

## CONFRONTING BACKLASH AGAINST WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY IN BRAZIL: A LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSAL<sup>1</sup>

Cecilia M. B. Sardenberg<sup>2</sup>  
Maíra Kubik Mano<sup>3</sup>  
Teresa Sacchet<sup>4</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

This work is part of a research and intervention programme to investigate, confront and reverse the backlash against gender equality and women's rights in Brazil, which will be part of the Institute of Development Studies – IDS Countering Backlash Programme, supported by the Swedish International Development Agency - SIDA. This Programme was elaborated in response to the backlash against women's rights and gender equality that has emerged as a growing trend, championed by conservative and authoritarian movements gaining space across the globe, particularly during the last decade. In Brazil, this backlash has been identified as part of an 'anti-gender' wave, which has spread considerably since the 2014 presidential elections. Significant changes in Brazil have not only echoed strongly on issues regarding women's rights and gender justice, but also brought disputes over gender and sexuality to the political arena. To better address the issues at hand in this work, we will contextualize them in their historical background. We will begin with a recapitulation of the re-democratization process, in the 1980s, when feminist and women's movements emerged as a political force demanding to be heard. We will then look at the gains made during what we here term "the progressive decades for human and women's rights", focusing, in particular, on those regarding the confrontation of Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Brazil, which stands as one of the major problems faced by women and LGBTTQIs, aggravated in the current moment of Covid-19 pandemic. Next, we will single out the main issues which we plan to further in our research, including women's resistance to the backlash, concluding with considerations about future studies that could lead to further understandings on how we can better support feminist and women's movements in their struggles.

**KEY WORDS:** backlash against women's rights; backlash against gender equality; feminist resistance to backlash; Brazil.

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<sup>2</sup> Antropóloga, Professora Titular do Departamento de Antropologia (aposentada) e credenciada como Professora Permanente de Teoria Feminista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre Mulheres, Gênero e Feminismos - PPGNEIM, da Universidade Federal da Bahia - UFBA. Obteve o Bacharelado em Antropologia na Illinois State University (1977), Mestrado em Antropologia na Boston University (1981), Doutorado em Antropologia, Boston University (1997) e Estágio Pós-Doutoral como Visiting Fellow no Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Inglaterra (2003; 2005; 2013). É uma das fundadoras e atual Pesquisadora Permanente do NEIM-Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher/UFBA.

<sup>3</sup> Graduada em Comunicação Social, Habilitação Jornalismo, pela PUC-SP (2003) e pós graduada em Gênero e Comunicação pelo Instituto de Periodismo José Martí, de Havana, Cuba (2011). É mestra em Ciências Sociais pela PUC-SP (2010) e doutora em Ciências Sociais pela Unicamp (2015), na linha de pesquisa de Estudos de Gênero, com doutorado sanduíche na Université Paris 7 - Diderot. É professora adjunta da área de Teorias Feministas, do Departamento de Estudos de Gênero e Feminismo, da Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas da Universidade Federal da Bahia (FFCH/UFBA), e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre Mulheres, Gênero e Feminismo (PPGNEIM/UFBA). É pesquisadora do NEIM (Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher)

<sup>4</sup> Possui pós-doutorado em Ciência Política pela Universidade de São Paulo (USP); doutorado em Ciência Política pela Universidade de Essex (revalidado pelo DCP, USP), mestrado em Sociologia e Política pela Universidade de Londres (Birckbeck College) e graduação em Serviço Social pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Atua como professora visitante do Programa de Pós-graduação do Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher, da Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA) e pesquisadora do NEIM/UFBA.

**RESUMO:**

Este trabalho faz parte de um programa de pesquisa e intervenção para investigar, enfrentar e reverter a reação contra a igualdade de gênero e os direitos das mulheres no Brasil, que integra o programa do Instituto de Estudos para o Desenvolvimento - IDS Countering Backlash Program, apoiado pela Agência Sueca de Desenvolvimento Internacional - SIDA. Esse Programa foi elaborado em resposta à reação contra os direitos das mulheres e a igualdade de gênero que surgiu como uma tendência crescente, promovida por movimentos conservadores e autoritários que ganharam espaço em todo o mundo, especialmente durante a última década. No Brasil, essa reação foi identificada como parte de uma onda "anti-gênero", que se espalhou consideravelmente desde as eleições presidenciais de 2014. Mudanças significativas no Brasil não apenas repercutiram fortemente nas questões relativas aos direitos das mulheres e justiça de gênero, mas também trouxeram disputas sobre gênero e sexualidade para a arena política. Para melhor abordar as questões em apreço neste trabalho, vamos situá-las em seu contexto histórico. Começaremos com uma recapitulação do processo de redemocratização, iniciado na década de 1980, quando os movimentos feministas e de mulheres surgiram como uma força política exigindo ser ouvida. Em seguida, examinaremos os ganhos obtidos durante o que aqui denominamos "as décadas progressivas dos direitos humanos e das mulheres", com foco, em particular, naqueles relativos ao enfrentamento da Violência de Gênero (VBG) no Brasil, que se destaca como um dos principais problemas enfrentados por mulheres e LGBTTQIs, agravados no atual momento de pandemia de Covid-19. A seguir, destacaremos as questões principais que planejamos aprofundar em nossa pesquisa, incluindo a resistência das mulheres à reação, concluindo com considerações sobre estudos futuros que podem levar a maiores entendimentos sobre como podemos apoiar melhor os movimentos feministas e de mulheres em suas lutas. .

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** onda anti-gênero; movimentos reacionários contra direitos das mulheres e igualdade de gênero; resistência feminista; Brasil.

## Introduction: Framing

This work is part of a research and intervention programme to investigate, confront and reverse the backlash against gender equality and women's rights in Brazil, which will be part of the Institute of Development Studies – IDS Countering Backlash Programme, supported by the Swedish International Development Agency - SIDA. This Programme was elaborated in response to the backlash against women's rights and gender equality that has emerged as a growing trend, championed by conservative and authoritarian movements gaining space across the globe, particularly during the last decade. In Brazil, this backlash has been identified as part of an 'anti-gender' wave (Corrêa 2017, 2020; Junqueira 2017, 2018), which has spread considerably since the 2014 presidential elections. Significant changes in Brazil have not only echoed strongly on issues regarding women's rights and gender justice, but also brought disputes over gender and sexuality to the political arena (Mano 2017, Santos 2019).

As known, Brazil had a long period of military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. In 1988 a progressive new Federal Constitution was approved securing important rights for women. However, in 2016 Brazil suffered another coup d'état, which ousted President Dilma Rousseff, from the *Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT* (Workers' Party), and the first and only woman president to be elected in the country (Miguel 2016a). This coup was paved by patriarchal, anti-gender ideologies, and sustained by the legislative and judiciary powers, as well as by mainstream media (Rubim and Argolo 2018; Ramos and Fraccaro 2016). Since then, the situation has worsened in many respects. Michel Temer, Dilma's vice-president, a centre-right politician representing the old oligarchy and one of the coordinators of the coup, started dismantling the women's state machinery. He was also responsible for boosting neoliberal reforms in the country. To continue changes in that direction, centre-right parties rendered their support to Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a former army captain who had been a low profile congressman for nearly three decades. Bolsonaro was elected with the support of religious fundamentalist groups, having also been aided by campaigns demonizing PT and the absence of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the contest, who was leading the opinion pool. Former President Lula

could not run as he was convicted in a questionable judiciary process led by a judge who went on to become Bolsonaro's Minister of Justice.

During his campaign, Bolsonaro not only refused to participate in public debates with other candidates, but also made several discriminatory pronouncements against left wing parties as well as women's, LGBTs, indigenous populations and black people's rights. In his inaugural speech at the National Congress, in January 2019, Bolsonaro stated: "Let us unite the people, cherish the family, respect the religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, *combat gender ideology while preserving our values*. Brazil will once again be a country free of ideological bonds".<sup>5</sup> Once in power, he replaced the Women's and Human Rights Ministry, a ministry that had been created by President Dilma Rousseff, and designated Damares Alves, a female evangelical pastor, to run it. In one of her first days in office, she proclaimed that, from now on "girls wear pink, and boys wear blue", giving her full backing to traditional gender distinctions.<sup>6</sup> That perspective has been gaining support among Brazilians, yet, it also faces strong resistance, particularly from the organized women's movements and feminist academics, which we intend to map and analyse throughout this research project.

Under Bolsonaro's government the far-right has gained political clout and popularity. Brazil has seen a growth in religious fundamentalism that preaches a theology of authoritarianism and hatred against those regarded as enemies, an ideology identified as "Christofascism" (PY 2020).<sup>7</sup> In economic terms, 'bolsonarismo' follows ultra-neoliberal ideals, advocating a minimum state and the dismantling of workers' rights. Yet, it sustains conservative morals, defending the 'traditional family' – that is, the patriarchal family as defined by fundamentalist evangelical sects as well as conservative and charismatic Catholics. Central to these morals is an anti-gender stance, manifested in speeches and actions contrary to the rights of women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals, transvestites,

<sup>5</sup> <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2019-01/no-discurso-de-posse-bolsonaro-pede-apoio-para-reconstruir-o-pais>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/01/menino-veste-azul-e-menina-veste-rosa-diz-damares.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> [www.ihu.unisinos.br/600150-cristofascismo-a-uniao-entre-o-bolsonarismo-e-o-maquinario-politico-socio-religioso-entrevista-especial-com-fabio-py](http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/600150-cristofascismo-a-uniao-entre-o-bolsonarismo-e-o-maquinario-politico-socio-religioso-entrevista-especial-com-fabio-py)

and transgenders (Santos 2019). They have emerged much as a reaction to feminist and LGBTTTQIAs gains in sexual and reproductive rights, advanced most notably during the time in which PT was in government (2003 to 2016). These counter moves strengthened the far-right campaign that was responsible to bring Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency, and evangelical fundamentalists to national, state and municipal legislatures (Santos, 2019). Brazil has now an extremely conservative Congress, dominated by groups that defend Christian values, the army industry, and agribusiness (Chaia 2018, Prandi and Santos 2017).

For certain, the Legislative and Judiciary Powers have also played important roles – at times quite controversial - during this period. In the National Congress and State Assemblies, there has been fierce and increasing battles on the so-called "gender ideology" in education and culture, with some municipalities legislating against discussions on gender in their local schools. There have also been registered continuous attempts at all levels to dismantle sexual rights. But the Judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court (*Supremo Tribunal Federal-STF*), has maintained legal approval of gay and lesbian marriages and annulled local laws that forbade discussion concerning gender issues in public schools, considering them a violation of the federal constitution.

In this work, we will look at these disputes over gender and sexuality issues taking centre stage in Brazilian politics in recent years, which have sustained the backlash against feminism and women's rights. However, as we also intend to demonstrate in this work, mounting resistance to these anti-gender manoeuvres has grown considerably among different progressive segments of civil society, with feminist and women's movements leading the struggles.

By far and largely recognized as one of the most well organized and influential women's movements in Latin America, feminist movements in Brazil have taken important strides in fighting the backlash imposed by the rightists in power. The major mobilisation against the backlash happened before the first round of the 2018 Presidential elections, when a campaign called "Ele não" ("Not him") became viral on Facebook and, on September 29th, took over the streets of 160 Brazilian cities. But before that, several other smaller protests took place, indicating an increase and even a renewal of Brazilian feminist and women's

movements. They continue to be active, even if due to social distancing imposed by the COVID-19 pandemics, most of the protests have moved into social media channels and networks.

Backlash against gender equality and women's rights in Brazil has been widespread, involving very different areas and specific issues. However, as we shall spell in greater detail further ahead, in this work, we plan to look at and act upon the backlash and women's resistance to it in relation to four major policy issues, which have suffered the larger budget cuts and attacks by Christofascist currents: a) the conflicts and confrontation regarding the so-called "gender ideology" in education and culture taking place in the legislative and judiciary spheres; b) the attempts to destroy sexual and reproductive rights; c) the dismantling of programmes geared towards confronting gender-based violence against women; and d) the threat to the "Bolsa Família" Programme (PBF) which assists families under economic vulnerability, particularly those which are women-headed.

To better address the issues at hand, we will contextualize them in their historical background. We will then begin with a recapitulation of the re-democratization process, in the 1980s, when feminist and women's movements emerged as a political force demanding to be heard. We will then look at the gains made during what we here term "the progressive decades for human and women's rights", focusing, in particular, on those regarding the confrontation of Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Brazil, which stands as one of the major problems faced by women and LGBTTTQIs, aggravated in the current moment of Covid-19 pandemic. Next, we will single out the mains issues which we plan to further in our research, including women's resistance to the backlash, concluding with considerations about future studies that could lead to further understandings on how we can better support feminist and women's movements in their struggles.

## 1. Mapping the National Context in a Historical Perspective

The 1964 military coup and the authoritarian, repressive regime then installed in Brazil - as well as the resistance that it arose from different segments - have been for long the object of studies by historians, social scientists, and activists alike (Quartim 1971,

Stepan 1973, Dreyfuss 1981). More recently, with the release of previously qualified documents and the turn to the right, renewed interest has been raised on the issue (Reis 2000; Fico 2014; Napolitano 2014; Carvalho 2019). This includes new analyses of the process of re-democratization of the country and how it ties in with the tensions at play in contemporary political arenas (Codato 2005; Reis 2014; Maciel 2015; Silva, Calil and Silva 2016, Caldeira Neto, 2020).

In hindsight of nearly four decades, new studies suggest that the use of torture and related actions used by the military regime were supported by Brazilian sectors of the ruling elite, some of them still figuring in positions of power to this day (Reis 2014), e.g., Bolsonaro himself. Likewise, they see a continuity of neoliberal policies at work emerging full fledged during Fernando Henrique Cardoso's terms (1994-2002), which persisted through the PT years (Maciel 2016; Silva, Calil and Silva 2016). These neoliberal policies have now reached extremes that, combined with the pandemic economic stall, has led Brazil to an economic crisis with unemployment rates of 13, 3% (Brasil, IBGE).<sup>8</sup>

Other studies have focused on gendered experiences in the context of the 'dictatorships of the Southern Cone' (Silva, Pedro and Wolff 2018), revealing memories of women who were involved in the conflicts or who otherwise suffered under the hands of the military (Pedro 2011; Woitowicz and Pedro 2009). Ousted president Dilma Rousseff was herself a victim of severe torture sessions while imprisoned by the military regime, suffering in the hands of Colonel Ustra, a torturer who has been honoured by Jair Bolsonaro, including during the session in which the National Congress voted in favour of her impeachment.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the interest on such memories has arisen with the creation, by Dilma Rousseff, of the *Comissão Nacional da Verdade* (National Commission for the Truth) to investigate crimes committed by the State during the military rule, and of the *Comissão da*

*Anistia* (Amnesty Commission) to identify and compensate the victims.<sup>10</sup> A move which has instigated a "War of Memories" (Pereira 2015; Costa 2019), causing deep resentment among the military, particularly those retired, many of whom now take part in Bolsonaro's government. Some of them are top officers, such as the vice-president, General Hamilton Mourão, and all top slots in the Ministry of Health. Many of them still identify the 1964 Coup as the "1964 Revolution".<sup>11</sup>

This time, the military have come into power by supposedly 'democratic' means, although accusations of fraud through the use of fake news in the last elections are currently under examination by Judiciary committees. In any event, the military have now re-emerged as important actors in the present political scenario, as one of the conservative forces that defend the 'traditional family' (Castro and Leirner 2009). However, the National Commission for the Truth's investigations have revealed that sexual violence against women was a torture practice (Gracia 2014). This suggests that the 'high morals' preached by the military regime did not apply to their practices in relation to prisoners (Colling 2004, Schneider 2013).

## 2.1 The Emergence of Contemporary Women's Movements and Women's Machineries in Brazil

Contemporary feminist movements in Brazil emerged in the mid-1970s in the context of the democratic struggles against the military regime, having the issue of violence against women figuring on the foreground. A well known case leading to women's organized actions was the verdict of 'not guilty' to an assassin who claimed 'legitimate defense of honor' (Ardaillon and Debert 1987). This stirred up a wave of protests in major cities across the country, against impunity usually granted aggressors of women and

<sup>10</sup> <http://memoriasdaditadura.org.br/comissao-nacional-da-verdade-2/>

<sup>11</sup> Recent accounts report that there are close to 6 thousand military personnel serving in the different cabinet ministers of the Bolsonaro government. See, for example, *Correio Brasiliense*: 'Segundo TCU, 6,1 mil militares ocupam cargos no governo', Simone Kafruni, 17/07/2020, available at: [https://www.correiobrasiliense.com.br/app/noticia/economia/2020/07/17/internas\\_economia.873137/segundo-tcu-6-1-mil-militares-ocupam-cargos-no-governo.shtml](https://www.correiobrasiliense.com.br/app/noticia/economia/2020/07/17/internas_economia.873137/segundo-tcu-6-1-mil-militares-ocupam-cargos-no-governo.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> Available at:

<https://www.ibge.gov.br/busca.html?searchword=desemprego&searchphrase=all>

<sup>9</sup> Extra, Globo. Com news, "Coronel Ustra, homenageado por Bolsonaro como 'o pavor de Dilma Rousseff', era um dos mais temidos da ditadura", 18/04/2016. Available at:

<https://extra.globo.com/noticias/brasil/coronel-ustra-homenageado-por-bolsonaro-como-pavor-de-dilma-rousseff-era-um-dos-mais-temidos-da-ditadura-19112449.html>

murderers, giving greater visibility to the long-lasting practice of violence against women in Brazil (Sardenberg 2016).

During this time feminist groups were already active in different cities, becoming part of a wide and heterogeneous movement that articulated the struggles against the oppression of women in society with the fight for re-democratization. Feminists joined other women's movements in this struggle, enlarging the debate on gender inequality bringing about issues such as domestic violence, discrimination against women in the labor force and their exclusion from decision-making spheres and formal political participation (Sardenberg and Costa 2010, 2014). Topics such as sexuality, contraception and abortion were also important to feminists, however, as Jaqueline Pitanguy (2002:2) has stated, in public debates, they had to be introduced "gradually and cautiously, since they raised themes considered taboo by the Catholic Church and rejected by democratic forces allied with the Church against the military."

In 1979, in the midst of a profound economic crisis, which elevated the level of dissatisfaction with the military, General Geisel, the ruling President, proclaimed "general amnesty" to enemies of the regime as well as government agents, seeking to avoid criminalization of the latter. He also vowed to launch a "slow, gradual and secure" process of 'opening' up the system towards re-democratization with 'order'. To that end, the multi-party regime that had been suppressed with the coup was re-instituted, and a call was launched for direct general elections to be held in 1982 for all posts, including those for governors and for mayors of large, target cities, until then governed by appointed right wing politicians. The exception was the post of President, which remained a military prerogative until 1985, when, despite growing popular demands for direct presidential elections, a process for a congressional election of the new president occurred. Yet, for the first time in over 21 years, Brazil finally had a civilian for president: Tancredo Neves. However, he died shortly before inauguration, being replaced by José Sarney, the elected vice-president, a former right wing senator who had supported the military regime (Codato 2005; Reis 2014; Maciel 2015; Silva, Calil and Silva 2016, Caldeira Neto, 2020).

Nonetheless, despite his identification with the military, José Sarney responded to the demands of feminist and women's movements by creating, in

1985, the *Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher* – CNDM (National Council for the Rights of Women). Linked to the Ministry of Justice and operating with special funding, CNDM had, so to speak, a relative administrative autonomy, being organized on the bases of a Deliberative Council, Executive Secretary, and Technical Assistants with the Presidency of the Council indicated by the President of the Republic. Composed of 17 women, 1/3 of them representing women's groups and civil society institutions, the Deliberative Council was to be composed, in its great majority, by feminist activists from Brazil's different regions (Pimenta 2010).

In the 1982 elections, feminists had been quite active, joining the campaigns of opposition parties' candidates, many of whom were elected in major cities and several states. In São Paulo, feminists were able to grasp, in return, the support of the new governor, who responded to their demands by creating, in August, 1985, the first specialized Police Station in Defence of Women (*Delegacia de Defesa da Mulher* – DDM) to tend to women in situations of violence. In December of 1986, it was created, in São Paulo, the first State Council on the Condition of Women (*Conselho Estadual da Condição Feminina*), organized on a similar basis as the CNDM. This gave the impetus for the creation of police stations and state and municipal councils in several other states and cities, contributing, in time, to the establishment of women's rights machineries throughout the country (Sardenberg and Costa 2010, 2017; Costa 2008). This dialogue of feminist and women's movements with the state also opened the possibility for the formulation of a Comprehensive Health Program for Women (PAISM) and the provision of public services for legal abortions – in the case of pregnancies resulting from rape or those that pose a threat to the woman's health – which were in the books since the 1940s, but never before thoroughly enacted (Sardenberg and Costa 2010, 2017).

With the local support of these new organs, CNDM faced an important task in the following years, coordinating and orchestrating the campaign for the inclusion of women's rights in the new constitution being elaborated by the Constitutional Congress. In many state capitals, women's forums were organized in order to obtain signatures supporting the presentation of popular amendments to the new constitution on their behalf. At the same time, in

Congress, women representatives, with the assistance of CNDM, organized the so-called “*Lobby do Baton*”, the “Lipstick Caucus”, to campaign among their Congressional peers for the approval of those amendments (CNDM 1987). They were quite successful in their efforts: nearly 80% of all of the amendments women presented were approved and sealed in the New Constitution sanctioned in 1988 (Silva 2011; Silva, 2014). Indeed, totaling only 26 women (and only one self-declared feminist among them), representing a myriad of different parties, the Women’s Caucus was able to “rise to the occasion”, assuming a supra-partisan identity and presenting 30 amendments defending women’s rights in the new Constitution (Pinto 2003:74-75). In particular, the new Constitution established the principle of equal rights for women and men, forbidding sex-based discrimination and sanctioning, as well, the rights and needs of other minorities (racial, ethnic, disabled, aged). As such, it came to be known as the ‘*Constituição Cidadã*’ (Citizenry Constitution), although many of the progressive clauses it included were better elaborated than implemented (Alves 2017; ANFIP 2008; Oliveira and Oliveira 2011). According to some authors, in fact, despite the many gender-based advancements it included, women were still portrayed as second class citizens (Bonetti, Fontoura and Marins 2009; CFEMEA 2006).

In spite of these limitations, CNDM was instrumental in supporting local campaigns to advance women’s rights in the elaboration of the new state constitutions. In Bahia, in fact, feminist groups worked so as to circumvent some of the limitations of the Federal Constitution, including a special chapter on women. Yet, despite its many successful campaigns – or more than likely, precisely because of this success – towards the end of the Sarney government, CNDM suffered cutbacks in funding and administrative autonomy, leading to a walk out of all its members, beginning with the Council President (Costa and Sardenberg 2008). Although it was to be reorganized during President Fernando Collor’s term (a short one, as he was inaugurated in January, 1990, but impeached for corruption in 1992), it was only in 1994, during Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s government, that a new CNDM, with the participation of feminists indicated as counsellors, would begin to come into action (Pimenta 2010).

## 2.2 Gender Equality and Women’s Rights in the 1990s

The 1990s have been widely recognized as the decade of feminist professionalization, both as result of the institutionalization of feminist studies in universities, which was initiated in Brazil in the 1970s (Costa and Sardenberg 1994), as well as of the emergence of feminist NGOs (Alvarez 1998). In Brazil, the 1990s were also characterized by the expansion of feminist ideas among other women’s movements, such as the black women’s movement and other so-called ‘identity movements’, which contributed widely to the multiplication and differentiation of feminisms in the country (Sardenberg and Costa 2010, 2014). Moreover, the 1990s have been identified as the ‘Decade of the Conferences’ due to the staging of several world conferences by the United Nations, which had an impact on the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality around the globe, and contributed to the expansion of feminist networks throughout Brazil and to the trans-nationalization of Brazilian feminisms (Pitanguy 2002; Sardenberg 2015).

As we have noted elsewhere, “this process began with preparations for the Earth Summit – the UN Conference on Environment and Development – held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where Brazilian feminists participated actively, both in pre-conference as well as Global Forum meetings. They were among the almost 2,000 NGOs present at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, where they guaranteed various references throughout the final declaration, even a specific article recognizing women’s rights as an integral part of human rights” (Sardenberg 2015, p.116).

Likewise, as in the case of the Vienna Conference, so too “pre-conference organising was strategic for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo. Brazilian feminist NGOs brought together more than 300 feminists from different countries to produce a consensus on the recognition of women’s reproductive and sexual rights. Close dialogues also took place between feminists and the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations, leading to a progressive stand on the part of the official delegation. Brazil was instrumental in negotiating the more difficult issues in the Cairo Program of Action, such as those dealing

with health and reproductive rights, issues that led to a break within the G-77 group. This break remained at the 1995 Beijing conference, where Brazil, once again, advanced a more progressive position towards women's reproductive rights (Sardenberg 2015, p.116-117)."

Indeed, since 1992, after the impeachment of President Collor and up to the coup against President Dilma, Brazil counted on Ministers of Foreign Relations who were sympathetic to the defense of gender equality and women's rights in international arenas. As such, in preparation for the IV World Conference on Women, two different processes were set in motion for Beijing, with intense exchanges between them: a governmental one, with official conferences and reports led by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the support of university research centers; and a civil society one, led by the *Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras* (AMB), created precisely for organizing feminist participation in the overall process (Sardenberg 2015, p.117). Leading the Brazilian delegation to the Beijing meetings was President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's wife and first lady Dr. Ruth Cardoso, a Professor of Anthropology and self-declared 'feminist', who advocated for the articulation of a more progressive CNDM and facilitated the participation of notable feminists in the delegation (a policy which was followed until recent years), fostering an approximation between the official delegation, with access to the Conferences, and those participating in the parallel NGO forum (Sardenberg 2015, 2018).

During the Conference, there was an intense exchange, back and forth, between these two groups, with briefings about ongoing negotiations and the position Brazil should adopt in them. One of the more polemic issues at play was precisely the incorporation of the concept of gender and of a gender perspective within the Beijing Platform of Action. Vatican representatives and those of Islamic countries rejected the gender perspective and even the use of the term, vehemently opposing, as well, the inclusion of sexual and reproductive rights, particularly the legalization of abortion on demand, a position which still stands to this day. Brazil, together with Japan, the United States and the European Union, campaigned for the inclusion of the phrase 'sexual rights of women', but they were defeated by the conservative forces led by the Vatican, who only allowed for the inclusion of statements as to

the control over sexuality as a human right, and for the non-criminalization of women for seeking voluntary abortions (Sardenberg, 2015, 2018).

Advancing these issues was important for Brazilian feminists given that, back home, these were also contending points. It was important then to make use of what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) called the "boomerang pattern" of influence, explained by Sonia Alvarez ( ) as the kind of influence "(...) whereby transnational coalitions of non-governmental, governmental and intergovernmental actors put pressure on more powerful states and IGOs to bring pressure to bear in turn on a particular government which violates rights or resists the desired policy change." (In: Sardenberg and Costa, 2017).

This strategy eventually paid off in regards to the upgrading of women's machineries at home. In 2002, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso created the National Secretariat for Women's Rights – SEDIM, which took as one of its first tasks the elaboration of Brazil's first report to the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, Committee. According to CEDAW's article 18, all member countries that signed CEDAW (passed in 1982) should present periodical reports each 4 years, however, it was only in 2002 that the Brazilian government would first respond to that obligation, commissioning, for that purpose, a number of feminist NGOs. The CEDAW Committee also recommended the presentation of a parallel report, popularly known as the "Shadow Report", elaborated by civil society organizations. In response to this clause, close to 400 entities in Brazil formed a network in order to produce a "Shadow Report", which was to be presented alongside the official report to the CEDAW Committee in New York (Sardenberg and Costa 2011).

This process opened the way for the articulation of activists in the feminist and women's movements to organize in preparation for the 2002 presidential elections. To that end they created a national organizing committee responsible for launching a *Carta de Princípios* (chart of principles) and proposing key themes to be discussed and approved in state conferences. The resulting document - the Feminist Political Platform (*Plataforma Política Feminista – PPF*) was presented and approved at the Brazilian Women Conference (*Conferência de Mulheres Brasileiras*), held in Brasília (June 6-7, 2002), with the participation of more than 2,000



women representing all the different states. It was later officially presented to all candidates running for national and state offices (Sardenberg and Costa 2011).

### 2.3 Participatory State Feminisms under the PT Government

Running unsuccessfully for the Presidency in three previous elections (1989, 1994 and 1998), Luis Inácio Lula da Silva - a former steelworker who had emerged in the national arena as a labor union leader fighting the military regime and was one of the founders of PT, the Workers' Party - was finally elected President in 2002. He was one of the first candidates to endorse the Feminist Political Platform, and responded promptly to the suggestions of feminists in his transitional committee by creating the Special Secretary of Policies for Women (*Secretaria Especial de Políticas para Mulheres-SPMulheres*), with the status of Ministry, and declaring 2004 as *Ano da Mulher* (Women's Year), by decree. As part of the events for that year, SPMulheres, along with a renewed CNDM, organized the *I Conferência Nacional de Políticas para Mulheres- I CNPM* (First National Conference on Policies for Women), which took place in Brasília, the national capital, in July, 2004.

At the time, two distinct - even contradictory - processes had profound implications for the formulation of policies regarding women's issues. On one hand, the gradual re-democratization of political institutions, a process marked by the emergence of new actors in the national arena - feminists, including - had in time made events such as the I CNPM a possibility. On the other hand, Brazilian society faced the effects of a perverse combination of the processes of globalization, production restructuring, and the advancement of neo-liberalism in large scale, which turned labor relations even more frail and resulted in the widespread impoverishment of the population. In particular, the implementation of fiscal adjustment policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund, with the consequent cuts in social programs, rendered the life of the Brazilian poor laboring classes even more difficult, if not downright painful (Sardenberg 2004).

As such, despite the important advancements made towards the re-establishment of political and citizenship rights which culminated with Lula's swearing in as President, Brazilian society was still

profoundly marked by social inequalities, particularly those resulting from the intersection of gender, class, race, age, and other equally widespread social determinants. More importantly, even if inequalities between women and men still persisted, they tended to narrow within given social groups, whereas inequalities among women - especially between black and white women - had widened considerably (Sardenberg 2004).

Women, as a whole, earned (and still do) less than men, regardless of their color/ethnic groups, and independent of their level of schooling. As a matter of fact, the distortions increase as we move up in terms of years of schooling. Nevertheless, white women, as a whole, earn more than black men, while black women earn, on average, half of the earnings of white women and a mere fourth of what white men receive. Besides, black women still tend to face the most precarious conditions of insertion in the labor market, a large proportion still working as domestic servants without any type of social benefits, and respond (then and still today) for the highest proportion of heads of mono-parental households, the greatest majority living under poverty level incomes (Sardenberg 2004).

These inequalities among women were important issues to be dealt with in the national conferences, which had, as their main purpose, the launching of a process of dialogue between civil society and government, from the municipal through the federal levels. It also aimed at the formulation of the *I Plano Nacional de Políticas para Mulheres - I PNPM* (First National Plan of Public Policies for Women) towards the eradication of gender inequalities in Brazil, giving rise to what some authors have identified as a "participatory state feminism" (Sardenberg and Costa 2017). Indeed, the process mobilized close to 300,000 women throughout the country to discuss a proposed plan and appoint delegates through municipal and state conferences. Nearly two thousand delegates, indicated at the state conferences, participated in the Brasilia Conference, where 239 proposals were approved and later translated into 199 actions by a special committee that elaborated the I PNPM. Representatives of the different ministries, as well of the National Council of Women's Rights (CNDM), and of different women's bureaus throughout the country, integrated this Committee, working together for three months to

consolidate the Plan (Sardenberg and Costa 2011, p.68).

The I PNPM was marked by a feminist gender perspective along the lines of the 2002 Feminist Political Platform – PPF, which, in turn, included various issues already raised in the Beijing Platform of Action. Through the campaigning of feminist groups throughout the country, the legalization of voluntary abortion on demand was approved and included in the Plan (Soares and Sardenberg 2009). SPMulheres then created a special committee to prepare a policy brief for presentation to Congress by Minister Nilceia Freire. However, as it will be seen further ahead on Section 2, due to accusations of corruption against PT, the Workers’ Party, strategic alliances with Catholics and Evangelicals in Congress were strengthened, and the government retracted on its support to the process of approval of that law project (Mano and Macêdo 2018; Soares and Sardenberg 2009). But this issue would rise again during Dilma Rousseff’s 2010 presidential campaign, to the detriment of any real advancement in this regard (Mano and Macêdo 2018), remaining on the negotiation tables to be used by the Right against Leftists supported candidates when needed.

A much better reception was granted to issues involving legislation to confront gender based violence against women. A policy brief in that direction elaborated by a consortium of Feminist NGOs was presented and approved by Congress, being ratified by President Lula da Silva in August, 2006. It became known as *Lei Maria da Penha*, in honor of Maria da Penha Fernandez, a teacher who became paraplegic through a shotgun assault by her former husband, despite her repeated – and neglected - appeals for help from state authorities (Sardenberg 2016). Maria da Penha Law is one of the most comprehensive legislation packages to combat domestic violence against women in the world, responding to nearly 40 years of feminist struggles towards the creation of effective means of confronting and preventing domestic violence against women in Brazil (Barsted, 2007).

As planned, in August of 2007, the II National Conference for Public Policy for Women – II CNPM was held, modeled on the previous one, gathering, this time, a total of 2.559 participants elected in the 600 municipal, regional and state conferences that were part of this process. The final document, which was to serve as the basis for the elaboration of the II National

Plan of Public Policies for Women, included the launching of the “Pact Against Violence” to guarantee the implementation of the new domestic violence legislation, reaffirming, as well, the demand for the legalization of abortion by a wide margin, in spite of a non-supportive stance on the government’s part (Sardenberg 2007, Sardenberg and Costa 2011). We shall return to these issues in Section 3 of this paper, as they still remain central, particularly in the current backlash against women’s rights and gender equality in Brazil.

In regards to the current backlash, it is also important to observe that the PNPMs established among its priorities: a) the promotion of actions in the educational process for gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation equity; b) expansion of the access to early childhood education, day care centers and pre-schools; c) promotion of literacy and expansion of the provision of basic education for adult and elderly women, especially black and indigenous women; d) enhancement of the cultural initiatives of women and; e) dissemination of non-discriminatory and non-stereotyped images of women (Brasil, 2004; Costa; Rodrigues; Vanin, 2011). This implicated, in turn, the dissemination of a gender perspective in education, an issue which, as we shall see further ahead, has led to fundamentalist led campaigns against a supposed “gender ideology” that goes against “nature”. It is also tied up to campaigns denouncing the supposed propagation of “gay kits” in schools, even among preschoolers, as well as to campaigns that demand a policy of “schools without a party”, that is, without political orientation, campaigns which find to this day numerous adepts in the right wings of the National Congress.

In response to the social inequalities at large, ingrained in Brazilian society, the Lula Government created governmental machinery not only for the promotion of gender equality and women’s rights, but also for the promotion of racial equality (a Secretary of Racial Equality – SEPPIR) as well as for human rights as a whole. It also provided for the enlargement of the public university system with free college education and the implementation of social and racial quotas to undo the existing immense racial imbalance in public universities. To fight hunger and poverty a Conditional Cash program – ‘Bolsa Família’ – transferred cash to poor families, and free public health was provided, including for those in need of expensive medical

treatments. Lula closed his two-terms in government, in 2010, with nearly 87% approval, managing to elect his successor, Dilma Rousseff, the first woman ever to be elected as president of the country.

An economist of Marxist tendencies and former political prisoner during the military dictatorship, Dilma Rousseff was called by President Lula to serve, first as Minister of Mines and Energy, rising, in 2005, to the post of Head of the *Casa Civil* (Civil House), the major cabinet post in government, when corruption accusations were made against José Dirceu, President Lula's 'right arm' until then.<sup>12</sup> She was chosen for her reputation for being tough and honest, and getting so to speak, "the job done". Although not a self-declared feminist, she supported women's rights, including the legalization of voluntary abortions, a position which would be used against her during her first presidential campaign, in 2010, although back-firing.

Indeed, after the presidential primaries which in Brazil select the two most voted candidates to run against each other, Dilma Rousseff ran against José Serra, the Social Democratic Party – PSDB candidate, the party which had elected Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1994 and 1998, but lost to PT in the following elections (2002 and 2005). Knowing the position of conservative Catholics and fundamentalist Evangelicals against women's sexual and reproductive rights, he accused Dilma of defending the legalization of abortion. The issue stopped being pursued only after a former student of José Serra's wife revealed that she had confessed in class to having an abortion herself when the couple was exiled during the military dictatorship in Brazil.<sup>13</sup> By then, however, Dilma had already radically erased from her campaign any support to women's reproductive rights pertaining to termination of pregnancies, a move that lost her the support of several feminists and feminist groups (Mano and Macêdo 2018).

She restored some of that support by honoring, in her inauguration, her former cell mates during the

military regime,<sup>14</sup> and by attempting to bring more women as her cabinet members, having a total of 18 women serving with her during her five and a half years in office, the highest number of women ever in such top positions in the country. To be sure, there are accounts that she tried to have 50% of women, but was not able to do so due to "internal struggles" among different groups within PT.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, from the very beginning, President Dilma Rousseff vouched to pursue gender and racial equity through policies that narrowed the gaps between women and men, blacks and whites, poor and rich.<sup>16</sup> She continued the process of installing a 'participatory state feminism' initiated during President Lula's government, presiding over the III and IV National Conferences of Public Policies for Women, held in 2011 and 2015, respectively, the last one closing precisely on the day that Congress voted in favor of starting the impeachment process against her.

Before looking more closely at this process in the next sub-section, it is important to stress here that President Dilma Rousseff not only gave sequence to the policies promoting gender equality and women's rights implemented by President Lula da Silva, but instituted new ones as well, particularly in respect to confronting gender violence against women. Of note was the *Mulher Viver Sem Violência* Program (Women Living Without Violence), coordinated by the Secretariat of Policies for Women - SPMulheres, then under the direction of Minister Eleonora Menicucci, a Professor of Sociology at the Federal University of São Paulo and former cellmate of the President. The aforementioned Program aimed to "integrate and expand public services aimed at women in situations of violence, through the articulation of specialized services in the scope of sector policies, such as health, justice, public security, social assistance and income generation." The initiative was transformed into a Government Program through Decree n°. 8,086, of

<sup>12</sup> He, and two other PT politicians, José Genoíno and Delúbio Soares, were recently cleared of all charges, despite having spent years in prison. See: [https://luizmuller.com/2020/08/20/farsa-do-mensalao-15-anos-depois-petistas-tem-pena-extinta-por-que-eram-inocentes/?fbclid=IwAR1P6TROVFT9ZN7pDhrpbBfCk1hm\\_36nvsqA66NontaMcZadypapihLlLmg](https://luizmuller.com/2020/08/20/farsa-do-mensalao-15-anos-depois-petistas-tem-pena-extinta-por-que-eram-inocentes/?fbclid=IwAR1P6TROVFT9ZN7pDhrpbBfCk1hm_36nvsqA66NontaMcZadypapihLlLmg)

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/poder/po1610201011.htm>

<sup>14</sup> The experiences of these women, Dilma Rousseff including, are now portrayed in a documentary: <https://tab.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2019/09/19/dilma-e-outras-torturadas-protagonizam-filme-sobre-presidio-na-ditadura.htm> See also:

<https://blogs.ne10.uol.com.br/social1/2015/01/02/companheiras-de-cela-de-dilma-prestigiaram-posse/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-36384962>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/367624-presidente-dilma-diz-que-igualdade-de-genero-e-uma-das-metas-do-governo>

August 30, 2013, which sought the adhesion of the different units of the Union (Brasil, SPM, 2013).

To achieve these objectives, the Federal Government allocated a budget of R \$ 365 million to this Program, structuring it in six axes of action, namely: a) Implementation of the *Casa da Mulher Brasileira* (Brazilian Woman's House); b) Expansion of the Women's Service Center - Call 180; c) Organization and humanization of care for victims of sexual violence; d) Implementation and Maintenance of Women's Service Centers in the Frontier Regions; e) Continued awareness campaigns and; f) Mobile Units to assist women in situations of violence in the countryside and in the forest (Sardenberg 2018a).

Of all these actions, the Implementation of the *Casa da Mulher Brasileira* was the main one, receiving the most attention and largest budget. The House was presented as a 'public space' concentrating the different services for an integrated and humanized assistance to women in situation of violence, among which were included: Psychosocial Support; Specialized Police Station; Specialized Court on Domestic and Family Violence against Women; Specialized Prosecutor's Office; Public defense; Economic Autonomy Promotion Service; and Child Care space, with toy libraries (Sardenberg 2018a).

Alongside these actions, SPMulheres also endeavored to formulate and approve the 'Femicide Law', ratified by President Dilma Rousseff in March 2015. Responding in particular to the analysis of data on the Map of Violence, this law changed the Brazilian Penal Code in order to redefine "femicide" as a type of qualified homicide. It is now included in the list of "heinous crimes" - that is, among those considered extremely serious and thus deserving more severe sentences, without the possibility of bail or reduction of sentences. According to the new law, domestic violence against women is now classified as a "qualified crime", with sentences up to two and a half times longer than those for "simple" homicides of women (Sardenberg 2018a).

Another important gender related issue dealt during President Dilma's term in office was the dispute over the approval of the National Educational Plan. It involved conservative Catholic and Evangelical groups who opposed the inclusion of what they termed "gender ideology", proposed for the Plan. As summarized by Sandra Duarte de Souza (2014, p.188): "The mobilization of these sectors, which involved a

strong campaign on the internet, protests in the House of Representatives, and private meetings with representatives and senators, resulted in the withdrawal of the directive that proposed the overcoming of educational inequalities, "with emphasis on the promotion of racial, regional, gender and sexual orientation equality". The main argument was that this was a threat to the "natural family" and should be fought." For certain, it had a religious undertone (Barreira 2019). We will look more into these issues further ahead.

## 2.4 Gender Issues in the 2016 Coup<sup>17</sup>

As noted in a previous paper (Sardenberg, 2018a), it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when, why and how the process that led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff was launched (Dias; Segurado 2018, Moraes 2017, Nunes 2019). Pedro Bastos (2017) offers us a long-term discussion of the factors at play, pointing at "the structural power of the financial capital and the contradictions inherent to the models of economic growth and political coalition observed since the Lula administration". Despite President Dilma's attempts to overcome them, he concludes, the situation only worsened "in the context of an economic slowdown and the sharpening of international competition and social conflicts in Brazil", leading to the break-up of the support President Lula was able to gather among financial capitalists. This promoted the union of different capitalist fractions against the government, while the social ascension of the working classes into the spaces and symbols previously enjoyed by the middle classes, resulting from the social policies at work, fed the ire of the latter against PT, already instigated by corporate media and judiciary discourses of corruption against that party (in Sardenberg 2018a).

Some authors have placed the more near factors in the "June days" - that is, in the protests started with the *Movimento Passe Livre* (MPL), in São Paulo, in June 2013, when people took to the streets to complain about the rising public transportation rates (Mattos et al., 2016). Kátia Baggio (2016: 289) argues that, although this movement had nothing to do with the "coup plot", the "June days" opened the floodgates

<sup>17</sup> Portions of the discussions in this subsection first appeared in Sardenberg (2018a).

for right-wing groups, encouraged by the “great conservative and anti-petist liberal media” which had started “an intense process of wear and destabilization of the government of Dilma Rousseff”, to take to the streets asking for her impeachment.

Other authors have called attention to the plots being woven by different members of Congress and other agents involved in illicit schemes investigated by the so-called Operation Car Wash (*Lava Jato*). As can be drawn from the conversation between Senator Romero Jucá, from PMDB, a supposed PT ally, and Sérgio Machado, former director of Transpetro (the Retirement Fund of Petrobrás, Brazil’s petroleum company), who recorded the referred conversation between the two in which Jucá says “with Dilma it doesn’t work, we need to put Michel (Temer, the vice-president) in a great national agreement”, with “ the Supreme Court and everything ”(Valente, 2016). Without forgetting, of course, that the Vice President, Michel Temer, besides having more than 20 years in Congress and having been President of the PMDB, had much strength over the parliamentary majority bloc known as “*Centrão*” (Alencastro, 2016), and could certainly swing it to his favor. Indeed, he had already threatened President Dilma in a personal letter made public, in which he called himself “decorative vice”, complaining that she did not trust him nor his party, the PMDB (and today we know, with reason).<sup>18</sup> According to Ana Flávia Ramos and Gláucia Fraccaro (2016: 282), this letter is one of the “vestiges left of the coup”: “This record of “dissatisfaction” would sound more like a threat of conspiracy than the denunciation of an injustice. In other words, the Vice-President declared that he would deliver the coup, and that it would be the president's own fault for not trusting him.”

It is also important to highlight the damage to the President done by the Supreme Federal Court (STF) in adopting an “activist stance”, with the open support of the “national political, economic and social elites”, to make possible, although not openly, a political agenda that had already been defeated in electoral disputes (Fernandes and Gómez, 2017). In other words, the Supreme Court not only legitimized

the coup, but also the PSDB program defeated at the polls but later implemented by the Temer Government.

Probably, all these factors contributed to the removal and eventual impeachment of the President (Oliveira 2016), or “golpeachment”, for Jessé de Souza (2017), considering that the accusations against her were unfounded (Galvão, Zaldan, Salgueiro, 2017). It was, therefore, a legal-media-parliamentary coup, launched along the lines of a “classic dramaturgy” (Vidal, 2016), so that, on August 31, 2016, Dilma Rousseff, the first woman President of the Republic was removed from office,

[...] in a vote in Congress that would become one of the darkest episodes experienced by that House. Transmitted by the media to the whole country, the images of hundreds of deputies distilling their hatred for the president, in the name of a speech based on “God” and the “Family”, demonstrated in a monstrous way the legislative power's desire to remove the president of the place of chief of chief mandate of the Nation (Leitão, 2018: 52).

The evocation of the ‘family’ at that time shows that the gender issue, which is still not very well ventilated in the analysis of the coup, played a fundamental role in the whole process (Rubim and Argolo, 2018, Pina 2017). It can even be said that this coup was characterized as an instance of political gender violence against the woman Dilma Rousseff, starting with the disqualification speeches of her person, propagated by the corporate media (Rosario, 2017), which followed her trajectory “from the moment her name started to be shown as a possible candidate for the presidency ”(Araújo, 2018: 34). The corporate media then proceeded to characterize her as a simple ‘technician’, disqualifying her as a ‘political’ person for never having held an elective office, as well as for her alleged lack of ability for ‘dancing according to the music’ in dealing with the political leaders who sought her while a Cabinet member in Lula’s government.

Céli Pinto (2018: 26) has argued that this criticism focused on Dilma Rousseff was probably based on “[...] a broad concept of what it means to be political, which includes an exchange of favors between public agents and between public and private agents.” But, as the same author points out later, due to her own political trajectory as a left-wing and imprisoned and tortured militant, Dilma Rousseff [...]

<sup>18</sup> <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2015/12/1716259-em-carta-desabafo-a-dilma-temer-diz-que-foi-desprezado.shtml>

“had a more political and left-wing perspective than Lula himself” (2018: 29).

The disqualification of the President also characterized her as 'non-charismatic' and as someone “[...] whose speeches surpassed the void of appeal and content and were always the object of mockery and the lack of this 'quality' to govern” - even to be presented as a 'dumb woman' who only 'talks nonsense' (Araújo, 2018: 38).” Not to mention the wide-ranging instances of violence that made her a target, whether by public insults, such as at the opening of the 2014 World Cup in Rio de Janeiro, or because of sexual offenses exposed on stickers and on social networks (Leitão, 2018 ). As Ana Flávia Ramos and Gláucia Fraccaro (2016: 282) affirm, it was a misogynistic blow to democracy: “Not even in the moments of greatest popular rejection car stickers were produced with the figure of Fernando Collor in a proctological position”.

For Céli Pinto (2018: 30) all of these offensive instances constitute themselves as “[...] parameters of the level of civic education and prejudice against women in the country,” characterizing what Flávia Biroli (2016 ) calls “political violence against women”, which stands as one of the different dimensions of how gender violence against women manifests itself in Brazilian society.

## **2.5 The dismantling of Women’s Rights Machinery with Michel Temer (2016-2018)<sup>19</sup>**

It should be stressed that, as highlighted by Linda Rubim and Fernanda Argolo (2018: 10), the election of the woman Dilma Rousseff “[...] represented a significant change for the history of women and, particularly for the presidential profile of the country, until then, exclusively dominated by men.” It should also be added that policies for women, such as the implementation of the Maria da Penha Law, the Femicide Law, the “Woman Living Without Violence” Programme and others of that order, originating from proposals by feminist and women’s movements, represented historical changes, being one of the main advances brought by the governments of the Workers' Party (PT). They became, as such, one of the main objects of the deconstruction initiated by Michel Temer, who installed, instead, an

ultra-neo-liberal government, characterized by a patriarchal tone from the beginning, openly expressed in the absence of female representation, at the highest levels, and without commitment to the struggles and demands of women (Sardenberg 2018a).

Indeed, the measures taken by the Temer Government towards ‘fiscal austerity’, from the very beginning, did have a gender overtone in provoking a very negative impact on women’s lives. The labor reform, the Social Security reform, the cuts in the Bolsa Família Program, among other neoliberal measures, imposed by President Temer and the Congress that supported him, came with a gender focus, impacting women more strongly (Farias, 2018). Therefore, the considerations of ex-Minister Eleonora Menicucci (2016), of SPMulheres, are quite pertinent:

The articulators of this current coup are apparently hidden, but who are they? They are white, rich, violent and voracious men who became explicit as structuring of the Brazilian patriarchy that unites gender, race and class. They dismantle the social policies that support daily life, eliminate civil, social and labor rights that guarantee citizenship and privatize with the greatest speed ever seen all public goods. The relationship between patriarchy and ultra-economic liberalism shows itself with great vigor in the current fascist coup context, highly explained by the fundamentalism of the National Congress, especially the Chamber of Deputies.

Similar thoughts were expressed by Congresswoman Maria do Rosário (PT), in referring to the attacks on women's rights in the National Congress, which not only prevented further progress, but also destroyed what had already been achieved:

Within the National Congress the most atrocious attacks on women's rights are under way, and the unimaginable always takes place when the objective is to silence our voices and guide our bodies. One of the best examples of this is the conversion of a Constitutional Amendment Proposal that aimed to ensure longer maternity leave time for mothers of premature babies in a text that can prevent abortion in case of rape, risk of the mother's life or anencephaly, and even the morning after pill (PT na Câmara, 2017).

It should be noted that, under pressure from the opposition forces to cut on public expenditure,

<sup>19</sup> The discussion about the Temer government in this subsection first appeared in Sardenberg (201a).

President Dilma had proceeded with a ministerial reform, giving rise to the combination of the Secretaries of Policies for Women, Promotion of Racial Equality, Youth and Human Rights under a new Ministry, the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, Youth and Human Rights, placed under the direction of Minister Nilma Lino. However, the Secretariat for Policies for Women, housed there, continued to have a large degree of autonomy and to manage a considerable budget to carry out policies and programs aimed particularly at tackling violence against women (Sardenberg 2018).

As soon as he was sworn in as interim president, Temer extinguished the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, Youth and Human Rights, which housed the Secretariat for Policies for Women, transferring it to the Ministry of Justice, but without the previous status. In addition, to coordinate it, the interim appointed the ex-congresswoman and ex-president of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, Fátima Pelaes (PMDB), who soon transformed the facilities of the aforementioned Secretariat into a space for religious cults, violating the principle of secularism of the State (Sardenberg 2018).

This cabinet reform was indicative of the little importance - even disregard - given to policies for women in the Michel Temer government. In fact, President Temer himself repeatedly showed the patriarchal bias that guided him, as observed by his pronouncement on International Women's Day (March 2017), in which he portrayed women as almost exclusively concerned with children and homecare and, as such, as specialists in the "fluctuation of prices in supermarkets" (Marreiro, 2017).

In 2017, after the 'gaffes', President Temer made new changes in the ministries, creating the General Secretariat of the Presidency and the Ministry of Human Rights and transferring the Secretariat of Policies for Women from the Ministry of Justice to the Secretariat of Government, held by former Congressman Carlos Marun (PMDB), famous for being authoritarian and known in Brasília as the President's "pitbull" (*Correio Brasiliense*, 2018).

In July 2018, through another Provisional Measure, a new change was made to the Secretariat, with its transfer, together with the National Council for the Rights of Women - CNDM, to the Ministry of Human Rights, commanded by Minister Gustavo Rocha (Chagas, 2018). This change implied a new

demotion, as reported in CNDM's Public Note, where the councilors emphasized that:

The various organizational changes of the Secretariat in a short period of time reflect, for us, Civil Society Counselors at CNDM, negligence with the portfolio that is competent for topics of extreme relevance to Brazilian society, such as gender equality; combating sexual violence; the fight against femicide and misogyny; women's participation in politics; sexual and reproductive rights and the insertion of women in the labor market.

We must consider not only the disaggregation and demotion of women's rights machineries, but also the drastic cuts in the total budget destined to the Woman Living Without Violence Program: from R \$ 365 million in 2016, to R \$ 96 million in 2017, that is, a cut of almost 1/3 of the previous value, with further cuts in 2018. Undoubtedly, these factors led to the dismantling of the policies of the previous governments, as Congresswoman Maria do Rosário lamented:

Temer's legacy for women is a cut in funding from policies aimed at promoting gender equality, which, according to the 2018 budget forecast, will reach 80% compared to Dilma's last year at the helm of the presidency. Measures that transform policies to assist women in situations of violence, and to encourage autonomy into mere remnants of what they once were (PT na Câmara, 2017).

It is worth mentioning that the construction of the *Casas da Mulher Brasileira*, which appeared as one of the main axis of the program in question, was paralyzed and even those three that were delivered ready before the coup were not put in operation. As the former National Secretariat for Confronting Violence Against Women in the Lula and Dilma governments, Aparecida Gonçalves, expressed in a recent interview: "They were not put to work because they are not priorities for this government. The policy to confront violence against women is a secondary issue, it is effectively scrapped" (*Porém.net*, 2016).

For Congresswoman Maria do Rosário, however, it was not just a lack of funding, but above all the "neglect and lack of political and social sensitivity" of the Government, disregarding "national and international standards for guaranteeing and protecting the human rights of women, above all, the

Maria da Penha Law, the National Plan of Policies for Women and the OAS Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women” (Farias, 2018).

It should also be noted that, in addition to the neglect, scrapping and abandonment of different agencies and bodies in the service network to assist women in a situation of violence, the Temer administration imposed a police-like conservative view of how to deal with the issue of gender violence against women. For instance, a new federal plan to combat violence announced that it would “[...] give payments of daily allowances to PMs and police from the National Security Force who worked, on their days off, in regions with high rates of domestic violence” (Melo, 2016).

Alongside this view of tackling gender-based violence as a “police case”, the Judiciary began to change its directive in the application of Maria da Penha Law, aiming it to defend the family instead of women. Following the example of Minister Carmen Lúcia of the Supreme Federal Court, which attempted to transform the Courts of Domestic and Family Violence against Women, instituted by the Maria da Penha Law, into “Courts of Peace at Home”. As the *Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras* commented regarding this proposed change:

This attempt may seem interesting at first, but when we analyze the project we find that it is more an attempt to silence women, precisely when we try to name and give voice to our pains and sufferings. As long as we are experiencing domestic and family violence, we will not have peace at home nor in the streets (AMB, 2017).

For certain, Michel Temer’s term in the presidency was not a popular one. He left with over 80% of disapproval from the people, and could not bring his party’s candidate, Henrique Meirelles, who served with President Lula, to the electoral second turn. He was nevertheless right in his prophecy that Brazilians would miss him: with Bolsonaro in power, we most certainly do.

## 2.6 Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo (2018 -)

To this day, nearly two years after the last presidential elections (Oct, 2018), what responds for the election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro still remains a

puzzle to many Brazilians and foreign observers alike (Pinheiro-Machado and Feixo, eds, 2019). Indeed, his bid to run for the presidency was first regarded as a joke! He left the Army in 1988 under suspicion of threatening to blow up barracks in protest to low military stipends, making use of his notoriety to earn a seat at Rio de Janeiro’s City Council and then at the National Congress, serving 28 years in public office without having one single project approved. But he made very good use of his Congress tribune to make sexist, racist, homophobic and xenophobic pronouncements, paying homage to the military regime and to known torturers such as Colonel Ustra, who was Dilma Rousseff’s tormentor. Yet, despite his apology of torture and after being married twice before and known for his unfaithfulness to his former wives, he was taken into the evangelical community after marrying his present (and third) wife, Michelle Bolsonaro, a devout member of a Baptist church in Brasília. This opened the way for him to join the *Frente Parlamentar Evangélica*, (Congressional Evangelical Front), where he built support for the 2018 elections.

Evangelicals first gained expression as a conservative, corporatist group in politics during the works of the Constitutional Congress which, as noted earlier, elaborated the 1988 post-dictatorship Federal Constitution. However, evangelicals have not been necessarily ‘monolithic’ in terms of politics, having supported Lula da Silva for the presidency in the 2002 and 2006 elections, whose running mate, José de Alencar, was an evangelical pastor from a centrist party (Machado 2006). Although up to then there was already a ‘Bancada Evangélica’ (Evangelical Caucus) within Congress, it was only in 2003, thus after Lula and José de Alencar’s inauguration, that the *Frente Parlamentar Evangélica* was organized (Borges 2009). At present this Front counts with nearly 200 representatives who are not necessarily evangelical, but identify with conservative evangelical guidelines, which focus primarily on family related issues (Py 2019). Although composed of different parties and denominations, the Congressional Evangelical Front presents a strategy and joint action that reflects the power of mobilization of Pentecostals in Brazilian society (Trevisan, 2013). They represent a moral conservative front in Congress, gaining strength particularly with the election of former Congressman



Eduardo Cunha (PMDB) as Speaker of the House, during President Dilma Rousseff's term.<sup>20</sup>

During the 2010 presidential elections, evangelicals began to withdraw their support from PT, not campaigning for President Dilma's election, particularly after she was 'accused' of supporting the legalization of abortions on demand. They took part in the manifestations against Dilma in different cities throughout the country, but were more tuned in to electing evangelical Congressmen and Congresswomen, enlarging the Evangelical Caucus in Parliament and, as such, the conservative vote pro impeachment in defense of the 'family'.

Yet, this conservative wave in politics in which religious groups come strongly into the political arena has not been restricted to Brazil. And here, as elsewhere, they have strategically aligned with neoliberal groups (Gentile 2018), giving rise to what has been termed 'liberal conservatism', that is, a branch of conservatism (or of neoliberalism) which combines conservative moral values with a belief in the principles of the free market, constituting what some authors regard as the "new right" (Messenberg 2019).

A survey conducted by Debora Messenberg (2019) among 'new right' groups and representatives (Jair Bolsonaro among them), focusing on their "discursive emissions" through different media in 2015 (followed by group discussions with people who followed or otherwise supported them) revealed that three majors semantic fields dominated their messages, which combined conservative values and liberal economics, as follows:

- a) Anti-petism, having as related ideas: Dilma's Impeachment, corruption, economic crisis, Bolivarianism;
- b) Moral Conservatism: defense of the 'traditional family', rescue of Christian faith and values, patriotism, anti-communism, fight against crime, opposition to racial and social quotas;
- c) Neoliberal principles: Reduction of State Apparatus, market efficiency (privatization of state agencies), free market (entrepreneurism), meritocracy, cuts in social policies.

Messenberg (2019) observed that the discursive elements tied to the defense of the 'traditional family', centered on the opposition to same-sex marriages, legalization of abortions, 'gender ideology' and the expansion of feminism, while being supportive of the so-called 'gay cure'. She characterized their discourses as being openly homophobic, sexist, racist and xenophobic, a tendency which seems to be common to the "new right" in other countries as well.

Leticia Cesarino (2019) argues that these discursive elements were a central part of Bolsonaro's electoral campaign, characterizing Bolsonarism as a rightist populism. She investigated digital messages exchanged among Bolsonaro's followers during the campaign, focusing on memes, videos, audios and texts transmitted through WhatsApp, which taken as a whole could be characterized as what she termed "digital populism". Cesarino observed that, as discussed by Ernesto Laclau in reference to populism in others instances, so too in the messages she analyzed the 'axis of difference', related to establishing an "antagonistic division between friend and enemy", as well the 'axis of equivalence', "which traces contiguity between leader and "people" could be clearly identified (2019:533).

Cesarino also identified three other discursive functions in those messages, which she believed were equally important: "permanent mobilization through alarmist and conspiratorial content; inverted mirror of the enemy and return of accusations; and creation of a direct and exclusive communication channel between the leadership and its public through the delegitimation of authorized knowledge production instances in the public sphere (notably, the academy and the professional press)" (ibid:ibidem). Of interest to our discussion is her affirmation that "it is not by chance that Bolsonaro's original fame as misogynist, racist and homophobic reproduces point by point the markers of difference privileged by identity policies in Brazil and elsewhere: gender, race and sexual orientation." His campaign memetics used these markers to define the central enemies, but were careful not to make an antagonist separation between whites and blacks, men and women, or heteros and gays. Instead, this separation was defined "between the feminist, LGBT militancy and the black movement and the 'good citizens'" (*cidadãos de bem*). Thus it made it possible

<sup>20</sup> Eduardo Cunha was found guilty of corruption and is now serving a prison term.

for those who did not directly identify with these movements, to be mobilized “by the Bolsonarism equivalence chain, which operated with empty signifiers as “Brazilians”, “Workers”, “good citizens” or “patriots”. (Cesarino 2019: 534).

Cesarino notes, as well, that in response to the feminist #EleNãO campaign, which mobilized thousands of women on the internet and brought thousands to the streets in major cities throughout the country just prior to the first electoral turn, there was a flood of messages circulated through WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media, featuring “feminists as the enemy.” They were “associated with the colors red and black, to disorder, to threatening atmospheres, to nudity, to the shamelessness and hypocrisy of the elites who pretend to defend the people, but who really want to maintain their privileges, often through corrupt ways” (Ibid:ibidem). Furthermore, they made use of “binary memes”, which divided the women between right and left, picturing the former with “purity, beauty, intelligence, high body parts (brain), hygiene, civility and green-and-yellow; and the second, with banditry, ugliness, ignorance, low body parts (vagina, anus, urine), dirt and animals.” Similar tactics were used to characterize the LGBT population, activists being featured as bad and ugly, and Bolsonaro’s gay supporters as good and beautiful. Let it be added that many of the memes circulated are in fact based on so-called “fake news” and make use of digital robots to disseminate the messages at great speed and quantity, a electoral digital machinery that has been paid by illegal campaign contributions, a matter which is now under examination by the Judiciary.

Let it be stressed that in establishing his cabinet, Bolsonaro made use of an “inverted mirror” tactics, similar to that used in the memes, appointing to several of the cabinet positions people who negate that which they are supposed to watch over. As such, for Minister of Environmental Resources, he nominated an anti-environmentalists, who is destroying the Amazon Forest and indigenous populations; for Minister of Foreign Relations, he has a flat-Earth believer who despises globalization and speaks of the United Nations as a Cultural Marxism breeder; for Head of the Palmares Foundation, an organ created by previous governments in response to the demands of Black People’s movements, he has appointed a black man who despises and criminalizes the movement; and for Minister of Women, the Family, and Human Rights, he

has appointed Damares Alves, an Evangelical Pastor, who has destroyed nearly all federal women’s rights machineries (and their previous internet sites), and takes a stand against nearly all feminist principles, vouching to defend “the family”. As is the case of Minister Damares, two other cabinet – the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Education - are also Evangelical Pastors, a situation which further characterizes Bolsonaro’s government as guided by a “christofascism” (Almeida 2017, 2019, Miguel 2019). In the following section, we will look more closely at some of the contemporary issues that are in dispute between feminists and this ‘christofascist’ new right.

### **3. Contemporary gender and women’s rights issues being contested**

#### **3.1 Education and Culture – ‘Gender Ideology’**

On November 7, 2017, the noted philosopher Judith Butler was in São Paulo, Brazil, as an invited speaker to participate in a conference on Democracy, promoted by the University of São Paulo - USP. Long before she arrived, the street in front of the conference venue was taken over by two different noisy groups: one protesting against her presence, even to the point of burning a doll-image of her, and the other aiming to applaud and defend her (Pereira 2018).

Two weeks earlier, a petition for the cancellation of her presence in the event was circulated in the internet, gathering more than 300.000 signatures. This was followed by calls through the ‘events’ pages of Facebook for people to participate in the street protest, identified as an “Act of Repudiation against the Major Propagator of Gender Ideology: Judith Butler”. In preparation for the event, memes were circulated in Facebook and WhatsApp featuring claims such as “Children’s sexual education is a parental prerogative”, “Men come wearing blue, women pink”, “Out Judith Butler with your noxious ideology”, “Leave our children alone” and so forth. More than 7.000 people signed up to participate in the act, but most of them did show up (Kalil 2018). Nonetheless, on the day Judith Butler was to leave for Rio de Janeiro, she was met by a small group of protestors,

being pushed around by two women with banners yelling improprieties.<sup>21</sup>

Among other things, they accused her of propagating “gender ideology” and thus going against nature, given that they claim ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are biologically determined and ultimately by God. As Sara Garbagnoli (2016) has observed, in this perspective ‘gender ideology’ is thus regarded as “the heresy of immanence”, that is, it represents the “denaturalization of the sexual order established by God”.

As noted earlier, this notion of ‘gender ideology’ was in fact first expressed in a Vatican document elaborated by Cardinal Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) opposing the incorporation of a gender perspective in the Beijing Platform of Action, approved at IV World Conference on Women (1995). From a critique of the gender perspective was coined the notion of ‘gender ideology’ with a negative connotation, as a means of associating critical issues, such as “the order of gender, family and sexuality” (Dip 2016). It is also a way of “opposing both the emergence of the debate on women’s reproductive rights, abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and education programs that include gender issues” (Elzbieta Korolczuk 2016, in Garraio and Toldy 2020, p.121).

The Vatican produced several documents in that order, including one approved at a meeting held in the Basílica of Aparecida, in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, taking a stand to this day against feminism, regarded as pernicious to the family. These ideas found echo among different Christian denominations, particularly among Evangelicals, emerging, in time, as a trans-national, global “anti-feminist movement that aims to counter policies that promote gender equality” (Garraio and Toldy 2020, p.120)

Despite its global character, this movement has taken on regional and local characteristics (Miguel 2016b). In Latin America, this movement expanded particularly after the publication of Argentine author Jorge Scala’s book, *La ideología de género: o el género como herramienta de poder*, published in 2010, whose opening paragraph states that : “The badly called [...] “perspective” [...] of gender, is, in

fact, an ideology. Probably the most radical ideology in history, since - by imposing itself - it would destroy human beings in their most intimate nucleus and, simultaneously, end society “(Scala, 2010: 7). In a comparative analysis, Richard Miskolci and Maxiliano Campana (2017, p.734) have observed that three elements seem to be common in the emergence of debates on ‘gender ideology’ in countries of Latin America: 1) they started with the coming of the new millennium; 2) they emerged in countries which elected leftist governments; and 3) they seem to have flared up particularly around educational and legal reforms.

Indeed, in Brazil, the anti-gender movement began to gain strength during President Lula’s first term, particularly with the creation of the Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy and Diversity (Secad), in 2004, which laid the foundation for the implementation of educational policies aimed at promoting gender equality and combating homophobia, as proposed in the I Plan of Public Policies for Women (Cowan 2016). It flared with greater intensity in 2009, with the launching of the III National Plan for Human Rights and of the Program “Brazil Without Homophobia” (Machado 2017, Luna 2017). And it came out with full force from 2011 on, after the Supreme Federal Court (STF) recognized that same-sex marriages had the same status as heterosexual unions. According to Richard Miskolci and Maxiliano Campana (2017, p.735, our translation):

The hegemony of the notion of “gender ideology” has been established in Brazil since 2011, the year in which the Federal Supreme Court (STF) recognized that the union between people of the same sex had the same status as heterosexual marriage. In the same month of the Supreme Court’s decision, the controversy over the didactic material of the “School without homophobia” program, known by conservatives as “gay kit”, gained national notoriety, which would be distributed in six thousand public schools, but which, after strong opposition, was vetoed by President Dilma Rousseff.

In this context, ‘gender ideology’ became a category with the meaning of “ideological indoctrination in educational institutions”, regarded as promoting the hyper-sexualization of children (Garraio and Toldy 2020, p.147, Miskolci 2018). In Congress, it faced strong opposition led by the FPE

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/sociedade/judith-butler-e-agredida-ao-embarcar-no-aeroporto-de-congonhas/>

(Parliamentary Evangelical Front), which also took on against the National Plan for the Promotion of Citizenship and the Human Rights of the LGBTT. Through a twisted move, they elected in 2013 Congressman Marcos Feliciano, an Evangelical Pastor, as President of the Congressional Human Rights Commission, and gained momentum as well to elect, in 2015, another Evangelical Pastor, Congressmen Eduardo Cunha, as Speaker of the House (Miskolci and Campana 2017).

A parallel movement, the “School Without Party” (*Escola sem Partido*), links the propagation of ‘gender ideology’ in schools with Leftist and ‘Communist’ attempts to politically indoctrinate children as well in that direction (Cisne et al 2018, Frigotto 2018, Mano 2019). They have gained support to successfully pass legislation in Municipal and State Houses prohibiting ‘political’ discussions in school and criminalizing teachers who do so. Fortunately, the Supreme Court (STF) has continuously found these laws unconstitutional, but religious fundamentalist legislators are relentless, they keep on forcing their notions upon their local chambers (Gomes and Galvão 2019). As Marco Aurélio Prado and Sonia Corrêa (2018, p. 445, our translation) well explain:

“In the Brazilian case, the Catholic-Evangelical profile of the offensive is striking, on the one hand, even when the strong frequency of the Vatican, as an intellectual mentor of this discursive chain, is obscured by the evangelical stridency. On the other hand, it is also essential to recognize the contribution of the participation of other religious voices such as Kardecists and Jews from the right and secular sectors, such as the so-called liberals of the Free Brazil Movement (MBL), lawyers, doctors, teachers and politicians who are not necessarily religious, an example of which is *Escola sem Partido*. These mobilizations, which have been increasingly intense since 2016, have not only been part of the electoral and post-electoral scenario, but, since before, they have involved attacks on the freedom of professors’ professions, extrajudicial complaints against schools, prohibition of teaching materials on sexuality and gender topics, promoting bills that aim to restrict not only gender and sexuality education, but the reproductive and sexual rights of women and LGBTI people.”

It is important to stress that this attack against the rights of women and lesbians, gays, bisexuals,

transsexuals, transvestites and transgenders (LGBT) is related to the strengthening of the extreme right in Brazil and to the victory of Bolsonaro. According to Rayana Santos (2020), in fact, “the mobilization of themes related to gender and sexuality is not a smokescreen for the implementation of the real objectives of right-wing groups, but central issues that are used to mobilize the population and become policies that benefit certain groups and harm others.” Indeed, Maranhão, Coelho and Dias (2018: 67) go as far as arguing that Bolsonaro “was elected president due to the transmission of untrue news on social networks such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook on topics such as “gay kit” and “gender ideology”, aiming to cause a feeling of social terror due to the supposed extermination of the “traditional Brazilian family.”

### 3.2 Sexual and Reproductive Rights

As we saw earlier, reproductive rights also became central issues in previous elections, as was the case of Dilma Rousseff’s first electoral campaign, when her support to the legalization of voluntary abortions was turned against her and she opted for bowing out, as in the case of the so-called “gay kit”. This remains a touchy issue, particularly for feminists who directed efforts to the campaign for the legalization of abortion led by *Jornadas Brasileiras pelo Direito ao Aborto Legal e Seguro* (Brazilian Journey for the Right to Legal and Safe Abortions).

To be sure, Feminists have been campaigning for close to five decades for the legalization of voluntary abortions in Brazil, but this fight took a new turn in 2003, when several organisations active in the feminist movement joined the September 28 Campaign, a Latin American trans-national movement for free and safe abortions. *Cunhã*, a feminist collective, was the focal point for the Campaign in Brazil, working close together with two national feminist networks: *Rede Feminista de Saúde* (Feminist Health Network) and *Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir* (Brazilian Catholics for the Right to Decide). Together and with the support of local organizations, they promoted several meetings with women’s forums throughout Brazil before the 2002 presidential elections, to discuss a nation-wide campaign for the legalization of abortion. This created the conditions for the articulation of *Jornadas Brasileiras pelo Direito ao*

*Aborto Legal e Seguro* around the slogan: ‘Abortion should not be a crime. No woman should be arrested, fall ill or die because of an abortion’ (Soares and Sardenberg 2009)

Feminists believed that Lula da Silva had a good chance to win the elections and once in power, that PT would be supportive of Jornadas’ goals. When CNDM and SPMulheres placed a national call for the organization of the I National Conference for Policies for Women, with delegates being nominated, step by step, from Municipal conferences to the National one, Jornadas began to work so as to ensure the nomination of delegates, at all levels, supportive of their cause, and thus have it approved for inclusion in the National Plans of Public Policies for Women. In the process of these conferences, Jornadas adopted the slogan: ‘Abortion: Women decide, Society respects the decision, the State ensures its execution’. This same slogan was adopted by the September 28 Campaign, remaining as the major theme in the struggle for the legalisation of abortion in Latin America. Their combined strategy proved to be effective: with the exception of the state of Minas Gerais, all other state conferences approved the legalisation of abortion. At the National Conference, the approval of the revision of the legislation to include voluntary abortions was met with intense applause by the participants, with activists crying and hugging each other, celebrating their victory.

To address the recommendations of the national conference, SPMulheres created a Tri-party Committee (*Comissão Tripartite*), constituted by representatives from civil society, and from the executive and legislative governmental bodies. Their major objective was to formulate a legal pre-project/policy brief tending to the demands of the feminist movement to be presented to Congress. As noted earlier, however, the process between the installation of the Tri-party Committee and the presentation of the project took place in a critical political period, marked by charges of corruption in the legislative body and in the ruling Workers Party. As described by Gilberta Soares and Cecilia Sardenberg (2008, p.58):

Trying to allay the crisis, the Lula government made strategic changes in its cabinet and installed a Parliamentary Investigation Committee to examine the corruption charges. The matter occupied the national media for several months, as a vulnerable

government in search of political support negotiated with members of the legislative body and with the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup> The Church took advantage of this situation, asking the Lula government to take a stand regarding reproductive life and sexuality, and demanding governmental opposition to abortion, homosexuality and stem cell research. The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil – CNBB) exercised political pressure directly over the Brazilian government, trying to avoid the installation of the Tri-party Committee, doing everything to generate public opinion unfavourable to the Lula government, by means of strategic actions focused at the media, parishes, publicity materials and public demonstrations.

It is well to note that the Tri-party Committee finished her job and Minister Nilcea Freire, then head of SPMulheres, presented the pre-project at Congress, but it did not go very far without greater support from the government. “The solution found was for Congresswoman Jandira Feghali, who was in charge of reporting on an older project on the matter to Congress, to adopt the results of the Tri-party Committee as her report. To that end, Jornadas lobbied within Congress to gain supporters for the project. By means of combined efforts, Jornadas conducted opinion surveys within Congress and organised women in the different states to bring pressure on their representatives in Congress to support Congresswoman Feghali” (Soares and Sardenberg 2008: 59). Again, it did not go very far – worse still, Congresswoman Feghali lost her bid for another term in Congress (she did regain it later).

This was the last major attempt, on the part of feminists, to gain support for legislative changes in favour of expanding legal abortions. Since then, the Parliamentary Evangelical Front has grown considerably. At present, there are more than 500 pre-projects circulating in Congress, most of them aiming to shrink the possibilities for access to legal abortions, or worse, to make any type of interruption of a pregnancy a crime.

Activists for the legalization of abortion in Brazil have geared their efforts since to making appeals to the Federal Supreme Court (STF). In June 12, 2012, this Court finally analyzed the action proposed in 2004 by the National Confederation of Health Workers, which asked the Supreme Court for permission to terminate the pregnancy in case of anencephaly, that is, when the fetus does not have a brain and thus cannot carry life outside of the womb.

But Ministers were concerned to emphasize that the understanding does not authorize “abortion practices”, nor does it require termination of anencephalic pregnancies. It only gives women the possibility to choose whether or not abort in cases of anencephaly.

Meanwhile, the anti-abortion movement in Brazil – named “Brasil Sem Aborto” (Brazil Without Abortion) has grown.<sup>22</sup> In July of every year, for the last thirteen years, they have staged a National March in Brasília – the “Marcha Nacional da Cidadania pela Vida” – to pressure Congress to change the legislation so as to criminalize any type of abortion. This year (2020), due to the COVID-19 pandemia, this March became a Virtual March, but has not lost its strength. In their internet page they present themselves as a:

“...supra-party and supra-religious nature movement that defends the preservation of life since its conception, acting in a structured way to guide actions and arguments based on evidence and research in the field of genetics, embryology, bioethics and current legislation. Professors, students, lawyers, religious and community leaders, jurists and renowned scientists are part of the organization, which mobilized around 40 thousand people in national marches in Brasília. Across the country, more than 100,000 people have participated in events for life and against abortion.

In August, 2018, they took part in a major public audience at STF to hear arguments pro and con the decriminalization of abortion. Débora Diniz, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Brasília and an activist for decriminalization, also spoke. She “recalled the data from a study, in which she participated as a researcher to affirm that, when it comes to abortion, what matters most is not the answer to the question “if you are for or against abortion? ”, but the real practice of women.”<sup>23</sup> After her public speech, Prof. Débora Diniz suffered a ‘backlash’, receiving a series of life threatening messages, to her and her family, forcing her to leave the country.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the backlash against feminists and LGBTT activists has been pronounced in recent years,

particularly with the election of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency – he has opened the comports for hatred. Congressman Jean Wyllis, a gay activist, who was repeatedly offended by Bolsonaro at the House, as well as the feminist phylosopher, Márcia Tiburi, were also forced to leave for exile, following repeated death threats, something which cannot be taken lightly in face of the murder of Councilwoman Marielle Franco – a black lesbian feminist - in Rio de Janeiro, by militiamen connected to the Bolsonaro family.

### 3.3 Gender-Based Violence against Women (VAW)

In August, 2020, Brazilian women celebrated fourteen years of the passage of Maria da Penha Law (LMP), one of the most comprehensive legislation packages to confront domestic Violence Against Women (VAW) in the world.<sup>25</sup> Sanctioned by former President Lula da Silva during his first mandate (2003-2007), the law was formulated by a consortium of Brazilian feminist NGOs and lawyers and debated in women’s forums across the country before being presented to - and approved by – the National Congress (Sardenberg 2016).

Responding to nearly forty years of feminist campaigning for effective means of confronting and preventing VAW in Brazil (Barsted 2007, 2016), LMP was inspired on international conventions, plans of action and platforms for women’s rights (Bandeira and Almeida 2015). It recognizes different forms of violence - i.e. physical, psychological, moral, sexual and patrimonial - and defines not only punitive measures against aggressors, but also much needed protective and supportive measures in tending to the victims, as well as important preventive measures at large (Sardenberg 2011).

Within the first decade of the passage of LMP, significant advancements were made in the development of institutional mechanisms and

<sup>25</sup> As previously observed, the law was named in honor of Maria da Penha Maia Fernandes, a teacher from the State of Ceará, whose appeals to local Police Stations and courts to protect her from her husband had gone unheard. He was left free to come home and shoot her, leaving her paraplegic. In 1998, the Brazilian government was finally condemned for ‘negligence and omission’ in acting upon several complaints filed by her against her former husband fifteen years before. In 2002, he was finally incarcerated for attempted murder, but nearly twenty years after the shooting that put her in a wheelchair for life.

<sup>22</sup> <https://brasilemaborto.org/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.justificando.com/2018/08/06/aborto-veja-as-falas-no-stf-de-debora-diniz-e-outros-especialistas-pela-descriminalizacao/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.cartamaior.com.br/?/Editoria/Antifascismo/Professora-forcada-a-deixar-o-pais-por-defender-legalizacao-do-aborto/47/43076>

campaigns to confront VAW, with considerable positive results (Campos 2015). There was a reduction of nearly 10% of femicides practiced within the domestic sphere (IPEA 2015). LMP has also contributed to the construction of a new consciousness about VAW, leading to increases in the number of reported occurrences. Due to successful campaigns led along the first ten years of the law, nearly 98% of the adult population in Brazil now has some knowledge of LMP (Dias 2016; Pasinato 2011a). The inner workings of the Law are still not well known among the populace, but surveys conducted in 2015 indicated that most people are aware that it is geared towards protecting women, making it one of the most ‘popular’ laws in the country (Campos 2015, Bandeira and Almeida 2015, Instituto AVON, IPSOS, 2011).

Despite these and other important achievements registered during the first decade since the sanctioning of LMP, a considerable gap between law and practice still remained. Indeed, data relating to the incidence of VAW in Brazil in 2015 showed that it was and it is an extremely serious problem, impacting the lives of women of all walks. As the “Chronometer of Violence Against Women” elaborated by Agência Patrícia Galvão (2015) informs us, in Brazil: a) 5 women are battered at each 2 minutes; b) 1 is raped at each 11 minutes; c) 1 femicide occurs at each 90 minutes; d) an average of 179 reports of physical aggression are registered daily; and e) nearly 13 female homicides are committed per day.<sup>26</sup> In point of fact, in 2013 Brazil had an average rate of 4.8 female homicides for each 100 thousand women, a rate 2.4 times higher than the average rate of 2 female homicides in a pool of 83 nations. Not surprisingly, Brazil had the fifth highest average rate in this pool, only ranking behind El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, and Russia (Sardenberg 2016).

Studies conducted at that time suggested that, to a large extent, these high rates sprang from the numerous shortcomings that still prevented the implementation of LMP in the spirit in which it was formulated – that is, to save women’s lives (Sardenberg, Tavares and Gomes 2016). In addition to meeting considerable resistance, particularly within the judiciary system, it faced the shortcomings of federalism: LMP is a Federal Law and thus of national scope, but depends on state and municipal organs and

agencies to be properly implemented. This gave rise to different local policies and practices that often fell short of fulfilling the aims of the law (Sardenberg, Tavares and Gomes 2016). Moreover, the overall shortage of budgetary allocations for its proper implementation (Aparecida Gonçalves in Carta Capital 2012), together with the absence of cross-agencies coordination through the chain of services, delayed the needed procedures. And yet, due to the lack of compatibility among existing data on cases, processes, victims and aggressors, important for monitoring procedures, the State’s response in making the needed changes was often limited (Alves, Dumaresq and Silva 2016). These structural constraints, along with the workings of the ‘culture of violence’, so deeply ingrained in the construction of masculinity in Brazil (Segato 2003, Machado 1998, 1999), responded for the still alarming rates of violence against women, despite the advancements brought about by LMP (Sardenberg and Grossi 2015).

As discussed in the first section of this report, since the 2016 coup and the rise to power of ultra-neoliberal, neo-fascist governments in the country, the implementation and application of LMP has suffered profound setbacks. Significant budget cuts, as well as a lack of ‘political will’ to carry on the programs implemented by the Lula and Dilma’s administrations, the state machinery to confront gender-based VAW has been dismantled. As a result, according to data from the Map of Violence, 4,473 cases of intentional homicides against women were recorded in Brazil in 2017, which corresponded to about 12 murders of women per day, that is, one woman murdered every two hours, totaling a rate of 4.3 female homicides for every 100 thousand women in the population. For the World Health Organization (WHO), this figure corresponds to approximately double the global homicide rate of this nature, placing Brazil in the 7th position in the world ranking of the 83 most violent nations for women (Cerqueira et al, 2017).

It should be noted that of the total number of homicides against women, 946, that is, less than a quarter were classified as femicide, defined as the murder of women for their gender status (Segato, 2006), already recognized in the Femicide Law as qualified homicide (Brasil, 2015). Furthermore, in 2017, more than 10,700 femicide cases were awaiting court decision. But a survey by the National Council of Justice (CNJ) revealed that, in 2017, the

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.agenciapatriciagalvao.org.br/dossie/o-dossie/>

effort of judges to apply the law in cases of murders of women generated more sentences compared to the previous year: the State Justice magistrates issued 4,829 sentences in 2017, 2,887 more than in 2016. Nonetheless, in the analysis of specialists, there is a lot of underreporting, probably due to the lack of training of technicians, experts, to recognize cases of femicide (FBSP, 2018). Even with underreporting, an assessment by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that Brazil has a rate of 4.8 femicides per 100 thousand women, which corresponds to the fifth highest rate of femicides in the world (Cerqueira et al, 2017).

Although there are not reliable data yet to sustain affirmations, it is possible to believe that the Covid – 19 pandemic, in particular, the isolation necessary to prevent the virus from spreading at great speed, puts the couple who is already experiencing tensions in their daily lives, indoors together 24 hours a day, many without money, without enough space, intensifying previous conflicting relationships.

In face of this situation, the federal government launched in May, 2020, a campaign to raise awareness and address domestic violence aimed at the pandemic period of the new corona virus. With social isolation, the records of this type of violence have been increasing - according to Minister Damares Alves, Ligue 180, the Federal Government's Women's Service Center, registered in April a 35% increase in the number of complaints compared to the same month. in 2019. A partnership between the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, led by Alves, and the Ministry of Citizenship of Osmar Terra, the campaign was launched on International Family Day and has the motto "denounce domestic violence - for In some families, isolation is becoming even more difficult". With this, it chose to address not only domestic and family violence against women, but also against other groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, children and adolescents. However, advertising focuses almost exclusively on promoting reporting channels. Although women are the main victims, Minister Damares Alves says that 'domestic violence has no gender'. She also emphasized the protection of families several times. "In this government, the family is the focus of all actions," he said.

Indeed, it is clear that this government, beginning with Minister Damares Alves herself, has no

intention to really focus on women, not even young girls. In the case of the little ten-year-old girl, mother dead, father imprisoned, who was repeatedly raped by her paternal uncle since she was six, getting pregnant as a result and being refused a legal abortion in her home state of Espírito Santo, having to be flown to another state to get it, Minister Damares revealed the extent of her christofascism. She obtained the personal information about the little girl and where she was to have the intervention performed, passing it on to people who publicized the information. When the girl arrived at the clinic, she was met by a group of religious cronies (including elected members of the local City Council), who greeted her and the attending doctor by calling them 'murderers', then invading the clinic in an attempt to stop the intervention. Prior to that, Minister Damares is reported to have some of her religious assistants harass the little girl's grandmother, at home, trying to convince her that the girl should not go ahead with the intervention. In her Facebook page, Minister Damares then declared that the local courts should not have granted permission to the abortion, even if it is legal in the case in question (a pregnancy resultant of rape and which threatened the life of the girl).

The Archbishop of Recife and Olinda, in the State of Pernambuco, where the clinic taking in the girl is located, also made a public pronouncement, regretting the abortion and sympathizing with the people who protested what he called a "shameful and regrettable event". By its token, OAB- Pernambuco, the Pernambuco Bar Association, published a statement explaining that it had "received with concern the information of the demonstrations, and rejected the actions that do not aim to preserve the child, victim of violence, and that do not help her to overcome the physical and psychological trauma resulting from sexual violence. The entity also said it was in solidarity with the girl, the legal representatives and health professionals involved in the procedure."<sup>27</sup>

It is important to highlight here the 'Think Olga' Project, launched in October 2015 to study sexual violence in Brazil, which obtained a very positive response through social media. In a few days, the hashtag '#primeiroassedio', referring to reports of

<sup>27</sup> <https://agenciabrasil.etc.com.br/radioagencia-nacional/justica/audio/2020-08/tio-suspeito-de-estuprar-menina-de-10-anos-e-presos>



sexual harassment suffered by women, was shared 82 thousand times. It is scary, however, to know that the analysis of a sample of 3,100 of the reports, shared on Twitter, revealed that the average age at which women suffered the first harassment was 9.7 years, but with a considerable number reporting that they were molested between 5 and 7 years old. In the same study, the words that most appeared in the reports computed and analyzed were: “house, father, man, school, ass, uncle, mother, penis, bus, neighbor, masturbating, panties, me I ran, he tried ”(Moraes, 2015). This suggests that sexual violence against girls is a serious problem in our society and that this danger is very close to home and our families (Sardenberg 2017).

### 3.4 *Bolsa Família*: Brazil’s Conditional Cash Transfer Program

It is often affirmed that Brazil is a rich country, full of natural resources, whereas the Brazilian people are poor. Indeed, the country has a highly skewed income distribution pattern, with a disproportionate concentration of income in the hands of a few. The poorest areas are concentrated in the Northeast Region, particularly in an area named by geographer Josué de Castro, “Polígono da Seca” (Draught Polygon), where rainfall is scarce and hunger is widespread, and families are periodically forced to migrate South in search of water, jobs, and better living conditions.

President Lula da Silva left this region as a child with his family in search of a better life in the more economically developed South region. As a president on the inauguration ceremony, on January 1, 2003, he vowed to end hunger in the country and reduce social inequalities. One of his first projects was the *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger), which eventually grew into the *Programa Bolsa Família* - PBF (Family Grant Program). This would in time become one of the largest and most acclaimed income transfer programs in the world. *Bolsa Família*'s main objective is to reduce poverty and misery by transferring income and creating alternatives for families to overcome these conditions through human development initiatives. As a result of cash transfers, hunger and poverty decreased considerably in the country. The project to reduce social inequalities, however, was less successful, and the country remained as one of the most unequal in the world. Even so, the rates of social inequality decreased

during this period, as well as the rates of child and maternal mortality (Campello and Nero 2013).

In the PBF the transfer of income is preferably made to women (average of 92%). This policy guideline has been considered by the government and some authors as “empowering” for women (Campello and Nero 2013; Soares and Silva 2010; Rego and Pinzani 2013). However, a growing number of feminists have disputed this claim arguing that empowerment is a complex process requiring much more than access to a small amount of cash (Bradshaw and Viquez 2008; Molyneux 2006; Tabbush 2010). Although PBF has provided access to a certain income to women in situations of poverty and extreme poverty, it has not fostered initiatives needed to promote gender justice, which besides cash transfer require actions capable of dealing with cultural and political dimensions of gender inequalities (Sacchet, 2020a). By requiring that women comply with the conditionalities in a context of dismantling essential public services, PBF has not only put extra pressure on the lives of already overburdened women, but it has also reinforced traditional gender roles based on unequal gender relations, as well as perpetuates an essentialist view of women as mothers (Sacchet 2020b; Mariano and Carlotto 2009).

In 2011 Dilma Rousseff created PBSM as a way to expand on initiatives meant to improve human development and help people out of poverty. It introduced initiatives around three axes: income transfer for people living in extreme poverty (in addition to the PBF); access to public services of education, health; and productive inclusion initiatives through training and credit (Costa 2013). However, this strategy worked well during her first term in government, but was weakened early on in her second term. The fiscal crisis of that period drove the government to reduce initiatives in the areas of professional training and credit, among others (Sacchet 2020a). BF was not affected, but there was no increase in the number of families assisted by the program.

Since 2016, initiatives meant to fight poverty and to promote human development have been shrinking. President Bolsonaro has often threatened to end the PBF, but after realizing the political damages that could bring upon him, has proposed a change in its name - to dissociate from the PT’s administration - instead. *Renda Brasil* (Income Brasil), the name of the new program proposed, would start after Covid-19

pandemic is over<sup>28</sup> and, according to the government, would bring together a number of social programs under a single umbrella, including a new stipend that is now being paid to informal workers harmed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

PBF, as other social assistance policies, has a strong familistic orientation, in which the family (in fact women) is seen as a key “partner” of the state in implementing social policies (Molyneux 2006). Thus, PBF originated and developed as a policy that instrumentalized female social roles, failing to adopt actions meant to counter structural inequalities between men and women.

With the 2016 coup, the experience of poor women with PBF worsened, first under Michel Temer’s administration and then under Bolsonaro’s. Temer paved the way for the expansion of neoliberal reforms in the country that were then continued and deepened by Bolsonaro. In two years of government Temer carried out major restructuring in public policies cutting public spending significantly, particularly in the areas of health, education and social assistance. The Constitutional Amendment nº 95 of 2016 (EC 95), froze resources that would be destined to health, education, social assistance, housing and security for 20 years. These changes together with the labour and the social security reforms promoted during his time in government have negatively affected the lives of the poor, particularly of women.

In Bolsa Família the central focus became its efficiency, driven to greater control over possible deviations from its rules and non-compliance with conditionalities, which led to constant requirements for updates in the Single Registry of Social Programs of the Federal Government. This has impacted particularly (black)women in greater social vulnerability, with low levels of formal education, and those who live in areas far away from the registration centers, since it has been more difficult for them to meet the new requirements (Sacchet, 2020b).

With Bolsonaro there was a reduction in the value of the bursary and an increase in the number of eligible people waiting to have access to the stipend. According to official data obtained by the newspaper *O Globo* through the Access to Information Law (due to the government's refusal to disclose information), in

2019 there were 500 thousand families on the waiting list (Capetti and Martins, 2020). However, data from the *Jornal El País* indicate that the number of families, who were entitled, waiting for the stipend may have reached 1.2 million (Rossi, 2020).

A decree from the Ministry of Citizenship of December 2019 resulted in cuts to social assistance funds transferred to state and municipal governments, which has placed at risk the continuity of social assistance services, particularly in smaller, less prosperous municipalities. Cuts have varied among counties, but they have been in between 30% and 40%. These cuts have not only affected women who depend on social work benefits and services, but also workers of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), who are mainly women.

Since Brazil is one of the countries with the greatest social inequality, SUAS workers deal with complex situations related to violence, unemployment and child labor on a daily basis, specially in the most unprotected and precarious locations. Thus, reducing Social Assistance and other Social Policies’ budget represents a real threat to social achievements in the area, harming the population, particularly women, and deepening inequalities.

#### 4 Women’s Resistance

By far and largely recognized as one of the most well organized and influential women’s movements in Latin America, feminist movements in Brazil have taken important strides beyond national limits, making their presence positively noted in global spaces (Sardenberg and Costa, 2014). Not surprisingly, therefore, these movements have been active in fighting the backlash imposed by the rightists in power.

Indeed, women have taken to the streets of major cities throughout the country to voice their protest, indicating an increase and even a renewal of Brazilian feminist and women's movements. In 2013, for instance, there were dozens of protests against the misogynist and homophobic pastor and congressman, Marco Feliciano, appointed as chief of the Human Rights Commission in the National Congress, but who shameless expressed his sexist views against women’s rights, as follows:

<sup>28</sup> <https://fdr.com.br/2020/07/07/bolsa-familia-vai-acabar-renda-brasil-promete-ser-o-novo-legado-de-bolsonaro/>

In an interview for the book “Religions and politics; an analysis of the role of evangelical parliamentarians on women's rights and LGBTs in Brazil”, Congressman Marco Feliciano (PSC-SP) criticized the demands of the feminist movement and said he was against their struggles because they can lead to a predominantly homosexual society. The congressman was recently elected president of the Human Rights Commission in the Chamber amid protests that accuse him of being “homophobic” and “racist”. The information was published in the newspaper O Globo.

“When you encourage a woman to have the same rights as a man, she wants to work, her share as a mother begins to be annulled, and, in order for her not to be a mother, there is only one way that she knows herself: or she does not marry, or maintains a marriage, a relationship with a person of the same sex, and who will enjoy the pleasures of a union and will not have children. I see in a subtle way reaching the family; when you encourage people to release their instincts and live with people of the same sex, you destroy the family, a society is created where there are only homosexuals, you see that this society tends to disappear because it does not generate children”, he says on page 155, in a statement given in June 2012. Feliciano's statements caused revolt in feminist movements.<sup>29</sup>

In 2013, women also took to the streets to join the June Protests, which, as discussed earlier, started as demonstrations against a rise in the cost of transportation in São Paulo, but retracted when these protests were taken over by right-wing movements, many of them funded by US groups to destabilize President Dilma Rousseff's government. In point of fact, despite the president's decision not to public endorse campaigns for the decriminalization/legalization of abortion, women did play a major role in guaranteeing her reelection in 2014. This was a mutual support, as the President had openly endorsed women's campaigns against sexual violence, in protest against the results of a survey in which more than 60% of the men interviewed affirmed that women who dress provocatively deserved to be sexually assaulted. As in the following news report:

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/brasil/politica/pastor-feliciano-diz-que-direitos-das-mulheres-atingem-a-familia.e250bc9bfc78d310VgnVCM3000009acceb0aRCRD.html>

President Dilma Rousseff spoke on Monday (31) in favor of women participating in the social media protest against violence and rape.

Through Twitter, the president said that no woman deserves to be a victim of violence and that the government is on their side.

- No woman deserves to be a victim of violence, whether physical or in the form of a threat. The government and the law are on the side of women who are threatened or victims of violence. The president directly quoted Brasília journalist Nana Queiroz, organizer of the protest “I don't deserve to be raped”, which is mobilizing hundreds of women in the social networks.

The demonstration began after a survey by Ipea (Institute of Applied Economic Research) revealed that the majority of respondents (65%) believe that women who wear clothes that show their bodies deserve to be attacked.

The reaction came through photos where women hold placards with phrases repudiating rape and violence against women. Celebrities, such as singers Daniela Mercury and Pitty, have also joined the campaign and published photos declaring that they do not deserve to be raped.

With the scale of the protest, threats arose against the event organizer. The journalist received direct threats of rape and assault. In her Twitter account, President Dilma sympathized with Nana Queiroz.

- For speaking out against the culture of violence against women, the journalist was threatened with rape. Organizer of the protest # NãoMereçoSerEstuprada, Nana Queiroz deserves all my solidarity and respect.

In an interview with R7 DF, Nana committed the protest and said that she did not expect a different attitude from Dilma.

The journalist was happy with the support of President Dilma Rousseff, but says she expects effective measures, such as changes in laws that protect women.

- I expected nothing less from the president as a woman. I am glad that she was sensitized to the cause. I hope that her support will turn into concrete actions such as support for more current laws, or perhaps even an update of the Maria da Penha Law to also protect women against cybercrime.<sup>30</sup>

In late 2015, nearly thirty thousand black women from all over the country marched in Brasília, the capital, to demonstrate against racism and violence

<sup>30</sup> <https://noticias.r7.com/brasil/dilma-apoia-protestos-de-mulheres-contra-o-estupro-e-se-solidariza-com-jornalista-ameacada-31032014>

against women, particularly black women. Emerging in the 1980s as an independent movement, flourishing both as a reaction to the lack of a gender perspective in the *Movimento Negro Unificado*- MNU, the Unified Black Movement in Brazil, as well as to failure of Feminist movements to face issues pertaining to racism, the Black Women's movement in Brazil has grown to become of the most important women's movements in Brazil (Figueiredo 2018, Malta and Oliveira 2016, Rodrigues 2010). This movement thrives through an extensive network of different organizations throughout the country, as witnessed in the following list of those supporting the Black Women's March 2015:

The March of the Black Women 2015 is taking place today (11/18), with the motto "against racism, violence and for good living". The National Booster Committee of the March, created in 2013 during the III National Conference for the Promotion of Racial Equality (Conapir), is made up of representatives of Black Pastoral Agents (APNs), Articulation of Brazilian Black Women Organizations (AMNB), National Coordination of Articulation of Quilombola Communities (Conaq), National Coordination of Black Entities (Conen), National Federation of Domestic Workers (Fenatrad), National Forum of Black Women (FNMN), Unified Black Movement (MNU) and Union of Blacks and Blacks for Equality (Unegro).<sup>31</sup>

A similar cyber network of Black Women's groups and organizations has been articulated to organize, in different city-capitals across the country, the "*Marcha das Mulheres Crespas*" (March of Women with Curly Hair), which aim to boost Black Women's self esteem in regards to their hair (Malta and Oliveira 2016). And in 2018, the Black Women's movement held a national meeting to celebrate the 30 years since their first national meeting, as depicted in the following note published in the *Fundação Palmares*' site:

The National Meeting of Black Women 30 Years: Against Racism and Violence and for Good Living - Black Women Move Brazil took place on December 6 and 9, 2018, in Goiânia, state of Goiás. About a thousand activists from the black women's movement, participants in the organizational

processes in the states and the Federal District, were present at this historic meeting that also recalled the 30th anniversary of the 1st National Meeting of Black Women. Since 1988 the movement has sought to tackle racism, sexism and all forms of oppression of black women through their own, autonomous and protagonist organization, resuming the trajectory of Africans and Afro-Brazilians to exercise leadership over their own life, community and political space.<sup>32</sup>

Another equally important women's movement in Brazil is the *Marcha das Margaridas* (March of the Daisies), a march organized by rural women workers, to celebrate the life of Margarida Alves, a rural activist killed in 1983 in conflict over land rights in the Northeast Region. Since the year 2000, thousands of women have marched together in Brasilia every four years on August 12, when Margarida Alves was killed. Organized by *Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura* – CONTAG (National Confederation of Agriculture Workers) and the *Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia* – ANA (National Articulation of Agroecology) the March held in 2015 brought together close to eighty thousand women to Brasilia (Sobreira and Aras 2018). Likewise, in August, 2019, thousands of rural women also took over the streets of Brasília (Zucatto and Closs 2020).

Since 2012, Feminist "Slut Walks" and Lesbian Walks, fighting for lesbian and transgender rights and against sexual violence have also been conducted all over the country (Hermida 2018, Dell'Aglio 2016, Valente and Marcinik 2014, Luna 2014). These 'walks' originated in Toronto, Canadá, in 2011, in reaction to policemen who blamed sexual violence on women's behavior. The movement spread throughout the world, emerging in several major cities across Brazil. 'Slut walkers' also joined feminist protests that emerged towards the end of 2015, denouncing the setback in women's rights brought about by the very conservative National Congress, in a movement that was termed by the media as "Women's Spring". They demonstrated, in particular, against the House Speaker Eduardo Cunha's attempt to cut the support given to victims of rape, demanding the approval of legislation that offered "day after pills"

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.ipea.gov.br/participacao/noticiasmidia/participacao-institucional/movimentos-sociais/1310-marcha-mulheres-negras-2015>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.palmares.gov.br/?p=52700>

through the public health system to prevent unwanted pregnancies (Brito 2017, Dutra 2018).<sup>33</sup>

It is important to stress that many of these movements gathered women first through the internet, mainly through social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. This was precisely the case of the #EleNão protest, the major mobilization against the backlash that happened before the first round of the 2018 Presidential elections. This movement first went viral on Facebook and, on September 29th, took over the streets of over 100 Brazilian cities. According to political scientist Céli Pinto, who has written about feminisms in Brazil, this was the largest women's public manifestation in history in the country. As informed by *El País*:<sup>34</sup>

The total number of people who participated in the demonstrations is uncertain - the Military Police did not release public estimates in the main cities, as it used to do during demonstrations for and against Dilma Rousseff's impeachment.

According to G1, 114 cities had demonstrations against Bolsonaro. There were also acts in different cities around the world, such as New York, Lisbon, Paris and London. The largest demonstrations took place in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Through aerial images of the acts, calculations that consider the area occupied by the demonstrators produce estimates of the number of those present in a conservative and unscientific analysis: there were about 100 thousand people in Largo da Batata, in São Paulo, and 25 thousand in Cinelândia, in Rio, at the peak moment.

In August, 2019, the first National March of Indigenous Women took place in Brasília, followed by the Margarida's March, which, as noted, brought thousands of rural women to Brasília, as they have been doing since the year 2000. But that was the first time Brazilian Indigenous Women marched on their own, placing demands for their people. They published a declaration, entitled "Territory: our body, our spirit", emphasizing that the struggle for indigenous land is also the struggle for the right to life. In particular, they

expressed their protest against the Bolsonaro government, thus stating:<sup>35</sup>

"We are totally opposed to the narratives, the purposes, and the actions of the current government, which has made explicit its intention to exterminate indigenous peoples, aiming at the invasion and genocidal exploitation of our territories by capital. (...) Therefore, the territory for us is not an asset that can be sold, exchanged, exploited. The territory is our own life, our body, our spirit",.

The document further highlighted the need for the preservation of native languages and their right to express themselves through them.

"We women have a significant role in transmitting the strength of our ancestral knowledge through the transmission of language. (...) Our duty is to strengthen and value our traditional knowledge, guarantee our knowledge, ancestry and culture, knowing and defending our right, honoring the memory of those who came before us",

In the document, Brazilian indigenous women also manifested their belief on the importance of sewing alliances "with women from all sectors of society in Brazil and in the world, in the countryside and in the city, in the forest and in the waters, which are also attacked in their rights and forms of existence".

Due to the social isolation imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, International Women's Day on March 8, 2020, was the last time in which women took to the streets in large numbers, staging marches throughout the country. This year, the major demand was for the ousting of Jair Bolsonaro, identifying his government with toxic masculinities and racism:

In Brazil, the acts began as early as Friday, the 7th, and lasted until Monday. The central thread of the protests was criticism of the Jair Bolsonaro government, both for its misogynistic character and for the attack promoted on social and labor rights. Another important tonic of the acts was in memory of councilwoman Marielle Franco. Several women took sunflowers - the symbol of the institute that was founded in her name - and protested not only for clarifying the murder, but also in demonstration of the continuity of their political legacy. In

<sup>33</sup>

<https://www.uol.com.br/universa/noticias/redacao/2017/10/17/primavera-das-mulheres-mostra-as-direcoes-que-o-feminismo-toma-no-brasil.htm>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-45700013>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/08/15/mulheres-indigenas-o-territorio-e-nossa-vida-nosso-corpo-e-nosso-espírito>

addition, the mobilizations had an intersectional character, raising issues such as the fight against racism and prejudice against LGBT people<sup>3</sup>. (Zucatto and Closs 2020, p.21).

Let it be noted that despite the pandemic, feminist and women's movements have not been silenced. They have continued to voice their demands and protest, particularly against the Bolsonaro government, stating a major social media movement, the *Levante das Mulheres* (Women's Rising), which promoted a series webinars and gathered over 45.000 signatures in a petition for Bolsonaro's impeachment, deposited both at the National Congress as well as at the Federal Supreme Court.

There has also been a growing number of courses and webinars being organized to promote feminist candidates to city councils and mayoralty in the upcoming November elections. But the backlash against women's rights has not diminished. A number of these online events have been invaded by misogynist hackers, who delight in yelling improprieties and exposing pernicious slides to the participants.

Surveys conducted by Isabella Kalil (2019) among 'bolsonaristas' have shown that Bolsonaro's most radical supporters are predominantly young men under the age of 20, who are members of the chans, that is, of anonymous forums used to disseminate hate speech, and also among men aged between 40 and 60 years. Both have in common what Kalil defines as "lost masculinity", which is the loss of a social place.

These groups demand from the president a more authoritarian stance and a greater nod to radicalism. Since the campaign, the research shows that Bolsonaro's communication was marked by the segmentation of information, a strategy used to reach different electorate profiles. As president, when he resumed the authoritarian rhetoric with speeches in defense of the military dictatorship, he again waved to this part of the electorate and defined the support of political opponents (Lucena, Previtali, Lucena 2017).

Some of these groups enjoy making threats to feminists and other anti-fascists, as in the cases we cited earlier. Some of them have threatened NEIM, particularly Prof. Maíra Kubik, our director, who registered a police complaint and is being supported by UFBA's Legal Corps (Procuradoria Jurídica). These threats cannot be taken lightly. Like the President

himself, Bolsonaristas care nothing for the near 120.000 Covid deaths in Brazil. Why would they care about the lives of simple feminists and LGBTT activists? Indeed, as ..... observed: "When violence is performed, there is a contamination effect that is spreading and what was considered unacceptable, little by little, becomes acceptable and becomes trivialized."

### **Final Considerations and Implications for further research and action**

Let us begin our final considerations with the following words by Armando Boito Jr. (2020, p.112, our translation), which clearly delineate the context in which we live at this very moment:

In Brazil, today, we have a predominantly neo-fascist government, based on a neo-fascist movement, but so far what we still have, with regard to the political regime, is a bourgeois democracy, although deteriorated. Why bourgeois democracy? Because the representatives were elected and the National Congress continues to function and has an effective influence on the decision-making process - influence limited by Brazilian hyper-presidentialism, but such limitation is not new in this situation. Why deteriorated? Fundamentally, for two reasons. Because, in the first place, since the beginning of Operation Lava-Jato and thanks to the so-called Clean Record Law, a political filter was created by the judiciary to challenge left or center-left candidacies with chances of victory, and because, in Second, political institutions, including the Supreme Federal Court (STF), are under the tutelage of the Armed Forces, particularly the Army.

This situation has become even more aggravated with the current Covid-19 pandemic, with social isolation going on for nearly six months and probably to be extended, at the very least, until next year. At the moment, Brazil has nearly 4 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and close to 120.000 related obits. In a fascist fashion, the Federal government has not acted upon as needed to keep transmission to a minimum – to the contrary, Bolsonaro himself has dismissed the gravity of the situation, making fun of the use of protective masks, provoking agglomeration of people, promoting the use of useless medicines for Covid, filling public hospitals with them instead of other needed chemicals, and grunting "so what" when inquired about the rising

numbers of fatal victims.<sup>36</sup> Worse still, he has refused to assist the indigenous people, forbidding the assistance of Doctors Without Frontiers as well, meddling with official statistics. Meanwhile, dozens of impeachment petitions accumulate dust on the House Speaker's table, including the one with more than 40 thousand signatures presented by the Rising Women movement, while Bolsonaro buys votes in Congress to keep himself safe, in case one of those many petitions gets by (Solano 2019).

It is important to note that, despite the caution imposed to avoid agglomeration, some street manifestations have taken place in Brasilia and other major cities, both in favor as well against Bolsonaro. The military police have been fast to act, attacking those calling for impeachment with tear gas while applauding the fascist groups.<sup>37</sup> In point of fact, it is believed that, throughout the country, instead of being loyal to their state governors, the military police corps supports Bolsonaro, even more so than the regular military forces,<sup>38</sup> a fact that has given the President the edge to repeatedly threaten to close Congress and the Supreme Court and re-install a dictatorship in the country.

As to the people who want to save democracy, the great majority, by now, is short of cash, short of breath, short-tempered, and trying to keep their heads out of the water. For certain, it has not been easy for anybody, but it seems clear that women are taking the greatest burden on their shoulders in caring for their families. Insofar as schools remain closed, as they must, this has been far worse in the case of mothers with small children, who need to do home-office work on the side. For those on the front line, performing "essential functions" outside of the home, there is the additional fear or exposure to the virus and transmission at home. And this is the major scenario in which our mapping and analysis of the backlash against women's rights and gender equality in Brazil must be undertaken.

We believe that the previous sections have shown that, in the last five years, this process of

backlash not only has been widespread, but also has accelerated and tends to continue at this rhythm despite the considerable resistance put up by feminist and women's movements alike. Women's last major protest on the streets was on March 8, International Women's Day, but campaigns through social media have been quite effective in gaining public attention.

One relevant activity in pandemic times is the organization of online seminars, known as "webinars". Any random survey will show that the great majority of these events tend to focus on the issue of domestic violence under covid (Pasinato; Colares 2020). We ourselves have sponsored one and participated in others,<sup>39</sup> and do believe that violence against women, with a focus on domestic violence, is an issue that must be investigated further for the entire research period of the Countering Backlash program in Brazil. This will demand an approach which will consider: 1) data regarding the incidence (and rising incidence during the pandemic) of domestic violence; 2) monitoring of the implementation of LMP (Maria da Penha Law), including the Federal budget destined and applied to this end, as well new strategies being developed to cope with the rising demand in the pandemic (such as registering of occurrences through internet sites); 3) law- projects pertaining to these issues being discussed in Congress; and 4) women's organizing in relation to these issues. This means that domestic violence will be a matter for research and analysis by both the Policy and Practice and the Voice strands in the development of the Countering Backlash program carried out by NEIM in Brazil.

Another important issue which will also be object of research and analysis of both strands in our program is that of women's sexual and reproductive rights which, as discussed throughout this literature review, has been on the feminist agenda for the last five decades. In our research program, we plan to investigate, on the one hand, the public health services which are specialized in providing access to legal abortions (pregnancies resulting from rape, that endanger the life of the woman or related to anencephalic fetuses) and under what conditions these services are provided. On the other hand, we will monitor the projects regarding reproductive rights,

<sup>36</sup> <https://catracalivre.com.br/cidania/por-que-bolsonaro-esta-incentivando-populacao-a-contrair-covid-19>

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/06/14/interna\\_politica.863544/apoio-ao-governo-por-parte-da-policia-militar-gera-polemica.shtml](https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/06/14/interna_politica.863544/apoio-ao-governo-por-parte-da-policia-militar-gera-polemica.shtml)

<sup>38</sup> <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/bolsonaro-seduz-policiais-militares-com-promessas-cargos-e-poder/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://congresso2020.ufba.br/schedule/a-violencia-contra-mulheres-em-tempos-da-pandemia-de-coronavirus/>

particularly those focusing on abortion rights, either enlarging them or reducing them, which are under discussion in Congress. In this respect, it will be necessary to monitor, as well, the activities of the Movement Brasil Sem Aborto, which will involve not only monitoring their internet page(s) and their publications, but also, whenever possible, be present at their public events.

It is within our plans to also monitor those projects pertaining to LGBTTs' rights, either enlarging or attempting to restrict them, to the extent that these issues relate to our interest in further pursuing our current research on the anti-gender backlash in the education plans and law projects in Congress. We want to look more closely at, but keeping a cautious distance from, groups involved the demonization of what they regard as "gender ideology" (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Because we are the only university that offers a specific undergraduate bachelor's degree program on Gender and Diversity, as well as the only specific graduate program offering master's and doctorate degrees on Women, Gender, and Feminist Studies, we are clearly in the eye of the storm. In addition to having received threats against our Director, our internet sites have been hacked, including that of our journal 'Feminisms', and thus we need to constantly 'watch our backs' and not only metaphorically.

It will also be fundamental to our study to carry on participant observation in different groups and segments of the feminist and women's movements, both in the city of Salvador, as well as in social media, an activity which we already pursue as activists! Therefore, we plan to continue this activity, but now also as observers. We are part of the 8M network in Salvador, whose original purpose was to organize the March 5, International Women's Month in the city (and environs). Since the beginning of the pandemic, it has grown and widened its scope of concerns and activism, to deal with gender-based problems at large, and the backlash against women in the area. We are also active in the Women's Rising movement which is now international (with Brazilian expats in Europe and the US), taking part in their discussions and events – thus far, mainly online. The group deals as well with racist issues, with a special concern for Black Women.

Indeed, given that in Brazilian society sexism, racism, and the neoliberal version of capitalism work as matrices of oppression that intersect, we must deal as well with the issues pertaining to the vulnerabilities

created by the intersections of gender, race and class (and other social determinants), and which affect poor, black women the most. Monitoring issues pertaining to the *Bolsa Família* Conditional Cash Transfer Program, public health, the Covid-19 Cash Transfer Program, and other Governmental Programs geared to women in positions of vulnerability will also be included in our research program.

We believe that the next National Conferences of Policies for Women - the first one under Bolsonaro's presidency – which was supposed to take place in 2020, but it will probably be postponed, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, should provide a good opportunity to carry out fieldwork to collect data for the different issues is our research.

Finally, we cannot forget that during the period of development of this program, we will have two important elections in the country. This coming November, 2020, there will be elections for city-mayors (*Prefeitos*) and members of city-councils (*Vereadores*), and feminists, we, included, have vouched to guarantee not simply more women in these councils and as mayors, but progressive women who will fight the backlash. With this in mind, we have partnered with the Bahia State Council for Women's Rights, and will be offering online courses for women candidates. We will also be preparing women for the following elections – for president, governors, and state and federal legislative bodies - that will take place in October, 2022. They will certainly be a battleground between fascists and anti-fascists, and we need to make sure that we can drive fascism away as a major part of our campaigning against the current backlash against women's rights and gender equality in Brazil.

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