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VIEWPOINT



## A growing threat to human rights? Gender and political ideologies in Brazil

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### ABSTRACT

This viewpoint article discusses the growing threat to human rights in Brazil, specifically on gender and political ideologies. Brazil has a progressive Constitution that guarantees basic human rights to all Brazilians, including that of choice of gender. In the last few years, pressure groups, particularly religious groups, have increasingly influenced successive governments to restrain the freedom of people to access gender and sex education at school. In the middle of the current political and economic chaos of Brazil, religious fundamentalism has grown stronger. These groups have aimed to eliminate any gender and political discussions in the National Curriculum, but also in Brazilian life. However, there are many other interests underneath this rhetoric and actions. In the last decades, evangelicals have built an economic empire. Consequently, there have been significant losses to education, especially in gender education. Brazilian public universities are also under severe threat (financial and ideological). The current Ministry of Education believes that philosophy and sociology courses should be discouraged, as well as research on gender issues. Research spending has decreased sharply and there is a significant concern that censorship of research in certain areas of knowledge may occur.

### A brief introduction

Brazil is the largest democracy in Latin America with an advanced and progressive Constitution that guarantees basic human rights to all Brazilians, including that of choice of gender. In the last few years, and especially in the last 12 months, pressure groups, particularly religious groups, influenced successive governments to restrain the freedom of people to access gender and sex education at school. Before I detail how these groups have been working to undo policy, it is necessary that I first unpack the political and economic scenario against which their actions have taken place and that have fed the phobia toward the so-called '*gender ideology*'. The term '*gender ideology*' or '*ideology of gender*' are terms adopted by extremist right wing groups in Brazil and in Latin America. They have accused feminists and LGBTT groups of implementing a '*gender ideology*' that threatens Christian and traditional family values among children and young people in schools. These

self-proclaimed 'Christians' have been very active and successful in prohibiting any gender discussions at schools and changing curriculum at local and national levels. They want to 'recover' traditional roles for women and men, to ban discussions about gender discrimination and to demonize LGBTT and abortion discussions.

Simultaneously, in the last few years, the Federal Police and the Prosecuting Office (Ministério Público Federal) of Brazil have investigated and imprisoned many politicians because of corruption and traffic of influence. Most of these imprisonments and many further actions were the result of the 'Car Wash' operation initiated in March 2014 by Judge Sergio Moro and the Prosecuting Office of Paraná State in the South Brazil. The name 'Car Wash' derives from the very beginning of this investigation during which investigators found that a car wash in a petrol station was used to launder money. Subsequent investigations found that this small operation was linked to a much larger money laundering scheme that involved Petrobras, many politicians and several of the political parties of Brazil, including the Labour Party.

Further political unrest came about with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in August 2016. The impeachment was accepted on the grounds of fiscal misconduct, drawing attention to major corruption by the ruling party (Labour Party) and leading to loss of political support for the president. As required by the Brazilian Constitution, vice-president Mr. Michael Temer took office. Although the impeachment was legal, president Temer had never had significant public support. The unpopularity of the last presidents together, with the questionable reasons for the impeachment, have led many to suggest and still to insist that the entire process was a coup enacted by the Brazilian Congress. Since the last election, (now) ex-president Mr. Temer has been accused of many acts of corruption and some of these accusations have been accepted by the Justice system. As we have seen, Mr. Jair Messias Bolsonaro succeeded Mr. Temer as President. Mr Bolsonaro has continued with his nationalist discourse, which is perceived by many as racist, homophobic and sexist.

Federal Governments spanning over a decade, first Mr. Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) and then Mrs. Dilma Rousseff (2010–2016), had strong social agendas, however their policies were very fragile in terms of their sustainability. Like previous presidents of Brazil, these two Labour Party presidents were unable to break free from the 'tyrannical demands of financial wealth' (Paulani, 2017).<sup>1</sup> International economic crises during the first decade of 2000 buried the Brazilian Labour Party's political projects when the price of commodities (especially iron, petrol and agricultural products) fell. Lula claimed to have created a 'new middle class', but his government actually pushed the middle class into a 'proletarian class' condition (Chauí Marilena, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Such criticisms were also made by members of the Labour Party themselves. The two authors mentioned here, Dr. Paulani and Dr. Chauí, who provide much of theoretical framework of the left, are members of the Labour Party and occupied political posts during the Labour Party's government.

Undeniably, Lula's government represented a dream that Brazilian academics and most of the population had wished for after many decades of dictatorship. Lula's social programs benefited from the economic growth of the country and world, from very high commodity prices and an overall very positive view of Brazil worldwide. The next president, Dilma, was never a popular politician or widely known for her success in politics. Sharing a common political party and agenda, her election was mostly a result of president Lula's popularity and ability to negotiate with politicians, the elite, together with his

populist relationship with the poor. It was a weak government, with little support from Congress, and President Dilma was unable to communicate or attend to the population's demands due to the now soaring economic crisis. That created a perfect gap for the return of more conservative political groups, very much in line with many other countries in the world, including Great Britain and the United States. These have brought with them increasingly conservative perspectives on gender.

The Labour Party of Lula and Dilma was brought to power by voters who believed it was time for social justice in Brazil. Brazilian universities have historically been very leftist and have played an important role in the resistance against the military regime. During 1964–1985, a civil–military coup in Brazil imposed a repressive system that persecuted, tortured and murdered many Brazilian civilians and politicians who opposed the old oligarchies and historical exploits of settlers, including the US and European countries in Latin America. The coup was heavily financed by foreign capital, especially the United States. They feared the expansion of communist power, its external competitor, the Soviet Union. The coup was civil–military, and stifled mass movements of urban workers and rural workers, students and soldiers and low-ranking military. These groups wanted a State with a strong popular, democratic and national dimension, based on agrarian and urban reforms, control of remittances, nationalization of strategic sectors and promotion of national industry.

Brazilian universities' support for the election of both Lula and Dilma was an obvious consequence of their quest for freedom, social justice and the return of democracy in Brazil. However, here a *mea culpa* moment must be recognized. Many academics have themselves been radical in standing for left-wing rhetoric, mostly Marxist, with little tolerance for, or ability to communicate with, those who have different perceptions. Academics and students who disagreed with the Labor Party's ideas have been severely criticized and labeled as 'right wing'. As a consequence, fundamental aspects of university life such as freedom of ideas and impartiality in the analysis of social phenomenon, have been put at risk. Ideological policing inside universities mirrors many of the problems generated with the Labour Party as a ruling party: universities have failed to deal with contradictions within the population, including their opposing ideas and traditional values regarding gender.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the current political and economic chaos of Brazil, religious fundamentalism has grown stronger. A crusade has been established against what has been called a '*gender ideology*' and a '*school without a party*'. The aims of these fundamentalists have been to eliminate any gender and political discussions in the National Curriculum, including the punishment of teachers who disobey their ideas. Darwin's theory of evolution has been contested, homosexuals have been demonized or described as mentally ill, abortion has been criminalized with no exceptions (including victims of rape who previously had the legal right to interrupt pregnancy).

Fundamentalist Evangelical and Catholic groups have mobilized the rhetoric of recovering family values and protecting innocent children. However, there are many other interests underneath this rhetoric and actions. In the last decades, evangelicals have built an economic empire through their control of the media (from newspapers to gospel singers, gospel clothing, even gospel trip tours) and local churches. This is a new and very profitable untaxed niche market, susceptible to money laundering and other misconduct, much the same as those earlier opportunities that drove the 'Car Wash' operation.

The growth of the political strength of evangelicals came from their ability to support or become politicians, as they could secure votes among their followers. During Dilma's term, for example, an evangelical priest was nominated as Secretary of Human Rights. During his term, and with his support, sexist and homophobic discussions proliferated and clinics were created to practice 'gay cures'. In 2017, a Brazilian Federal judge in Brasília (the capital of Brazil) approved the access of gay people to a therapy of 'sexual reversal'.

Clearly, not all religious groups in Brazil share such abusive perceptions. However, since these groups control the media, they have more public presence to legitimize their ideas, thus gaining the attention of the population and establishing panic and homophobia, especially among parents.

In 2004, the Brazilian government spent 1.9 million reais (approximately one million dollars at the time) to develop a program called *Brazil without Homophobia*. At schools, it aimed to prepare teachers to deal with gender and sexuality issues through a sub-program called *School without homophobia*. In 2011, the project received severe criticisms from religious groups and politicians, who nicknamed the materials to be presented at schools as '*Gay kit*'. At that time, President Dilma yielded to the political and religious pressures and suspended the *Kit*.

Mr. Jair Messias Bolsonaro, now the President, was at this time, a member of National Congress and a retired military Captain. He was one of the first politicians to attack this 'Kit', accusing it of reinforcing homosexuality and encouraging promiscuity among students. On national television, Mr. Bolsonaro made use of false material on gender to accuse the former Labour Party government of financing and promoting moral degradation among pupils at schools.

This *Gay Kit* material comprised three videos and a guide for teachers, and was prepared by the Ministry of Education, through an agreement signed by the National Fund for the Development of Education (FNDE). It dealt with homosexuality, transsexuality and bisexuality among young people, including inside school environments, and warning about prejudice. The former representative of FNDE, Mr. Vincent Defourny, said that that the material was appropriate for the age groups and cognitive development of students. Later, in 2015, another attempt to implement it was frustrated by the same groups. These groups are powerful in order to promote their politicians. Thus, who would frustrate them?

Mr. Bolsonaro has become well known for many polemic speeches supporting torture during the military coup in the 60s in Brazil, also against black, natives, women and LGBT people. From being initially unknown, he gained much importance as a politician with this discourse. Last October 2018, he was elected president of Brazil, strongly supported by religious leaders.

Because previous President Temer had never had significant public support due to his alleged involvement with corruption, he has bargained with many political groups to keep his government on track. With religious fundamentalists, he has negotiated the exclusion of any gender discussion from the National Curriculum. Thus, school textbooks previously selected according to an evaluation of academics and subsequently selected by teachers, were unauthorized. It was mandated that from then on school books would be selected by people who simply registered on-line at the site of the Ministry of Education (MEC). Bolsonaro has continued in this vein with intentions to remove references to feminism, gendered violence and GLBT issues. Religious fundamentalists recognize only a

heterosexual order as natural and demand that sexual education is the responsibility of the family and that they have a right to exert conservative values on children. It was suggested by religious fundamentalists that any gender issue should be taught at school during religious classes, hence under the auspices of religious ideas.

In addition to their capacity to bargain politically with President Temer, religious fundamentalists, allied with conservative politicians, started to blame the Labour Party's past governments for giving too much space to the agenda of LGBT groups, putting children's education at risk. The current and previous governments have benefitted indirectly from this gender discussion at school. Indeed, there have been many coincidences between the appearance of political scandals and the approval of unpopular laws with the intensification of the gender debate.

There have been significant losses to education, especially gender education, during President Temer's government. However, it must be acknowledged that these losses started during Dilma's term when fundamentalist religious groups were successful in prohibiting textbooks and school literature. During both Lula's and Dilma's governments, gender discussions gain space of discussion in the political agenda. However, little real dialogue took place among the population before changes in policy and resourcing were implemented. In reality, some of the materials produced by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) were never adopted in schools. Not only the population but some academics were skeptical about these materials not in terms of their objectives, but because these did not have effective participation of the population in their development. These materials were publicized by religious groups and opportunistic politicians who used the argument to turn the discussion into a crusade against gender. People were made to believe there was a conspiracy to turn boys and girls into homosexuals, among other gender-phobic discourses. Again, this trend to demonize gender (but also communism or whatever he understands about it, especially considering that recently Mr. Bolsonaro identified Nazism as a left-wing government which during his visit to Israel, he was oriented that it was not!) issues has been seen recently in other countries, including other countries in Latin America but also in parts of Europe including France, Spain and Poland.

So, does Brazil have a chance to find a better way to be more inclusive and discuss gender issues in a more mature and democratic manner? Will 'gender ideology' still be used to strengthen the political power of fundamentalist groups and continue to confirm their prejudices? It would be naive to think that any new government would be able to change this chaotic scenario quickly. They must be able to communicate more effectively with the population to avoid a collapse in the country. This does not relate only to gender issues, as the country is now very polarized; hetero versus homosexuals, poor versus rich, religious versus non-religious, land owner versus landless are just a few of these polarized sides. Candidates for the most recent election (in October 2018) embodied this polarization. Brazil, a young democracy with institutions striving to strengthen themselves, may see a political situation very similar to what has been observed in the USA recently in a country with a strong democratic past and institutions known to curb the actions of presidents.

There are too many interests in this political game and all sides have shown intolerance and an inability to negotiate gender discussions inside schools, giving space to opportunistic politicians to gather votes. One thing is for sure, old strategies of resistance from academics and the Left are no longer effective in dealing with these conservative groups or

political powers. Academics and the Left must be able to understand the voices of the population, generate better and new ways to face conservative groups and change the manner in which they communicate to people.

For 2019, recently elected President Bolsonaro has promised to obey the Brazilian Constitution, which guarantees inclusion for all. However, all his previous declarations put this in doubt. While the Brazilian Labour Party was ‘negotiating’ its original ideas to keep power, the right wing took control over the political arena. Now, most Brazilians will count on Mr. Bolsonaro and his team to ‘fix’ Brazil from ‘*bad influences*’ such as the ‘*ideology of gender*’, which is claimed to threaten the traditional family, or from ‘*old communist ideas*’. Perhaps, this whole gender discourse is just nonsense to get elected. Let’s hope that Mr. Bolsonaro’s speech were just *fake news* and that his actions do not jeopardize human rights in Brazil. Now, 100 days into his government, it seems that the continued use of gender discourse will be central for Mr Bolsonaro’s government.

At the moment, Brazilian public universities are under severe threat – financial and ideological. For example, there has been a 30% cut in budget from a very low budget that was approved last year. In addition, the current Ministry of Education is preaching the idea that philosophy and sociology courses are no longer needed and should be strongly discouraged. Research is very much seen as not necessary and not well done. Research spending has decreased sharply, a trend that has continued through the last 5 years. There is significant worry that censorship of research in certain areas of knowledge may occur. No one knows what the plans for education or research are or whether any plan actually exists. The first Minister of Education lasted less than 100 days and the current Minister is an economist with little experience in Education.

These have been and are confusing times: threats to curtail human rights, censorship, strong religious groups trying to optimize their views. All of this is happening within a government that has not been able to communicate well with the congress and communicates with people via social media. Will democracy and the values that our Constitution defends survive? I believe it will but there will be significant turmoil and social unrest.

The country is certainly divided between what some call ‘left’ and ‘right’. But, honestly, like someone once said: Left and right wings belong to the same bird (Bob Hughes, 2017). Perhaps we need someone in the middle who will care for the people of this country and the many rights we have conquered with difficulties. Brazilians need much more than bread and circuses. And, really, as Hughes said:

‘the reality is that democracies need both socialism and capitalism to function efficiently. It’s only the balance that differs. ... As Einstein (1949) affirmed: “Why socialism? Private capital tends to become concentrated in few hands ... private capitalists inevitably control, directly or indirectly, the main sources of information (press, radio, education) ... the enormous power of which cannot be effectively checked.”’

## Notes

1. Leda Paulani: School of Administration – University of Sao Paulo/USP; Council Secretary of Planning Governor Haddad (The Labour Party).
2. Marilena Chauí: University of São Paulo/USP. Secretary of Culture São Paulo (a former Labour Party member).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Dr *Adla Betsaida Martins Teixeira* is an associate professor at the School of Education, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil since 1999. She completed her MA and PhD (1992–1998) at the University of London, Institute of Education on gender and education. Following, she completed postdoctorates at the University of Leeds, UK (2008–2009), Université de Lyon2, France (2008–2009) and more recently held postdoctoral positions at Stanford University, USA and Georgia State University (2017–2018) both on issues of gender discrimination and violence against women at university campuses and Project Prevent (Program of Prevention at Schools against Sexual Violence and Exploitation of girls by their families). Her research projects are on gender issues such as women in science, homophobia at schools, gender issues at police schools, groups of women victims of domestic violence and primary health support, promotion of women into STEAM areas.

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