

**OPINION / BRAZIL**

# Bolsonaro, 'gender ideology' and hegemonic masculinity in Brazil

*Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power marks the return of white, male, sexist and authoritarian politics in Brazil.*

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Supporters of far-right legislator Jair Bolsonaro take part in a rally during the second round of the presidential elections on October 28, 2018 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil [Buda Mendes/Getty Images]

Brazil has just elected Jair Bolsonaro as its next president - a man well-known nationally and internationally for his misogyny and homophobia. Although over the years, his rhetoric targeting women, the LGBTQI community and minorities grew increasingly obscene, it in no way upset his political career. In fact, it seemed to strengthen it.

During a parliamentary debate in 2014, he told MP Maria do Rosario that he would not rape her because she "was not worth it". The same year, he suggested during a TV interview that spanking a son who "showed signs" of being gay was the best way for parents to change his behaviour and assure he would grow up as a "proper" man. In 2017, he claimed that after having four sons, having a daughter was the result of a moment of "weakness".

In making these outrageous assertions in public, Bolsonaro was aiming to position himself strategically as a key player within the so-called "war on gender ideology". This

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Now he is likely to pay back the reactionary forces who contributed to his political success by empowering them in their war on progressive gender activism in Brazil.

## What is gender ideology?

The term "gender ideology" has no academic or theoretical basis, nor a clear and coherent definition. It is used within conservative religious circles to vaguely denote policies or activism aimed at improving gender equality and upholding the rights of women and the LGBTQI community.

It has its roots in the response of the Catholic Church and a number of influential conservative activists to the progress made on these fronts at the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 World Conference on Women.

This idea of a "gender" conspiracy or an agenda to undermine family and religious values and promote immorality quickly spread throughout the world after the mid-1990s. Conservative circles started instrumentalising the word "gender" to come after different "enemies" at different times: feminists, gays, trans people, etc.

As the "pink wave" receded in Latin America over the past five years, the "crusade" on "gender ideology" spread across the region. It was fed by the resurgence of the conservative opposition and the rise of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal groups.

In Brazil, the legal recognition of same-sex unions by the Supreme Court in 2011, was the turning point for "anti-gender crusaders". It was in the aftermath of this groundbreaking decision that the hysteria around "gender ideology" gained momentum and visibility.

Since then the evangelical parliamentary bloc, a key force behind Bolsonaro's successful candidacy, has systematically tried to undermine the expansion of sexual rights, including same-sex marriage and reproductive rights, and particularly the right to abortion. They have regularly submitted proposed legislation, including draft laws to recognise the "rights" of an unborn child, to define the family as a unit consisting of a man, a woman and their children, and to criminalise abortion even in the case of rape.

While none of these proposals has been passed, they have given an opportunity for the evangelical bloc to market itself as the defender of the traditional family and Christian values and stir public controversy. In this way, it gradually etched the idea in the public's mind that the values of the Brazilian society are indeed "under attack" and that a war needs to be waged on the subversive, immoral "gender ideology" to save them.

Bolsonaro's own career as an "anti-gender crusader" also started back in 2011. Then and now, Brazil has been dealing with alarming rates of violent deaths related to homophobia. In 2017, reports registered at least 445 LGBTQI deaths, a 30 percent increase from 2016. In this context, in 2011 then Education Minister Fernando Haddad (now Bolsonaro's former election opponent), launched an initiative to distribute educational materials aimed at combating homophobia and discrimination in schools.

Bolsonaro called the materials a "gay kit" and declared it a direct threat to the "natural" sexual binary, to children and to the Brazilian family. He led a public campaign which successfully swayed public opinion against the measure, forcing then President Dilma

Rousseff to veto the distribution of these materials.

## Hegemonic masculinity and violence

One of the high points of the crusade against "gender ideology" was during what many see as the parliamentary coup against the Workers' Party in 2016.

While many factors and political interests were at play during the impeachment proceedings against Dilma, the reactionary discourse on gender and sexuality played an important role in galvanising popular support for the move.

The opposition's public rhetoric employing misogyny, ridicule and moralist appeals to traditional family values incited against Brazil's first female president and paved the way for the return of white, male, sexist and authoritarian politics.

Bolsonaro, of course, actively participated in the whole charade, famously dedicating his vote in favour of Dilma's impeachment to Colonel Brilhante Ustra, the head of the feared Doi-Codi torture unit. This was meant to taunt the former president who herself suffered torture at the hands of Brazil's military dictatorship.

Thus the message that Bolsonaro and his allies delivered in 2016 was clear: Women and LGBTQI people are not welcome in politics, and neither are policies promoting gender and sexual justice.

Then in 2018 during his election campaign, Bolsonaro not only embodied and praised this hegemonic form of masculinity but also actively projected himself as a crusader against "gender ideology". "Anti-gender" rhetoric was also generously used even in the fake news campaign aimed at smearing his opponent. One fake story distributed on WhatsApp claimed Haddad supplied schools with erotic baby bottles in public child care centres. Another claimed his running mate, Manuela D'Avila, was an atheist who defiled religious symbols.

The effects of Bolsonaro's crusade against "gender ideology" have not been limited to Brazilian politics but have also extended to the Brazilian streets, where violence initiated by his supporters has escalated. During this polarised election campaign, different forms of gender-based and racialised political violence increased significantly. More than 50 violent incidents perpetrated by Bolsonaro supporters were registered during this election season, with many of the victims being women, blacks, and LGBTQI.

In his post-election-victory speech, Bolsonaro said his campaign had relied on the Bible, "the toolbox to fix men and women", demonstrating clearly that he will continue down the same path he had walked over the past few years - only now he would have the power to realise all that he believes in.

His rise to power has unleashed the most brutal side of the "gender ideology" crusade by pushing beyond the institutional constraints of politics to the point where hostile rhetoric about political "enemies" encourages their physical annihilation in the public sphere.

Our only choice going forward is to come together and confront this rising tide of gender-based and racialised violence as a united front of democratic forces. If we fail to unite, we risk losing ground to Bolsonaro's dangerous and dehumanising rhetoric and more innocent lives.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***

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