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Political violence against women in Brazil: expressions and definitions

Violência política contra as mulheres no Brasil: manifestações e definições

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Abstract

The article analyzes expressions of violence against women in Brazilian politics today. It discusses events that could be classified as political violence against women, setting an exploratory analysis. It also presents and discusses theoretical approaches, international laws and documents that have recently produced definitions and answers to this kind of violence. The present context of political violence against women in Brazil is addressed considering two different sets of events. The first consists in reactions to women's rights in Congress, expressed in propositions and statements by Congress men. The second corresponds to representations of President Dilma Rousseff during the political process that resulted in her suspension in May 2016. Following those, it discusses theoretical approaches on violence against women as a group, as well as approaches that address political violence against women in recent studies, international laws and documents. A brief conclusion intends to contribute to a definition of political violence that involves practices targeting specific women and actions against women's rights.

Key-words: political violence against women; women's rights; gender stereotypes; backlash; Brazil.

Resumo

O artigo analisa formas de violência política contra as mulheres no Brasil hoje, com a preocupação de discutir ao mesmo tempo manifestações empíricas que possam ser assim classificadas, abordagens teóricas dessa violência e leis e documentos internacionais que a tematizam. Situa o contexto político atual dessas manifestações e analisa dois conjuntos distintos de dados. O primeiro corresponde a reações contrárias aos direitos das mulheres no Congresso Nacional, expressas na forma de proposições e de enunciados de parlamentares em plenário. O segundo, por sua vez, corresponde a representações da presidenta Dilma Rousseff durante o processo político que resultou no seu afastamento em maio de 2016. Em seguida, discute abordagens teóricas sobre a violência contra as mulheres como grupo, assim como abordagens que tratam especificamente da violência política contra as mulheres em estudos recentes, leis e documentos internacionais. Uma breve

conclusão pretende colaborar para uma definição de violência política que envolve práticas dirigidas a mulheres específicas e ações contra os direitos das mulheres.

Palavras-chave: violência política contra as mulheres; direitos das mulheres; estereótipos de gênero, retrocessos; Brasil.

The present context of political violence against women in Brazil

Women's relative position has significantly changed in Brazil in the last decades¹. As in other countries in the Western World, this change is due to access to education and professional opportunities, laws criminalizing violence, as well as more qualified political participation.

The law that establishes a 30% quota for women in legislative elections in Brazil (9.504/1997²) will be soon twenty years old, but the country has never had more than 10% of women in the Chamber of Deputies. That does not mean, though, that women have not been active in politics, even within the limits of the State. There have been, also, qualitative changes in women's presence in politics in Brazil. Having a woman elected for the highest political post might be considered one of them. Dilma Rousseff was elected president in 2010 and is being deposed right now after the approval of a process of impeachment in both houses of Congress in April and May 2016³. Reactions to Rousseff and stigmas related to femininity will be part of the discussion presented here. This is, though, only one aspect – and I suspect it is not the main one – in the actual context of political violence against women in Brazil.

When the Worker's Party (PT) won 2002's Presidential Election, a not very expressive federal government department for women's policy became a Ministry (Secretaria de Políticas para Mulheres). It has been led by feminists whose experiences were built in social movements, party politics and academic careers. At the same time, because of PT's historical basis, men and women coming from social movements have been placed in other ministries

¹ The present paper dialogues with researches on gender and politics carried out by the Grupo de Pesquisa sobre Democracia e Desigualdades (www.demode.unb.br) of the Institute of Political Science of the University of Brasília. A preliminary version was discussed in the panel "Violence against women in politics: theories and concepts", at the 24th World Congress of Political Science, in Poznan, Poland, July 2016. I am grateful to participants and discussants for their remarks.

² The law has, as in other contexts, gone through changes that have made it more effective (in 2009, 2010 and 2012). That has not, though, changed the final patterns. Women are presently 51 (9,8%) of the 513 Brazilian deputies and 13 (16%) of the 81 senators. For analyses that discuss the limits of Brazilian quotas, see Araújo (2005) e Miguel (2008).

³ Impeachment is a legal procedure foreseen in Brazilian Constitution. But Dilma Rousseff's impeachment has been considered by many Brazilians as an illegal and illegitimate process for at least two reasons: so far, there is no proof of corruption or crime of responsibility, which is required for a process of impeachment in Brazilian law; it has been conducted by men who are defendant in many corruption processes and are being protected by the interim government.

and federal organisms as well, especially the ones related to social policies, human rights, racial equality, education, and health policies⁴. One turning point in conservative reactions, the National Plan of Human Rights (known as PNDH 3), presented in 2009, is expressive of the potentialities of the action of feminist movements in the State and in National Conferences that took place along the time PT was in charge.

It is also important to bring to consideration the spread of feminism in Brazil. Feminist movements and organizations have gone through different patterns of action and relationships with the State since 1970s (Alvarez, 1990 e 2014; Pinto, 2003). In recent years, feminism has become more popular than ever in the country. This social phenomenon can be seen as a result of many factors: changes in women's position in Brazilian society, cumulative action of feminist movements and organizations in the country, the growth of feminist values in international media, the role of internet in young people sociability, as well as the political context that I have mentioned above. Feminist movements and organizations, magazines, blogs and websites have multiplied.

Although research on feminist activism within the State and the growth of feminist movements and organizations in Brazil in recent years is still an ongoing endeavor, recognizing these patterns of action, as well as its results and its limits, is key to understanding present backlash in the country. We have not really advanced in the number of elected women, quotas have not been successful, but female's participation in politics in recent years has become larger and more qualified. If we consider political violence against women (or violence against women in politics) as a kind of reaction or backlash, Brazilian case might help us to understand that this is not only "an emerging tact to deter women's political participation as candidates and elected officials" (Krook and Sanin, 2016), but also an emerging tact to deter feminist activism (specially feminist struggles within the State to redefine policies concerning women) and to block ongoing changes in gender patterns

⁴ Abers and Tatagiba (2014) analysis of feminist activism in the Ministry of Health shows how feminist women worked inside the State to redefine guidelines related to women's health. Machado (2016) discusses the patterns of action of feminist women within the State and their limits between 2003 and 2015.

that are directly connected to changes in women's relative position in the public sphere.

There has been a considerable growth of conservatism recently, which is manifest in many legislative proposals that, if approved, will signify a backward step in women's rights. I will explain some of them below, but briefly they concern a return to family entity rights, reaffirming traditional family as "natural" relationship between men and women focused on reproduction, as well as the regression of actual laws on abortion for the complete prohibition of voluntary interruption of pregnancy by women, including the cases currently allowed by Brazilian Law since 1940 (pregnancy resulting from rape and risk of death for the pregnant woman). It is also manifest in proposals and actions that have been taking place since May 2015, which have already had some success in excluding and prohibiting "gender perspective" and "gender ideology" in public policy, education plans and programs, as well as classroom discussions.

At the same time, the first woman elected President has been suspended, the Ministry of Women, Racial Equity, and Human Rights, which replaced the Ministry for Women's Policies (the already mentioned Secretaria de Políticas para Mulheres), after a cabinet reform in 2015, has been disintegrated and the interim government leaded by Michel Temer has announced a whole male and white cabinet.

On one hand, the protests against the whole male cabinet have shown how much the presence of women in politics is now seen as a regular characteristic of present Western societies, although Brazil is far from having parity in representation – the exclusion of women (as well as black men and women) has been interpreted as a "return to the past" in public debate, even in newspapers and organizations that have supported the impeachment of Rousseff. On the other hand, we now have a radically shortened presence of feminists in the State and more support from the Executive to groups in Congress that have been acting against women's and LGBT rights.

The reforms implemented by the Worker's Party since Luis Inácio Lula da Silva became president in 2003 have been advanced and limited by a project that tried to balance the agenda of social movements which have been

historically the basis of the party and the agenda of traditional sectors in Brazilian politics (Singer, 2012 e 2013). That meant real limits for the advance of women's rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights, because of agreements with conservative actors (Machado, 2016). But it also meant an exceptional possibility for feminist movements to be part of the government, having representatives in cabinets, committees, policy planning. Policies and laws concerning women have been worked from this tension, and feminist networks have been limited, as well as have benefited from acting within the State. With the suspension of Rousseff, a new arrangement has taken place. Concerning "morality", women's and social rights, it represents a shutdown: presently, only traditional sectors have actual voice. For women, that means at the time a shutoff of the State to gender policies and to women's movements and organizations.

This paper has, as its environment, the tension between those trends – the growth of feminist movements and organizations and women's qualified presence in Brazilian society and politics and the growth of conservatism, which has as a key component the institutional closure to women's rights and feminist agenda.

The main hypothesis is that the greater access of women and, which is considerably relevant in this case, feminist women and organizations to the structures of federal government, associated to the election of Brazilian's first woman president and the spreading of feminism, has activated a conservative backlash against gender equality. This reaction is expressed as political violence against particular women and against women (and especially feminist women) more generally.

There is no definition of political violence in Brazilian law, nor has this definition been, in Brazil, part of government documents or academic debate so far. Other Latin American countries have typified this kind of violence – Bolivia, Mexico and Peru – or assumed a broader concept of violence in national laws – Argentina and Venezuela. Brazil has, though, ratified international treaties, as the "Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women", known as Convention of Belem do Pará, from 1994 (Decree 1.973/1996). That means a

compromise to consider violence against women as “any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere” (Article 1). From then, Brazil has advanced in specific laws focusing on domestic violence against women (11.340/2006), on sexual harassment (10.224/2001) and women’s assassination (13.104/2015), and has developed strategies to implement them, dealing with material, institutional and cultural difficulties and obstacles (Bandeira e Almeida, 2015). There has been no special concern for political violence.

This is an exploratory analysis that takes into account varied events that expose political violence against women in Brazil, understood as violence against specific women as well as reactions to women’s presence in politics and to changes in gender roles. Conceptual discussion is anchored in present literature on violence, and political violence more specifically, against women.

The following section presents conservative reactions against women in politics in Brazil, characterizing different expressions of what I understand that could be considered as political violence against women in the country today. Later, I will discuss some theoretical approaches to violence against women as a group, as well as the definition of political violence against women in recent studies, laws and international documents. Based on the theoretical debate and empirical events presented, the last section intends to collaborate to definitions of political violence against women that encompass practices directed to specific women and actions against women’s rights. Together, they add up to naturalize violence and bias against women.

Conservative reactions to women’s rights and feminism

This section discusses some axes of the present conservative reaction against women’s rights and feminism in Brazil. Firstly, I will briefly describe some legislative proposals in course at the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, as well as in state assemblies and local legislative bodies throughout the country. Then I will point to some statements and justifications by Brazilian politicians who

support conservative initiatives. Finally, I will present briefly and in an exploratory manner some sexist and misogynist expressions against Dilma Rousseff that have been produced and spread as part of recent disputes.

Legislative propositions

There has been a growing number of legislative propositions against women's rights in Brazil recently. Here I highlight the ones that have been chosen by political actors as the flagship in the conservative agenda concerning sexual and reproductive rights, family, and gender politics (debates and public policies).

Abortion and reproductive rights

In the 1990s, six law projects were proposed aiming restrictions in the present law (Brazilian women are allowed to decide for an abortion when pregnancy results from sexual violence, when their life is at risk and, since 2012, when fetuses are diagnosed with anencephaly) or stricter punishment for illegal abortion. From 2000 to 2015, 32 projects were proposed aiming the same outcomes. Only in the first months of 2016, four projects (PL 4880/2016, PL 4646/2016, PL 4642/2016, PL 4396/2016) were proposed to constrain and criminalize doctors and health workers, to typify as a crime punished with prison the acts of supporting and giving information for women who want to interrupt a pregnancy and to define abortion as a crime in case of anomalies as microcephaly⁵. A project from 2007 (Estatuto do Nascituro, PL 478/2007) and two proposals for changes in Constitution to determine that "the right to life" is valid from the moment of conception (PEC 164/2012 and PEC 29/2015), if approved, will criminalize abortion in any case, reversing Brazilian actual exceptions in law. They have been set as priority agenda by religious

⁵ For further discussion on the politics of abortion in Brazil, see the studies by many authors, considering different issues related to the struggles on the right to abortion, published in Biroli e Miguel (2016).

conservative deputies and, as part of the actual mechanisms to isolate feminist politicians, have been posed as a matter to be discussed in a recent Commission for Women's Rights created by those deputies despite the protests of many congresswomen. I should as well underline one more proposition, PL 5069/2013, because its approval at the Commission of Constitution, Justice, and Citizenship in October 2015 took thousands of women to the streets in many different cities, in different regions of Brazil, to protest against it. If it becomes a law, it will restrict care service for women who have suffered sexual assault⁶. One of its main traces is suspicion and distrust concerning women's testimonies, an issue to which I will return below. The acts against this proposition have been seen as the largest massive acts in defense of reproductive rights in Brazilian history.

Family

A law proposal approved in a Special Commission in September 2015 (PL 6583/2013) defines family as the reunion of man, woman and their children or each of them and their children. By affirming the "natural" character of the family, its purpose is nullifying decisions by Supreme Court (decision regarding the ADI 4277 and ADPF, 2011) and the National Council of Justice (Resolution 175, 2013) which recognize same-sex union as complying the same rights as unions between man and woman.

The proposal has, though, another important element that has been less discussed, the revival of family entity as the subject of rights, prevailing individual rights (see Biroli, 2014). According to the text of this law proposal, the State should assure to the "familiar entity", and not to individuals, the right to health care, food, education, culture, citizenship. Its text states that it is a right of the families, not of women and children, to be protected from violence ("guarantees for its physical and mental integrity"). On the other hand, it sets

⁶ From this moment, women took leading roles in protests against the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, who is now temporarily suspended from the office by the Supreme Court and might soon be definitely suspended. He is defendant in one process on corruption and has been denounced in many others. Besides being the author of the referred project (PL 5069), he has also been the main character in the contested impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff.

as an obligation the promotion of family values at school and includes the participation of “the representative of the family” (not an adult responsible for the child) in school boards.

Pentecostal and catholic deputies have had a clear leadership in such proposal as in others that set the defense of conventional family, in spite of gender equality, in Parliamentary agenda⁷. This backlash may be understood as a reaction to decisions and policies. Decisions by the Supreme Court (the decision from 2011 that recognizes same-sex union and the decision from 2012 that allows abortion in case of fetal anencephaly) and feminist activism within the State were set as targets. The participation of the feminist movement in the building of technical norms concerning women’s health (Abers e Tatagiba, 2014) and a National Plan for Human Rights (PNDH3, published in 2009) should be highlighted. PNDH 3 considers abortion a public health issue and sets measures to combat homophobia and to promote guarantees for same-sex couples, as the right to adopt children, recommending that they should have priority in intersectoral public policies.

Gender ideology

In May 2015, a Requirement of Information directed to Brazilian Ministry of Education, signed by a deputy by the main oppositional party, the centrist Party of Brazilian Social-Democracy (PSDB), demanded that the Government justified why the “ideology of gender” should be kept “as a mandatory guideline for the National Plan of Education” (PNE). The text of the Requirement considers inadequate the following parts of the PNE:

- “Part III of Article 2, which defines as a guideline “overcoming educational inequalities, emphasizing the promotion of racial equality, regional, gender and sexual orientation”;

⁷ For a discussion about the growth of Pentecostalism, politics, and gender in Brazil see Machado (2013).

- “Strategy 3.12 of Goal 3, which sets as an objective “implementing politics to prevent evasion motivated by racial prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, creating a network against related forms of exclusion”.

Only a month after the requirement was presented, conservative groups started coordinated actions in Assemblies and Municipal Chambers in different parts of Brazil to exclude “gender ideology” from the Plans of Education in states and municipalities. They have been successful in many of them. Exclusion has been one side of it, the other are the proposals that, if approved, will result in prohibition – veto to free expressions and debate is proposed in projects that intend to prohibit the “application of gender ideology” and the use of the terms “gender” or “sexual orientation” in curriculum, classes, and even complementary activities (PL 1859/2015, PL 477/2015). “Gender ideology”, signified as the opposite of “natural family” and “natural sexual roles”, have broadly been activated from 2015 in legislative proposals and speeches, as well as in actions to exclude “gender perspective” in public policy (PDC 214/2015 and the voting of MP 696/2015 in February 2016, that has excluded “gender perspective” from the then existent “Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, and Human Rights”) and to define policies for sexual orientation as illegitimate (PDC 122/2015).

Statements against orientations for gender equality and feminism

The advancement of a conservative offensive against gender as a conceptual and political guideline has brought up statements that can be seen as open reactions to social changes, as well as justifications for ongoing backlash. Although these have not been collected as consistent data, I have included them as anecdotal evidence that could allow further exploration⁸.

⁸ Brazilian main newspapers have not assumed this framing and have actually, if not broadly at least at some moments, given some space to feminist voices contesting conservative offensive against women’s rights. This has happened specially when, in October and November 2015, women went to the streets all over the country against the President of the Chamber of

The deputies whose statements I reproduce below have all been directly involved in the propositions and actions already mentioned:

“Gender is a term to empty the concept of man and woman. We advocate for the differentiation between man and woman”⁹

“Gender ideology is nothing more than the destruction of the family, mother cell and basis of society. (...) “it is up to the parents to decide how and when their children will receive information on sexuality. Each family has its culture and its principles”¹⁰

“Real women that are out there, battling to survive, do not want to be empowered, they want to be loved, they want to be cared for, they want to be respected. Feminists are the ones who want to be empowered”¹¹

“We need to defend our families and society from the harms of gender ideology”, which states that “any person could be considered a ‘woman’”¹²

These statements were produced in a political environment in which two sets of events are especially relevant. One of them has to do with the international context of the reaction to changes in gender roles. The book by Dale O’Leary, *The Gender Agenda: redefining equality*, first published in 1997 as an analysis of the Conferences of the United Nations on Population (in Cairo, 1994) and on Women (in Beijing, 1995), is the basis for arguments brought to justify legislative proposals against “gender ideology” that were mentioned before. It is easily accessible in propaganda against “gender

Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, and the project, already mentioned, that if approved would restrict medical support to women who have been sexually assaulted. But there was and there is still one clear political frontier to public discussion on the advancement of a conservative agenda: the main newspapers have taken a position against Dilma Rousseff and, as such, in favor of the group that has worked to suspend her elected mandate. Giving voice to women’s organization against this backlash in women’s rights at this moment would be adding to criticisms against what has been seen by these sectors as a coup and against the conservative agenda promoted by the interim government of Michel Temer.

⁹ Deputy Alan Rick (PRB-AC), *O Globo*, February 18th 2016: <http://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2016/02/camara-conclui-votacao-da-mp-que-reduziu-numero-de-ministerios.html>

¹⁰ Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante (PSD-RJ), personal page, February 18th 2016: <http://sostenescavalcante.com.br/sostenes-cavalcante-ideologia-de-genero-e-a-destruicao-da-familia-brasileira/>

¹¹ Deputy Flavinho (PSB-SP), Legislative session, Chamber of Deputies, Transcription by the Department of Tachygraphy, Revision and Writing (100.2.55.O), Abril 27th 2016, p. 83.

¹² Deputy Eros Biondini (PTB-MG), personal page, February 25th 2015: http://erosbiondini.com/noticias/index_ver.php?cd_novidades=591

ideology” at the internet as well¹³. The central idea is that of natural family, as a basis to exclude arguments for gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights. The United Nations appear, in Brazilian documents as well as in O’Leary’s book, as the link between international and local feminism and as the powerful propellant of an anti-family ideology.

Although in Brazilian politics Catholics and Pentecostal politicians and authorities have been acting together, Catholic Church has had an important role in the building of the international context: in June 2015, in Puerto Rico, Pope Francis declared the “gender ideology” to be a denial of “the summit of divine creation”, which is understood as “the complementarity of man and woman”¹⁴. That is exactly when, in Brazil, coordinated actions were going on all around the country to exclude “gender ideology” and “gender perspective” from Educational Plans.

If international context may be taken as one set of events constituting conservative statements, positions and actions, the other set of relevant events to the understanding of this backlash refers more directly to political disputes in Brazil. As I have said before in this article, the context in which this reaction has been taking place is one in which feminist activists have acted in Federal government, occupying cabinets and other positions in the areas of violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, education. Feminist women have been an active and important part of the definition of politics for gender equality in the last 14 years. Although this has taken place under a lot of pressure coming from “governability” and political alliances in which the Worker’s Party has had conservative politicians and parties as allies, it has meant a step forward in political agenda concerning women (Matos, 2016).

Adding to the events already mentioned, Brazil had for the first time a woman president, elected in 2010 and reelected in 2014. Connections between reactions to women’s agenda, feminism, and the presence of a woman in the most powerful political office in the country are one aspect of

¹³ As in a document entitled “A quick guide to gender ideology”(“Guia rápido: ideologia de gênero”, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0xT32rLgpEVT3QwMk9aeUg3LUU/view?pref=2&pli=1>, access in May 26th 2016).

¹⁴ “Pope: marriage between man and woman, no to gender ideology”, June 8th 2015, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/08/pope_marriage_between_man_and_woman,_no_to_gender_ideology/1150051

the context of explicit positions against gender equality and violence against women in politics more generally. I will explore them below.

Sexist and misogynist expressions against Dilma Rousseff, 2015-16

In recent studies about women politicians in Brazilian news (papers, magazines, and televisions), we have concluded that gender stereotypes still constitute the discourse, but have gone through important changes (Biroli, 2010; Miguel e Biroli, 2011). Analyzing the presence of women ministers in the main Brazilian weekly news magazines since 1982, when Brazil had its first woman minister (Esther de Figueiredo Ferraz, Ministry of Education and Culture of the last military government before democratization), we noticed that women's presence was always unequal and differentiated if compared to men's. Throughout the period, stereotyped presence organized women's image, mainly by a narrow relation between body, private life, and women's political image. But it became gradually less explicit from 1982 to the years 2000s. Dilma Rousseff, as former minister and as candidate in presidential elections, in the years between 2006 and 2010, was not visible in the same way previous women ministers had been. The main difference in the terms of the analysis of women ministries during more than three decades was that "the most extreme stereotypes, the ones which deny legitimacy to women's presence in the public space" were considered "overcome" (Miguel e Biroli, 2011, p. 168).

Although the most extreme keep off the records of Brazilian main papers and magazines, the open campaign against Rousseff's mandate as President after 2010's election has brought to the view registers that we thought had been overcome. A line has been surpassed specially in propaganda for the impeachment of Rousseff at the internet, in posters and stickers. But some stories and images published in magazines and newspapers have also been object of debate. I paste below some exemplary images:

News magazines and newspapers:

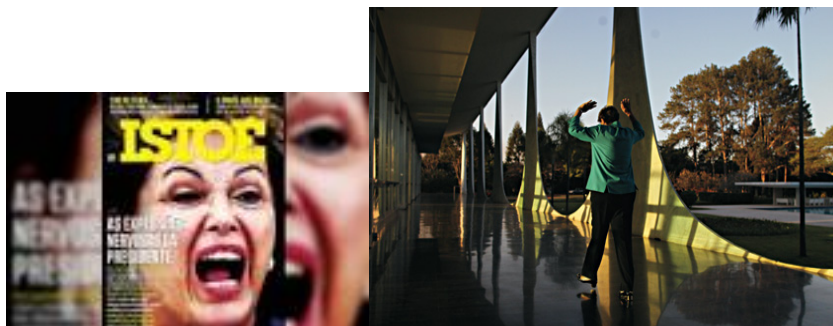


Figure 1: Isto É Magazine: “President’s nervous break-downs”, April 1st 2016



Figure 2: O Estado de S. Paulo: “Olympic fire”, May 4th 2016

“Memes” picturing Rousseff as having “lost it”:

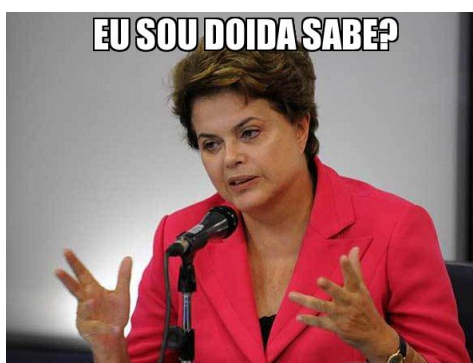




Figure 3: “I am crazy, you know?”.

Figure 4: “Beware of the beast! She acted in guerilla, planned terrorist acts, used arms to implement communism in Brazil and was sentenced to 3 years in jail. She defends abortion and she wants to be the “mother of Brazil”. Do you believe it?”



Figure 5: “It is too much pressure, it is too much pressure!!! Be calm, Dilminha, it’s only pans”.

Figure 6: “The costumer decides how it goes” [referring to Brazilian parties which were allies in government].

Auto-stickers and graffiti showing violent sexual content:



Figures 7: Auto sticker

Figures 8: Grafitti (Brasília, SQS 212, June 2016), “Dilma whore fucked economy”

Sexual stigmas and aggressions in acts for the impeachment.



Figure 9: “Sons Dilma bitch”, playing with the fact that “of a [de uma]” and “Dilma” sound similarly.

Figure 10: “Swing it that this bitch falls”

Some images situated in the opposite spectrum, in favor of Rousseff, were also marked by gender stereotypes, but were not marked by violent sexual content. In the figure below, cleaning work, broadly associated to femininity, has been evoked to positively signify her role in politics:



Figure 11: Either we remove her or we will be extinct!

The idea of a woman losing control was the most evoked, as well as the idea of a rude and overwhelmed woman. If this was present in weekly news magazines and news papers, sexual violence was a component in acts against Rousseff, reproducing not only stigmas that aimed to reduce her value as politician, but stigmas that concerned women in public life more generally.

Imagery concerning impeachment voting and Rousseff's suspension



Figure 12: Chamber of Deputies, at the night of the voting of the process of impeachment against Dilma Rousseff (April 17th, 2016). Figure 13: Image at the internet after the voting to proceed the process of impeachment in Senate (May 11th, 2016), which resulted in Rousseff's suspension.

The main slogan used by politicians in favor of impeachment, carried by congressmen at the moment the process to suspend Dilma Rousseff's mandate was voted in Congress (April 17th and May 11th 2016), was marked by gender: "Good bye, dear" brings, in Portuguese, an ironic connotation because "dear" is commonly used mostly between women and by men referring to women in a way that may be identified as top-down. Other acts were clear expressions of violence and hate speech concerning the president. A deputy that has become a symbol of intolerance and denial of human rights announced that his vote for the impeachment was a tribute to the colonel responsible for the tortures Rousseff was submitted to during military dictatorship¹⁵.

There are two pieces of information concerning present Brazilian scenario that have to do with advancements in conservative trends and the use of gender issues by President Dilma to characterize her removal from Presidency and the violence she has been suffering. The interim government that was installed after her suspension has taken actions to encourage the conservative agenda not only by having no women appointed to his cabinet, but by appointing conservative men and women to positions in the area of health, education and politics for women. Pronouncements defending the role of the churches in health policy, the necessity to eliminate "ideology" in education and the appointment of a religious conservative woman as the Secretary of Politics for Women have been noticed by human rights social organizations, as well as Brazilian and international media. On the other hand, Rousseff has denounced the coup against her as sexist and misogynist in pronouncements and interviews since the week before the decision for the pursuing of impeachment in the Chamber of Deputies, in April 2016¹⁶.

Violence against women has not been typified as such, but I believe it is a clear element in the present context. It is not restricted to violence against

¹⁵ The same deputy had, in 2014, declared that he wouldn't rape a woman deputy, Maria do Rosário (PT-RS), only because "she didn't deserve it". She would be, as he justified at the time, to ugly and not "his type". This public act of violence was motivated by the fact that Rosário was then in charge, as secretary of Human Rights, of a Committee to address torture and the killing and disappearing of oppositional citizens by the military dictatorship (1964-85). In June 21st 2016, the Supreme Court has accepted a charge by the Attorney general's Office against the deputy for injury against Rosário and incitement to rape.

¹⁶ President Rousseff has herself evoked sexism to explain impeachment. See, for an example, interview to CNN (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNudcLYNneQ>) in April 27th, 2016.

specific women, but encloses violence as the denial of women as politicians, as competent agents in public life as well as the denial of legitimacy to feminism and to the historical struggle for gender equality.

Political violence against women: concepts and critical potentialities

Feminist theories and movements have defined sexual violence against women broadly as a systematic form of patriarchy (or male) dominance. Sexual violence has, thus, been understood as a structural exercise of power that constitutes prevailing understandings of femininity and masculinity.

It might be interesting to start from sexual violence to advance definitions of political violence that contain, but are not restricted to, sexual violence. Susan Brownmiller, in a famous definition, considered rape as “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15). Sylvia Walby has seen violence against women as one of the key patriarchal structures in contemporary Western societies, along with five other axes, which she has defined as the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, state, sexuality, and cultural institutions. For her, “male violence against women has all the characteristics one would expect of a social structure” and “cannot be understood outside an analysis of patriarchal social structures” (Walby, 1990, p. 128). Although one structure does not contain the other, in a way that more representation for women at the level of the state, for example, does not mean automatically less social violence against women or even better codes to contain this kind of violence, and “the elimination of one does not lead to the demise of the system as a whole” (Idem, p. 177), Walby understands that these structures are interrelated in a system, the system of patriarchy.

We do not need to argue for patriarchy as a system or even enter that debate to consider that: (1) male dominance is made of different structures, which are not contained in or caused by a more fundamental structure; (2) male dominance is made of different structures that are interrelated and act

together in the reproduction of women's disadvantages and vulnerability in contemporary society; (3) the axes of male domination assume different relative importance, which varies historically and in different social contexts.

Violence is related to women's position in society – as much when it is a reaction to changes in women's relative position as when it is a pattern reproduced in every day practices to place women in (and out of) specific roles and social places. It is, as such, related to disadvantages in paid work, to institutional sexism, to double standards in sexual behavior and the way they are reproduced culturally, and, finally, to exclusion, underrepresentation and limited presence in politics.

Assuming that this is valid, Iris Young's understanding of violence as one face of oppression in contemporary societies might help to expand the comprehension of violence against women: physical and symbolic violence are clearly intertwined in this type of oppression. It includes physical attack as well as "harassment, intimidation, or ridicule for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members" (Young, 1990, p. 61). In her approach, violence is "systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group" (Idem, p. 62), which brings to our discussion the fact that one way women can be seen as a social group is as the target of specific violence – and here, again, there might be reasons to surpass sexual violence towards a concept of violence that includes political violence against women. I do not mean that women are equally affected or equally vulnerable to violence¹⁷, but that they are targeted and potentially vulnerable because they are women. I also mean, following Young less closely now than in previous lines, that we are discussing violence that aims a group marked as vulnerable and, at the same time, contributes to keeping them marked that way.

The way women are marked as different in politics carries the way they are marked as vulnerable in social life. And that refers to women's

¹⁷ It is certainly important to consider discussions on violence against women – as it is for other themes, as sexuality, family, work, poverty – having in mind the different and unequal positions of women in society. Race, classe, sexuality, and generation are some of the axes that should be considered (Biroli e Miguel, 2015; Carneiro, 2011; Collins, 2009 and 2015; Davis, 1983 [1981]).

historical belonging to private sphere as well as to the way women are, as a group, targeted by violence.

Another element in Young's definition of violence as a face of oppression is the fact that it is socially known to happen and to be repeated – by perpetrators as well as by the groups made vulnerable by it. It is a social practice exactly because it has a “rule-bound, social, and often premeditated character”, being central to its dynamic the fact that it “happens frequently and lies as a constant possibility at the horizon of the social imagination” (Young, 1990, p. 62). Because of its social and institutional character and because it is anchored in social toleration, it might be affected by “the redistribution of resources and positions” – and I underline that positions in politics are important here. On the other hand, in such a dynamic, overcoming violence against specific groups requires “change[s] in cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversions in the gestures of everyday life” (Idem, p. 63).

Connections between sexual violence and women's exclusion and underrepresentation in politics could be discussed at this point. In a way, violence against women is reproduced because it has grounds in institutions and culture. The small presence of women in institutional politics reduces the possibility of setting the combat of violence against women as priority for the State. I am not assuming that women will, because they are women, have this agenda as part of their political career. I understand, though, that structural violence against women is one of the dynamics that sets women's experience apart from men's (Biroli, 2013, chapter 2). When women's perspectives are isolated in public debate and they are not subjects in the building of rights, laws and public policies, their experiences as potential targets of specific violence might be suspended or nullified as a matter for politics. In an opposite direction, violence might be a reaction to the rising of women's political actions, to quotas in politics, and other measures to increase their presence (Krook and Sanin, 2016) – as well as to the building of rights and new cultural understanding of gender roles that are in an important way connected to those actions and measures.

One trace of structural and institutionalized violence against women is the silencing and distrust of women's words. Focusing on sexual violence, that means that consent is differently signified in unequal societies (Pateman, 1988 and 1989; Biroli 2013, chapter three). This works in interpersonal relations as well as in institutional approaches to sexual violence. One way of thinking of the differentiated and unequal inclusion of women in politics is that their voices are neglected. In other words, what is denied in this case is their capacity to speak up for themselves, defining individually and collectively their needs and interests in a way that is politically meaningful and effective. Again, this works in interpersonal relations as well as in institutional, symbolic and economic barriers that reduce women's political participation.

Violence against women could be considered as an effort to silence women, pushing them from public life and political expression to the private realm. The dynamics I have been discussing in Brazilian context contain this effort to silence women in two different ways: they reduce women's condition and ability as political actors; they nullify gender debate and agenda, reducing the legitimacy of feminist knowledge and women's organizations.

Recent studies have considered the definition of political violence not only in terms of physical, sexual and psychological violence, but of symbolic and economic violence as well (Krook and Sanin, 2016). Its manifestations "frequently overlap and escalate", so it is important to understand that typifying does not mean dealing with separate and disconnected phenomenon (Sanin, 2016, p. 27).

The first law to specifically address political violence against women is Bolivian Law 243 (*Ley contra el acoso y violencia política hacia las mujeres*, approved in May 2012). The law presents nine "principles and values": (a) equality of opportunities; (b) non-violence; (c) non-discrimination; (d) equality; (e) political participation; (f) social control; (g) depatriarcalization; (h) interculturality; and (i) positive action. It defines "political harassment" and "political violence", which are taken as degrees of violence to which different penalties should apply¹⁸. Following that law, Bolivia has approved Law 348 (*Ley integral para garantizar a las mujeres una vida libre de violencia*) in 2013. In

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Law 348, patriarchy is literally put as a reality to be overcome by public policy that “turns visible, denounces and eradicates patriarchy, through the change of structures, relations, traditions, customs, and unequal behaviors of power, domination, exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of women by men” (Article 4, Principles and values). The text of the law defines 17 types of violence, and three of them have more directly to do with this discussion: (1) media violence, (2) violence in political exercise and women’s leadership (which refers directly to Law 243 for definitions and guidelines), and (3) institutional violence. Although they are defined as different types of violence, they compose a whole set of preventions to gender equality that are assumed altogether as a situation – or system – to be overcome.

Mexico has also typified “gender political violence” in the reform of the law concerning violence against women and electoral code (Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia and Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales), approved by Mexican Senate in 2013. According to Daniela Cerva Cerna (2014, p. 111), the proposal “defines gender political violence as aggressive actions committed by one or many people that cause physical, psychological or sexual damage against one or various women, exercising political representation”, but that encompasses also “political violence against women imposed by gender stereotypes”, which leads to codes that establish and sanction infractions in media and political propaganda, considering the impact of stereotypes. Restrictions to women’s speeches in Legislative sessions are also mentioned by Cerna. Considering Brazilian actual context, it would be important to explicitly include not only restrictions to the voices of specific women by specific men, but the efforts to silence women and feminism described earlier in this article. They target the expression of positions in defense of women’s rights, gender debate and agenda, and women’s organizations.

In July 2016, a law against gender violence was sanctioned in Peru, enlarging the scope of laws concerning gender violence and political violence particularly. The “National Plan against Gender Violence” (“Plan Nacional contra la Violencia de Género”, Decreto n. 8/2016) typifies violence as physical, psychological, sexual, and economic or patrimonial and includes

“political harassment” as a kind of gender violence. It is defined as “any action, conduct or omission among others, based on gender, individually or as a group, which has the effect or purpose of impairing, nullifying, preventing, hindering or restricting their political rights, against women’s right to a life free of violence and women’s right to participate in political and public affairs on equal terms with men”.

Those legislations and efforts bring up, in different degrees, a definition of violence and an approach to political violence that encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, symbolic, and economic violence. Harassment is under violence typification, as part of all those different types of violence, preceding or constituting other kinds of acts. Political violence against women could, then, be defined as “an analytical and theoretical category that displays facts, meanings and words, from a certain place and political position towards power relations and social practices of dominance that represent an extreme exercise of authoritarianism which is considered legitimate by the ones who put it in action” (Machichao Marbery, s/d). It is political not only because it is a reaction against women in politics (although it might take place in public and private spaces), but because “it is a manifestation of unequal power relations in society more generally, and emanates from the perceived ‘intrusion’ of women in spaces that ‘belong’ to men” (Sanin, 2016, p. 8).

In Argentina, the Law 26485 (Ley de Protección Integral a las Mujeres), approved in 2009, has as one of its objectives to guarantee “conditions suitable to raise awareness and prevent, punish and eradicate discrimination and violence against women in any of its manifestations and areas” (Article 2, item “c”). It also encompasses, as an objective, “the removal of social and cultural patterns that promote and sustain gender inequality and power relations on women”. Although it does not define political violence against women specifically, it also sets a path to the consideration of connections between acts of violence against specific women and the denial of voice and rights to women in general.

The laws that I have mentioned here make a clear statement that violence encompasses stereotypes and structures that reproduce gender domination. They open a path to consider that actions aiming to block laws

and public policy to combat cultural patterns and practices that promote gender inequality and lead to violence against women are in itself political violence against women. Women politicians are put in a very difficult position: they are stopped in their will to reduce violence against women through policies and measures that guarantee women's rights and pose limits to gender stereotypes and discrimination; they are, as well, posed as deviants. It is also important to remember that laws and policies to overcome cultural patterns and practices that promote gender inequality are important to produce a social environment in which more women might be able to trail political careers.

In a context marked by a more qualified presence of women in politics and activism, as well as by changes in gender roles and perceptions of femininity, but still characterized by deep underrepresentation, laws that suppress "gender perspective" from documents and public policy could be taken as political violence because they intend to exclude gender as a topic for discussion and politics and, as such, to avoid the building of a public context in which gender inequality (in society and politics) could be faced and overcome. Physical, sexual, psychological, symbolic and economic violence, as well as the kinds of harassment that are involved and the silencing that violence potentially produces, might be deepened by the suppression of gender from debate and public policy.

I am aware that the lack of clear borders to the concept of political violence against women might be an issue, but it could as well be an advantage as it exposes the connections between suppressing women's voices, gender debate and agenda, and acting violently against women. The suppressing of gender agenda (debate and policy) means effectively that the State denies any relevance to violence against women in general and in politics, as well as to their historical effort as organized movements, collectives and networks to promote law and policy for gender equality and more specifically to end violence against women.

The changing patterns of gender exclusion and marginalization in culture, politics and institutions (Cerna, 2014, p. 114) include reactions not only to the increase in the number of women in politics, but also to the

strengthening of feminism and to feminist activism within the State and to redefinitions of gender roles and perceptions in society. Propositions and practices to block gender agenda intend to reduce the potential of women's voices to build paths to gender equality.

Conclusion

What is aimed by political violence against women, in its interpersonal and political-institutional forms, is parity democracy – democracy in different dimensions of social and political life. Widening the notion of parity in politics, parity democracy includes “a new proposal of sexual contract to equal roles and functions for both sexes in public domain as much as in private” (Albaine, 2015, p. 148). Referring to Athens Declaration of 1992 (from the “First Summit of Women in Power”), that proclaims the need to achieve balanced distribution of women and men in power, the notion of parity democracy evokes both formal and informal equality. It demands attention from political leaders and parties, unions, associations, and the media to promote participation and values that correspond to equality between women and men in politics and society.

Violence in politics can be seen as a “strategy to keep positions of power” (Albaine, 2015, p. 151), as it is “an expression of, and emanates from, male privilege and power in society” (Sanin, 2016, p. 5). It is manifest in explicit acts of violence, in the silencing of women and women's organizations, and in actions to prevent gender debate and policy, that is, to prevent an agenda for gender equality. It is a reaction not only to women's political presence and activism, but also to the changing patterns in gender relations and values in society.

Considerations stated earlier in this article pointed to the interrelation between different axes of domination, considering violence against women in its relation to disadvantages in paid work, to institutional sexism, to double standards in sexual behavior and the way they are reproduced culturally, and, finally, to exclusion, underrepresentation and limited presence in politics.

Actions to discourage and constrain the presence of women in politics aim at silencing and discrediting women's voices and, in Brazilian case, feminist agenda. When we have fewer women in politics, their concerns are, as they have historically been, addressed by men. When women are silenced, their needs and disadvantages are more likely treated as specific issues – and not as a general social issue. Therefore the concern for keeping women in a position of “weak publics”, which do not have their opinions empowered by what Nancy Fraser has defined as the translation of “such ‘opinion’ in authoritative decisions” (Fraser, 1992, p. 134-5). That is one reason to recognize the importance of feminist activism broadly and of feminist activism within the State, but it is also a reason to state the fundamental importance of having more women elected to political positions in Executive and Legislative branches.

Violence against women denies women's condition as equal subjects and contributes to keeping them subaltern in public life; political violence against women denies women's condition as equal political actors and contributes to keeping them subaltern in politics, weakening and limiting democracy.

Political violence manifests as physical, sexual, psychological, symbolic and economic aggressions and constraints that intimidate women in politics, put extra costs on their careers and, in some cases, risk their physical integrity and their lives. Its symbolic dimension is related to the reaffirming of conventional sexual roles in changing political and social environments.

Through this exploratory analysis of political events, theoretical debate and laws concerning political violence against women, I expect to have contributed to unveil how conservative reactions in Brazil converge in political violence aiming women as political actors, individually and collectively, as much as they aim women's rights. A key issue refers to current efforts to silence women and to block gender politics. They aim to reduce or neutralize women's historical struggle to build rights, public policy, and to strengthen the debate about gender inequalities. What is at stake is women's public voices as well as the ideal of a society in which women could effectively be anywhere without being permanent targets of violence.

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