

Brazil's Abortion Battle - The conservative and Evangelical right

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The Brazilian right's efforts to destroy abortion rights are key to their broader crusade against the Left.

Contents

- [The Family Front](#)
- [The Feminist Threat](#)

Brazil's right wing has gotten ahead through a series of dirty tricks. The [2015 impeachment](#) of Workers Party (PT) president Dilma Rousseff, pushed through despite the absence of any "crime of responsibility," is the most notorious example. Now, through similarly slick maneuvers, they're seeking further restrictions on reproductive rights. This, in a country where already one woman dies from a clandestine abortion procedure every nine minutes.

Currently, abortion is legal only in particular cases, such as when there's a direct threat to the life of the pregnant person, or when the pregnancy results from rape. It's these exceptions that the conservative and Evangelical parliamentary front is seeking to destroy. Through a variety of proposed bills and amendments, they may [eliminate the right to abortion completely](#).

One proposal sought to establish conception as the moment when life begins. But that was taking too long, so the front decided to push their agenda through a different bill, called PEC 181, which would extend maternity leave for mothers of premature babies.

The tactic was simple: find a bill that women of all political visions will support, work directly with the women involved, create an emotional narrative about the connection between a mother and her child, and insert, somewhere in there, what's known in Brazil as a "turtle" clause: a provision snuck into a separate, unrelated bill. If the bill is time sensitive, the "turtle" clause might get pushed through without due public debate.

[Eduardo Cunha](#), the previous parliamentary leader, who also drove Rousseff's impeachment, is responsible for writing the anti-abortion turtle clause in PEC 181.

So far, this strategy has made some headway. But in seeking to eliminate the right to abortion altogether, conservatives may have overreached. Women in Brazil are ready to fight for the few reproductive rights they still have left.

The Family Front

The Evangelical church is the major social force driving Brazilian conservatives' political project. Brazil is still the most Catholic country in the world, but the Catholic population has fallen while the

Evangelical community has grown.

Though there are different strands of Evangelism, it's the mega-church, prosperity gospel, morally conservative kind that has a national political project in Brazil. Unlike the Catholic church, the Evangelical churches have invested heavily in electing their pastors and members to all levels of political representation. They also work to establish relationships with the judiciary, the executive, and high-ranking bureaucrats and successful businessmen. Mirroring the televangelists and mega-churches of the United States, they preach financial prosperity as the path towards a "nation chosen by God."

Their federal parliamentary front consists of almost two hundred congressmembers, acting in tandem with other powerful fronts. Prominent among these are agribusiness, business, the construction sector, and, crucially, the family front: 238 congress-members whose families have pursued political power in Brazil for decades now. Together, these fronts acted in opposition to Rousseff and have helped to keep [Michel Temer](#) as president despite his abysmal approval rating.

Members of the Evangelical front come from different parties, from the extreme conservative right to the moderate left, including the Workers Party. Though they don't vote together on everything, they collude on issues involving religion and traditional family values.

To expand their social base beyond the churches from which they emerged, the family front stokes moral panics, especially around "concern for children." These panics have united conservative churches with liberal-conservative movements and parties — including some that attempt to project a non-partisan, independent image, like the Free Brazil Movement — in outbursts against the left, the LGBTQ community, and feminists, accused of corrupting "our children."

In September, the front sparked a frenzied movement to [close a queer art exhibit](#), claiming it promoted incest, pedophilia, and religious heresy. Then there was the campaign against São Paulo's Museum of Modern Art, for admitting children to an exhibit involving artistic nudity. These culminated into a generalized crusade against art and progressive intellectual work, setting the stage for the outrageous physical confrontation [against Judith Butler](#) and her partner Wendy Brown when they visited Brazil earlier this month.

Butler symbolizes the enemy for conservatives, since, according to them, she supports not only feminism and queer "corruption," but also bestiality, Marxism, and communism. For the Right, the moral panic is part of a broader project of promoting anti-leftist sentiment, especially as elections approach.

The Feminist Threat

The Right's moral panics and anti-leftist campaign tend to converge on a single target: women, and their growing presence in the political field. Feminist action gained widespread visibility with the [June 2013 protests](#), when a hike in bus fares sparked a generalized social revolt. Women took a leading role in the protests and were key in keeping the movement's demands progressive. They took to the streets en masse to denounce conservative pastor Marco Feliciano and Eduardo Cunha, sparking "Cunha Out!" demonstrations organized by the Left.

All sectors of the right wing, whether conservative, neoliberal, or hybrid are driven by fear of the momentum behind such feminist action.

That's not to say that Brazil's feminist movements are entirely cohesive or united. The normalization

of sexism in leftist organizations, the influence of both liberal and radical feminism online, and the disconnect of that feminism from class-based struggles all work to fragment the women's movement. Yet, for the Right, feminism is seen as a homogeneous movement: the Left's tool for attacking the status quo. And they're only partly wrong. Butler may not be the "Marxist witch" her protesters believe her to be. But the currents she represents — questioning gender norms, struggles against rape culture, and a focus on women's collective problems — do tend to open space for leftist ideology.

This poses a threat to the Right as leftist women have started coordinating explosive popular campaigns and mobilizations. They filled the vacuum created by the official left's uneven mobilization against the neoliberal government. In an interregnum period, marked by a highly fragmented left plagued by the PT's contradictions and sectarianism, Brazil's "feminist spring" has helped keep popular stagnation at bay.

Women have been prominent in the anti-Temer mobilizations, and are starting to demand more representation within leftist parties, unions, and movements. The Right is particularly concerned about the growing presence of leftist women as political representatives. The 2016 municipal elections saw the rise of feminist city councillors, even in places where conservatism was on the rise. Names such as [Sâmia Bonfim](#), [Talíria Petrone](#), [Fernanda Melchionna](#), and [Marielle Franco](#), among others, are becoming more well-known despite the right's attacks.

Women have also started to populate the higher levels of politics. [Luciana Genro](#) was The Party of Socialism and Freedom's (PSOL) presidential candidate in 2014; the United Socialist Workers Party (PSTU) recently made [Dayse Oliveira](#) their vice presidential candidate; and there are talks about [Áurea Carolina](#), a black feminist who won the most city council votes in Belo Horizonte, and [Sonia Guajajara](#), an indigenous woman leader of growing prominence, as potential names in next year's presidential race.

This puts the right in a delicate tactical position: if they attack women frontally, they have to brace for the potential whiplash of women's mobilizations across the country. Just in the past week, there were dozens of mobilizations against PEC 181 and there are bound to be many more if the men in congress trying to push the bill don't abandon it. The turf wars are intense, with conservative men spreading outrageous lies about feminist eugenics schemes to abort male babies. This plays out in the mainstream media, as well as online, where the Brazilian right has managed to keep a loyal and growing base of followers.

The stakes of this battle are high. Brazilian women still need and get abortions despite the laws against them. Some estimates put them at two thousand abortions per day. The majority of the women who can pay for safe (or at least safer) clandestine procedures are white and middle- and upper-class. The majority of women who can't — and who risk it with trafficked pills and homemade procedures — are black and live in the poor peripheries; these are the people who bear the brunt of conservatism.

What the Right underestimates is how the abortion debate unites these women of vastly different backgrounds across Brazil. And that includes religious women: groups like Catholics for the Right to Decide act as pioneers within and outside their own circles. Even Evangelical women are taking a stand, with the recent creation of the Evangelical Front for Legalizing Abortion.

If leftist organizations and their feminist sectors play this right — summoning women to stand up to the right to choose motherhood or not, whether or not they would have an abortion themselves — feminist acts of resistance for reproductive justice may get the masses stirring again in Brazil.

Sabrina Fernandes

P.S.

* Jacobin. 11.29.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/brazil-abortion-rights-cunha-rousseff>