in Congress and in legislative bodies on the sub-national levels. However, damage containment methods focused on the legislative are not enough. The interruption and the reframing of policy have effects on women's lives and, of course, on the public debate. It is, thus, important to produce strategies to dispute the depoliticisation of gender inequalities promoted by the far right. To make it clear, gender is now politicised to delegitimize progressive perspectives and reaffirm the supposed natural character of hierarchies and roles (Biroli, Machado and Vaggione, 2020). One of the battle fronts for feminists is indeed to expose pro-family policies and their appeal to »nature« in light of the disadvantages to and vulnerabilities of women, in particular black women and LGBTQ people.

Of course, this is not just a matter of choice. Even for public employees, acting within the state and in agreement with existent rights became risky. As an example, in June 2020, part of the team responsible for issues regarding women's health within the Health Ministry was exonerated of their duties after they prepared a technical note with guidance for contraception and access to legal abortion.³³

The third characteristic is that feminism became widely present in Brazilian society and is a collective locus of resistance against the far-right. In the context of polarisation that I have been describing here, feminist organisations and movements were very active on the internet and on the streets. In the 2000s, black, indigenous, *quilombola*,³⁴ lesbian, university and secondary students, rural workers, and women living in peripheral areas of the most populous cities in Brazil organised protests and manifested their perspectives. They made it clear that their needs and the definition of who they are should be brought to public debate by their own voices. Those voices were echoed in the *Marcha das Vadias* (Slut Walk), which happened in 23 Brazilian cities in 2012; in the *Marcha das Margaridas* (March of the Daisies), which took rural workers from

³³ See: <https://brpolitico.com.br/noticias/apos-nota-sobre-aborto-ministerio-da-saude-exonera-equipe-de-saude-da-mulher/> (last accessed on 5.6.2020).

³⁴ *Quilombolas* are those who live in communities founded by black men and women who escaped slavery. These communities survived the end of slavery in Brazil in 1888. Their right to traditional land was established by the Brazilian Constitution of 1988.

all over the country to the capital, Brasília, in 2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019; and in the *Marcha das Mulheres Negras* (March of Black Women), which in 2015 brought together more than 50,000 people in Brasília. In 2015, thousands of women also demonstrated against a bill (PL 5069/2013) that, if approved, would have created obstacles to hospital care for women who were raped. They became the biggest public demonstrations in Brazilian history demanding the right to abortion. Approximately a year later, in 2016, a movement that led to the occupation of secondary schools around the country showed very young women on the front line, leading the protests against unpopular reforms in the educational system. They assumed a clear feminist language, identifying as women in their political action and using insignias such as »Fight like a girl«. In March 2020, the 1st National Meeting of Landless Women showed how some of the most important and traditional social movements in Brazil, such as the Movement of the Landless Workers (MST), were also affected by feminist values and practices. And this, of course, corresponds to the multiplication of feminist websites, blogs, and feminist debates on social networks, but also in newspapers and on TV shows.

Finally, as a fourth point, it is important to consider that the Brazilian crisis is a crisis of democratic values and institutions. The far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro encourages and justifies the stigmatisation of collective actors and the attacks against the left, human rights groups, feminist and LGBTQ, against black movements, indigenous people, and environmentalists. It also aims at the knowledge that denaturalises the world as such (scientific research, academic debate), promoting a dismantling of the national system that supported scientific research in the country in the last decades. Humanities, social sciences, and gender studies, in particular, are being targeted through reducing funds as well as through open attacks by governmental actors.

This is certainly not a »regular« context for social movements to act. The Covid-19 pandemic adds to the previous difficulties as the government denied its gravity and opened new fronts of conflicts with state governors, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Its anti-science approach created resistance. At the same time, Jair Bolsonaro is dealing with legal inquiries regarding

the use of *fake news* during the 2018 electoral campaign, as well as inquiries regarding possible crimes involving one of his sons.

New movements and renewed alliances are formed against authoritarianism and in the defense of democracy. Feminist organisations are not leading them, but this could be an opportunity to make sure that, if authoritarianism fails women, democratic regimes need to do better.

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IMPRINT

2021

ISBN 978-3-96250-866-1

Published by:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung • Forum Politik und Gesellschaft
Hiroshimastraße 17 • 10785 Berlin

Author: Flávia Biroli

Editorial work: Kim Krach • Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Elisa Gutsche

Contact person: Kim Krach (kim.krach@fes.de)

Translation: Helen Ferguson

Design: Dominik Ziller • DZGN

Printed by: Druckerei Brandt GmbH, Bonn

Printed on EnviroPolar, 100 per cent recycled paper, awarded the Blauer Engel award.

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Forum Politik und Gesellschaft
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