

Beyond Backlash

How Gender Discourse Reaggregates Conservatism

By Priscila D. Carvalho

Gender not only reached an unprecedented level of exposure in public debates but has become a structuring element of contemporary conservative discourses. This text discusses how gender can be incorporated into assessments of the current crisis of democracies

“She does not deserve (to be raped) because she is very ugly. It is not my style to rape, but I would never rape her,” stated Brazilian congressman Jair Bolsonaro about a female colleague, back in 2014. In 2018, his presidential campaign stood for the protection of Brazilian families, represented as threatened by the “gender ideology” of the on-going policy of health education. Officially, Bolsonaro accused the opposite candidate and former minister of education Fernando Haddad of creating a “gay kit” that supposedly influenced school kids towards homosexuality. Unofficially, unsigned videos and WhatsApp cards went further and accused candidate Haddad of distributing baby bottles in the shape of a penis in schools. These tales tell about the centrality of gender in contemporary Brazilian politics. Anti-gender is not the sole agenda of the recent conservative wave that had flooded the country. The conservative agenda articulates a diffuse anti-corruption discourse, along with demands of punitive

security policy and socially intolerant ideas, while defending liberal economy.¹ However, gender has been a central issue for connecting conservatism, the mobilization of constituencies and the support for authoritarian projects through election—something Brazilian academic feminist Flavia Biroli has been pointing out since 2019.²

In this article I elaborate on her theory by showing two ways through which the anti-gender agenda has been enacted: via the idea of gender ideology and via macho speeches. The first pattern questions the very existence of gender by presenting it as an ideology. The second pattern re-naturalizes subaltern positions of women in society. By volume and reiteration, these patterns cannot be seen as political deviations of specific politicians, but as part of a political discourse that aims at restoring a certain order in which women (and LGBT+ people, and minorities in general) are placed back in subaltern positions. These phenomena have emerged in Brazil, but not only. Reactions to gender-equality initiatives under the umbrella of “gender ideology” were mobilized in other countries and electoral contexts, such as Colombia’s 2016 peace agreements. All over Europe, anti-gender campaigns took place with different effects in terms of redefining gender policies—shows the interesting “Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe” (<https://booksandideas.net/An-Anti-Gender-Europe.html>).³ While acknowledging that the two patterns are present in several countries, this text will focus on the Brazilian case where both coexist in order to argue that these stories are not simply personal preferences of far-right politicians nor only expressions of contemporary disputes around gender. They show how the anti-gender equality agenda is helping reassemble contemporary conservative discourses.

Finally, if these two patterns have been especially visible in countries where scholars identify crises in contemporary democracies—Brazil, the United States, the Philippines—it is worth asking: does the rise of anti-gender discourse affect democracy? If so, how?

¹ Almeida, Ronaldo de, “Bolsonaro presidente: conservadorismo, evangelismo e a crise brasileira”, in *Novos estud. CEBRAP*, São Paulo, v. 38, n. 1, p. 185-213.

² Biroli, Flavia, “O recesso da democracia e as disputas em torno da agenda de gênero”, *Blog da Boitempo*, Publicado em 24/05/2019. Disponível em: <https://blogdaboitempo.com.br/2019/05/24/o-recesso-da-democracia-e-as-disputas-em-torno-da-agenda-de-genero/>

³ An Anti-Gender Europe, Books and Ideas (<https://booksandideas.net/An-Anti-Gender-Europe.html>)

Contemporary democratic crises

In general, the literature that has been discussing contemporary democratic crisis focuses mainly on institutional variables of the democratic franchise. Scholars' main concern is explaining how democracies have been suffering not from abrupt interruptions, but from "gradually declining" through erosion processes led by elected leaders who subvert the rules that brought them into power. However, this literature often overlooks the central role played by the anti-gender agenda in democratic erosion.

In their bestseller *How Democracies Die* Levitsky and Ziblatt⁴ highlight the role of populist political leaders in democratic erosion and point out four indicators of authoritarian behavior that can jeopardize democracy: rejecting of the democratic rules of the game (or weakly committing to them), denying the legitimacy of political opponents, by portraying rivals as a threat—either to security, to certain ways of life, or to national sovereignty; tolerating or encouraging violence and, finally, by showing propensity to restricting civil liberties of opponents, including the media. In Brazilian experience, the anti-gender agenda provides a good example of portraying rivals as a threat—to the family, to the moral correctness. And discourses that echo sexual violence to women can easily fit in the category of tolerance to violence.

In another recent book, *People Against Democracy*, Yasha Mounk⁵ finds explanations of current democratic crisis not on the behavior of political leaders and the undermining of institutions, but on two axes: the dissatisfaction of citizens with democratic governments and their institutions, including the erosion of support for democracy related to the poor economic results of democratic countries in recent decades. Mounk is concerned with why citizens are increasingly opened to authoritarian alternatives to democracy and one of the reasons he finds is the stagnation on standards of living. In a scenario of rising economic inequalities, people get doubtful about their futures and prone to blame others—immigrants, racial minorities—for their problems. Alongside this, Mounk finds the roots of the crisis in the "slow divergence between liberalism and democracy", or between the popular will, expressed through elections, and the rule of law, which guarantees political rights. In his approach, the crisis of liberal democracies could lead either to democracies without rights or to rights without democracy. Still, he hardly

⁴ Levitsky, Steven; Ziblatt, Daniel, *How Democracies Die*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

⁵ Mounk, Yasha, *People Against Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2019.

incorporates feminist debates about how certain groups— among them women or ethnical minorities—never had equal access to political citizenship, either because of economic exclusion—the problem of distribution—or because of non-recognition of differences, oppressions and hierarchies.⁶

. These are familiar debates of feminist democratic theory. In contemporary democracies, the conditions that guarantee equal political participation—the right to vote, to engage in public debates and to be elected—are not bestowed to a large part of the population. Although there have been changes in the relative position of women in much of the world, it is not possible to think of equal citizenship with the persistence of unequal, unfair and violent patterns such as sexual division of labor, the responsibility for the care and reproduction of life. Each of these elements impacts the possibility of women's political action and does so all the more intensely as other factors such as race, color and social class are articulated.

In the following sections, I explore how the reaction to gender debates was central to the rearticulating of conservative agenda in Brazilian society and try to point out how these processes can potentially undermine democracy by replacing women in subaltern positions in public and private life and opening room for gender violence—thus, by undermining the possibilities of women to be present in the public life, they have potential to undermining women's citizenship and hard-won political rights.

The first pattern: the anti-gender agenda

The genesis of the reactions to gender date back to the UN Conferences on Women in Beijing, 1996, and on Population and Development, in Cairo City, 1995. There, feminist gender-equality agenda was opposed mostly by members of the Catholic Church who emphasized the natural or divine definition of the sexes⁷.

⁶ Phillips, Anne, *Democracy and Difference*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992.

⁷ Franco, Jean, "Defrocking the Vatican: Feminism's Secular Project", in Alvarez, Sonia; Dagnino, Evelina; Escobar, Arturo, *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1998, p.278-287.

Framing gender as an ideology—stressing the illusory or doctrinal character of the concept—emerged later, in the early 2000s, in Spains. In the mid-2000s the notion of “gender ideology”—defined as the possibility of each person to choose his sexual orientation with impacts on marriages, right to life and families—began to populate official documents of the Catholic Church in Latin America⁸. In Brazil, the expression reverberated shortly after initiatives of evangelical groups reacting to inclusive policies of the center-left government. The turning point was the release of the III National Human Rights Plan, in 2010. Items such as state secularism, abortion, same-sex unions, and media regulation were fiercely opposed by congressmen and Dilma Rousseff backed off implementing parts of the plan. Far from being a rupture, the Plan followed the path of human rights debates in the country since its first edition in 1996, but for the first time a group of conservative congressmen felt strong enough to question it.

In 2011, shortly after the Supreme Court granted marriage status to same-sex civil unions, controversy was installed around the teaching material of the program “Brazil without Homophobia”—dubbed “gay kit” by its opponents. Former deputy Jair Bolsonaro was at the head of the movement. The distribution of the material was suspended by President Dilma Rousseff but the controversy went on as the anti-program pieces kept circulating through social media. This is, in fact, one of the more perverse features of social media communications age (<https://booksandideas.net/The-Birth-of-Fake-News.html>): no matter if the subject is true or not, it can continue circulating and producing political effects for long. In 2015 the National Education Plan (PNE), a result of the National Conference of this area, was questioned by the Secretariat of Human Rights of the Chamber of Representatives, which for the first time had a neo-Pentecostal President. In this scenario, the whole set of gender-related groups and institutions started to be questioned. The legitimacy of the feminist movement and its interactions with the state in efforts for health, education and anti-violence policies were at stake when the whole set of participatory institutions were questioned in 2013.

Dilma Rousseff’s contested impeachment process took place in this contentious scenario and was illustrated by misogynistic images. The cover of *O Estado de S.Paulo*, one of Brazil’s main newspapers, had a picture of Rousseff behind the burning

⁸ Cornejo-Valle, Mónica and Pichardo, J. Ignacio, “La “ideología de género” frente a los derechos sexuales y reproductivos. El escenario español”, *Cadernos Pagu*, 2017, no.50.

⁹ Miskolci, Richard; Campana, Maximiliano. ““Ideologia de gênero”: notas para a genealogia de um pânico moral contemporâneo.”, *Soc. estado., Brasília*, v. 32, n. 3, p. 725-748, Dec. 2017.

Olympic pyre (04/05/2016). Automotive stickers pictured chief executive with her legs spread open in the car's gas tank. In a 10-hour long Sunday session, Rousseff's impeachment was voted in the Chamber of Representatives. A myriad of congressmen defended the impeachment as a way to protect families – 26,6% spoke on behalf of their own families and other 7% “for Brazilian families” in general, hence picturing Rousseff's terms as a threat to traditional-model families.

“I, together with my children and my wife who form the family in Brazil, that these bandits want to destroy so much with proposals that children change their sex and learn sex in school at the age of six, my vote is yes!”

said Delegate Éder Mauro (PSD, Pará).

“For the rescue of the people's hope for the reconstruction of our country, but, above all, in defense of life, family and faith, “yes” vote, stated Erivelton Santana (PEN, Bahia). “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord!”

shouted congressman Pastor Eurico, who completed: “In defense of life, family, morals, good customs, against corruption and not giving up on Brazil, my vote is ‘yes’.” (PHS-Pernambuco). Evangelical congressmen voted massively for impeachment—93,8% against 67,7% of non-evangelicals (<https://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbcsoc/v33n96/1806-9053-rbcsoc-3396032018.pdf>).¹⁰ The congress elected in 2014 was the most conservative in decades, composed by increased numbers of military, police officers and pastors who presented themselves by these features, as the names above show. This episode renders visible both the rising electoral appeal of conservatives and how Rousseff's impeachment was a moment where their moral agenda reached a new level of public exposure. Not by chance, this happened at the same time a contested impeachment process was taking place and those who replaced Rousseff in office kept activating this kind of issues while seeking for public support.

The term of vice-President Michel Temer began with his appointment of an all-men government and the cover of the country's main weekly magazine, *Veja*, celebrated the first lady as “Beautiful, demure and lady of the house”. Females were taken out of office and taken back home. The impeachment and these episodes, together, were a turning point. From then on, the anti-gender discourse left niche audiences and entered the national agenda. A year later, the issue was successfully

¹⁰ Prandi, Reginaldo; Carneiro, João Luiz, “EM NOME DO PAI: Justificativas do voto dos deputados federais evangélicos e não evangélicos na abertura do impeachment de Dilma Rousseff”, *Revista brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 2018, vol.33, n.96.

explored by far-right candidate campaign—proving the issue’s electoral potential. In this sense I suggest that anti-gender campaign was one of the elements of the electoral reorganization of conservative forces in Brazil.

There were, in fact, reactions to the narrative, but between 2016 and 2018 the clashes around gender continued to inhabit public agenda. In 2017, feminist Judith Butler was a target of protests while visiting Brazil. The demonstrators spoke of virtual impacts of queer theory concepts of gender performances on children, who would supposedly be taught they could choose freely to be a man or a woman, or event to move between both, against biology and God’s will. Attempts to disrupt queer-related exhibits were undertaken in the same period. The “gay kit” issue was re-activated in the 2018 presidential campaign, when several social media-based stories linked the production of the kit to candidate Fernando Haddad, who held the Ministry of Education between 2005 and 2012. Un-official campaign material portrayed Haddad as a politician defending abortion, drugs, surgery for sex-change and the end of catholic churches, among others. The “gay kit” —which, in fact, never existed in such form—came to be the issue that provoked the most ire. Un-official materials accused Haddad of having distributed an erotic bottle for children. All these items were articulated under the umbrella of a “gender ideology”. Each of them oversimplified extensive debates and complex policy outcomes. Despite that, they resonated with the electorate and spread doubts about the center-left candidate’s platform. This seemed to be a reaction to the Workers’ Party policies in areas such as women’s and trans people’s health, or damage-reduction initiatives in drug policies. The center-left government, however, never openly defended contentious issues such as abortion or drugs decriminalization—which, in fact, generated a fair amount of criticism among feminist and other social movements.

Finally, women were the group which ran the most extensive public reaction to Bolsonaro’s moralistic and punitive platform and as the #elenão (Not him) campaign went off on the streets, fake news portrayed the demonstrations as another example of left-wingers reckless behavior and mixed real images of the demonstrations with footage from other episodes—some of women breaking sacred images or Femen nude demonstrations. Misinformation was part of the political strategy, distancing from fair-play politics and using social media as a weapon to withdraw from a healthy electoral environment in which trustable and plural media may help leveling the field. Not only individual activists were questioned, but there was a disqualification of NGOs and social movements associated that were organizing demonstrations were pictured as corrupt or eager for public money, ill-intentioned groups that threaten

children, family, and the stability of society. They were also accused of being part of international conspiracies against moral values. This led, finally, to questions about their international connections and to the legitimacy of the international system where gender debates initially circulated. The whole idea that a plural and active civil society is relevant to democracy began to be put in question as several NGOs and activists' legitimacy was questioned.

The importance of these issues during the 2018 presidential campaign expresses the relevance of the anti-gender agenda in shaping a far-right political field based not only on positions on the economy and state function, but on conservative moral debates that react to the de-traditionalization of norms and practices. 2016 was a tipping point in Brazil. From that point on, "gender ideology" would progressively delimit a political grammar in the battle of moral entrepreneurs against the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights.¹¹ In this process, gender ceases to be a topic of clash between opposing groups in society or an agenda restricted to religious groups, and starts occupying a central place in political speech for some factions that, through moral debate, aggregate followers and voters, producing effects in electoral disputes. The controversy around gender has thus proved capable of bridging a set of agendas and debates that earn relevance in conservative platforms.

A similar process took place in Colombia, where two issues overlapped. One of the contentious issues of the 2016 peace agreement plebiscite was the inclusion of a "gender perspective" which meant, basically, that the conflict had specific consequences for women and LGBTI's lives that should be considered in reconstruction policies.¹² The issue mobilized sectors of catholic and evangelical citizens and is considered to have impacted the plebiscite outcome rejecting the peace agreement. In parallel, since 2015, in Colombia, there had been fierce debates about homophobia in schools and how the education system should deal with homosexual students. In this context, Supreme Court determined the production of health education materials in order to provide information and suggest ways for schools to better deal with the issue. In 2016, erotic comics were said to be part of those materials—this information, although a fake one, fostered reactions that pointed out how "gender ideology" was being imposed by national groups and international

¹¹ Miskolci, Richard; Campana, Maximiliano, *Op.Cit.*

¹² Rondon, Manuel Alejandro Rodríguez, "La ideología de género como exceso: Pánico moral y decisión ética en la política colombiana", *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad*, Rio de Janeiro, n. 27, p. 128-148, Dec. 2017; Muelle, Camila Esguerra, "Cómo hacer necropolíticas en casa: Ideología de género y acuerdos de paz en Colombia", *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad*, Rio de Janeiro, n. 27, p. 172-198, Dec. 2017.

organizations. As it happened in Brazil, the materials were eventually suspended by national authorities..

The second pattern: legitimating a subaltern place for women in politics

A second pattern of disputes around gender is related to the discourses of politicians that repeatedly revalue macho ideas (and actual behavior) and speak about women in disrespectful ways. These discourses range from justifications of violence against women, sentences that imply blaming the victims of violence, assessments of professional capacity via evaluations of beauty, comments about the sanity or insanity of women, among others. Although these ideas may persist in all countries at different levels, by openly expressing them political leaders reinforce and validate social places for women and acceptable practices in relation to our bodies and ideas. Donald Trump is probably the author of the broadest set of examples of such speech. While campaigning, he polemicized with Hillary Clinton around the image of a miss, whom he dubbed “Miss Piggy” and “Miss Housekeeping”. Another constant target of Trump has been women journalists making comments about how they look or doubting their mental health. Jair Bolsonaro’s offensive phrases towards women have been reported since 2003, when he said congresswoman Maria do Rosário did not deserve to be raped because she was ugly. The sentence at the same time blames the victims for rape and intends to disqualify a female parliamentary based on his assessment of her beauty. It was repeated in 2014 in the tribune of the House of Representatives and reaffirmed in an interview. Questioned in court, Bolsonaro was sentenced to compensation for moral damages to Maria do Rosário¹³. In interviews, Bolsonaro said he did not defend equal pay for men and women because “women become pregnant” —normalizing the idea that natural differences lead to economic and professional inequalities. In the same context, to amend, he pointed out that “However, there are a lot of women who are competent.” In March 2018, during the formation of the government and questioned on the low presence of women, he argued in an interview that it was not a gender

¹³ “Bolsonaro em 25 frases polêmicas”, 29 Oct. 2018, in *Carta Capital*. See: <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas>, accessed on 20 Sept. 2019.

issue, suggesting, however, that it was men who were capable of acting as ministers: “It is not a gender issue. You have to get whoever can handle it. If I had indicated women, then you would be asking me how many afro descendants”, he complained. In April 2018, already elected president, Bolsonaro defended a campaign of the Ministry of Tourism whose slogan had been blamed for suggesting sex tourism. The president explained, “Anyone who wants to come here to have sex with a woman, feel free.”

Bolsonaro, unfortunately, is not alone in his anti-gender equality crusade. Other high-level politicians have been suggesting that violence against women is acceptable and that it is normal politics to judge women’s potential by our physical attributes or sexual behavior. “If Hilary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?”, asked Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign. Rape has been part of the speeches of president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, who repeatedly tells the story of how he tried to sexually assault an employee and has affirmed he would like to have an Australian missionary raped and murdered in Davao city, which he ruled between 2013 and 2016. By the volume and recurrence, such mentions of women cannot be understood as personal deviations of political leaders, but as a political discourse. The reiteration of these ideas has sought to replace women in subaltern positions in public and private life, while disqualifying feminist action and making room for gender violence as they put those ideas back into the political scenario, as well as in society in general.

What may have started as a reaction to the mainstreaming of gender policies— a backlash¹⁴—has evolved to something else as the anti-gender agenda helped to catalyze support to the conservative agenda. It provided a common enemy and a political platform more attractive to the general public than the liberalizing minimum state agenda of late 20th century conservatism and, by doing so, helped far-right candidates to building electoral expression. The very definition of conservatism relates to the preservation of an established social order that may be threatened by the demands of equality from women and LGBTQI+ citizens. However, in countries like Brazil, since the democratization, the conservative agenda focused more on market liberalization and economic reforms. This means that a moral agenda was not the in

¹⁴ MATOS, Marlise, “O golpe restitui o heteropatriarcado branco racista colonial burguês.”, in *Revista Teoria e Debate*, ed. 171, 11/04/2018; BIROLI, Flavia, “Direitos em disputa: gênero em foco, democracia em xeque.” in Avritzer, Leonardo; Starling, Heloisa, Braga, Pauliane e Zanandrez, Priscila, *Pensando a democracia, a República e o Estado de Direito no Brasil*, Belo Horizonte, Projeto República (UFMG), 2019.

the frontline of the local conservatives until recently, when the anti-gender reaction began to show potential for bringing together people who shared discontent in cultural and political arenas.

Feeding democratic crisis?

Liberal representative democracy can be defined as a system that allows the participation of citizenship in decision-making through the election of representatives and guarantees fundamental rights. Within the state, power is limited by a structure of checks and balances that include the executive, the legislative and the judiciary bounded by the constitutions. This is the basics of democracy, the minimalist model. Contemporary democratic theory has a lot of contention about inclusion and equality, and how to strengthen or even rethink representation in ways that could guarantee equal participation to all people.

In fact, even in the older democracies the right to vote is guaranteed (after women's struggles), but the right to be voted and to engage in public debates is hardly universal as gendered inequalities in access to power, political positions and public spaces remain. In this sense, even considering the minimalistic democratic models, by undermining processes that moved towards gender equality the "conservative wave" can contribute to democratic ruptures to the extent that it interrupts (slow and limited) processes of inclusion of sectors of the people that were historically denied access to public debates and positions of power. A similar effect is produced by discourses that disqualify the action of gender-related NGOs and the feminist movement—as they potentially undermine the social legitimacy of spaces of political action built by women. To the extent that anti-gender discourse revalues the traditional roles of women in society, replacing us in the private space and emphasizing tasks in care, what is done is to reduce the possibilities of political participation in this segment of citizenship which, for its turn, (re)liberates men for political life, free from spending time in domestic tasks and in care. When the space of ministries and public offices is once again occupied by middle-aged men, it signals the closure of political space for women (alongside LGBTIQ+, coloured people of color, indigenous populations). This can potentially reverse processes of inclusion of sectors historically not included in citizenship.

There are, additionally, other issues that can potentially threaten democracy. As female politicians, feminists and LGBTI activists are portrayed as threats to the safety of families as they are spreading harmful ways of living, we are witnessing a denial of legitimacy of political opponents that can easily fit into Levitsky and Ziblatt's indicatives of authoritarian behavior. Of course, political disputes and different approaches to education and health agendas are defensible on pluralistic societies, but this does not include the friend-enemy logics nor the violent discourses expressed by words and images that have re-entered politics in recent years.

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