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Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Gender-Based Violence: notes on the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic can be discussed from the perspective of how different countries reacted to the public health crisis. In Brazil, in particular, we witnessed an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) cases. Focusing on the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, this essay analyzes how the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro in the presidency has impacted on the development of GBV policies. Firstly, we discuss a significant change in rightist collective action, with a shift in the public debate from socioeconomic to sociocultural terms. Secondly, considering the aversion to the constitutional protection of minority groups as a central element of this social and political stance, we maintain that GBV has been an important battlefield for feminist activists and movements. Thirdly, we observe different solutions proposed by regional governments and civil society in an exceptional context of demobilization in the country. Finally, taking Bolsonaro's Brazil as an example, we draw some considerations of an ongoing research agenda. This essay advances the literature on GBV in Brazil in its intersection with authoritarian neoliberalism, but also in epidemics and crisis conjectures.

Keywords: authoritarian neoliberalism; neoconservatism; gender-based violence; Covid-19; Jair Bolsonaro; Brazil.

Introduction

On March 11 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic situation for the new coronavirus – a global public health emergency. With countries decreeing social isolation as the main policy to contain the spread of the virus, the growth of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) around the world was reported almost simultaneously (New York Times, 2020).

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According to the UN Women, all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, intensified, and calls to helplines increased almost five-fold in some countries (UN Women, 2021). This is not surprising, since international organizations have been warning that periods of crises have as a common feature an increase of GBV rates.

Despite the emphasis on its global character, the Covid-19 pandemic can be discussed from the perspective of how different countries reacted to this health and humanitarian crisis. While the Ebola and Zika were epidemics that centered their morbidity on women and shed light on the gendered crisis and its responses, it appears governments have understood or acted very little on the gendered responses they must provide across diverse policy areas. The health pandemic crises are rooted in years of neglect by neoliberalism, in a process of de-politicization through economization that denies the importance of public health as a public good, while defunding the very institutions that made medical care possible. In Brazil, in particular, we witnessed a growth of GBV, also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), during the reluctant partial lockdown periods. Calls to the "Call 180 – Call Center for Women", for example, grew 17.9% in March 2020 and 37.6% in April 2020 (FBSP, 2020).

Taking into account the sexual division of labor present in Brazil (Hirata and Kergoat, 2007), and due to prolonged stay-at-home periods, many women have been forced to return to traditional gender roles. While their work environment has been transferred to their homes, women are also expected to take over all household chores, such as cooking meals and cleaning rooms, in addition to child care activities. Girls are also expected to do more housework when schools close, an indication that lockdown periods have profound gender effects for women, regardless of their age. It is in this context that there is an intensification of GBV and IPV (Oliveira, 2020).

This essay tackles setbacks related to the problem of GBV in Brazil. We focus on how both authoritarian neoliberalism and the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro in the presidency have impacted the development of policies on GBV during the pandemic – unveiled by the increase in reports of domestic violence. Additionally, we analyze different solutions proposed by regional governments, and civil society in an exceptional context of demobilization, imposed by the imperative of social distancing.

Our main argument is twofold. Firstly, taking authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff and Tansel, 2018) into account, we discuss a significant change in rightist collective actions in the country (Vaggione and Machado, 2020), shifting the public debate from socioeconomic to sociocultural terms. The nearly fifteen years of leftist governments in Brazil have produced a distributive consensus that broke with the rightist traditions that were once established. To adapt to this new reality, the right brought back issues abandoned by the left ground to install a neoconservative

agenda, able to challenge this consensus and have greater electoral appeal (Monestier and Vommaro, 2021). In this context, reactions against gender and democracy have become its most important targets, as the use of "gender ideology" and "school without parties" discourses in different campaigns demonstrates (Biroli, 2019). Secondly, considering the aversion to the constitutional protection of minority groups as a central element of this social and political stance, marked by conservative agendas at the behavioral level and the defense of state interference in private choices of individuals and families on issues relating to sexual, religious, cultural, and educational orientation (Santos and Tanscheit 2019), we make a case that GBV has been an important battlefield for feminist activists and movements in Brazil.

This essay is drawn from a literature review on the impact of authoritarian neoliberalism and neoconservatism on the reaction to gender and democracy in Brazil. In this context, Bolsonaro's government's reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic and GBV during 2020 will be observed. Next, we will carry out a brief analysis of the Legislative, state governments and civil society initiatives to combat GBV during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, we will present some insights for the future of an ongoing research agenda.

Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism

From a historical perspective, the birth of neoliberalism as a political and intellectual project refers to the Lippmann Colloquium, held in Paris in 1938. In the agreement made between its participants, the so-called “Agenda of Liberalism”, early neoliberals defended a new competitive order that would be “a man-made moral and legal framework within which markets would be as free as possible” (Schulz-Forberg, 2020, p. 176). The only role of the State should be to safeguard its constitutive axis: the social market order, where politics is subject to the economy (Garretón, 2012).

Neoliberalism can be seen as a continuation of the capitalist revolution within the framework of financial globalization and the autonomy of markets on an international scale. This doctrine, gestated between 1930 and 1970, comes to the government in the late twentieth century in alliance with neoconservatism. The most notable examples are those of Margaret Thatcher, in the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan, in the United States of America (USA) (Harvey, 2007). These governments declared an offensive against equality policies and a fight against the welfare state. This is because its is the maxim of neoliberalism the intrinsic value of inequalities: expression of the individuals' capacities to adapt to the market; natural; and, therefore, beyond the reach of the State (Garretón, 2012).

This rejection of equality policies, which aim to dismantle the welfare state, is commonly associated with privatization, market deregulation, and the reduction of state functions,

eliminating everything that resembles its redistributive approach. Cut funding and encourage private education or health systems, for example, are common strategies of neoliberal governments worldwide (Brown, 2015).

Brown (2003) calls attention to contemporary use of neoliberalism and neoconservatism by the right, defined here not only by its content but also by the transnational organization of its actors and their ability to mobilize due to an alleged corruption of the natural sexual order and its family model. In this sense, neoconservatism can be defined as a morality-based political rationality that "identifies the state, including law, with the task of setting the moral-religious compass for society, and indeed for the world"' (Brown, 2006, p. 697). As Biroli (2019) argues, this political project provokes the "reinforcement of an anti-pluralist rationality in formal democratic contexts, adding to authoritarian tendencies (Biroli, 2019, p. 3).

In this sense, the marriage between a market-political rationality with neoconservatism, a moral-political rationality, focuses on the interlacing between authoritarian statism and neoliberal reforms, happening in a particular way in each country where the model is applied (Brown, 2006). It is not surprising that its two main current leaders are the former president of the USA, Donald Trump, and the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro.

Authoritarian neoliberalism then offers the state institutional and apparently legitimate solutions to carry on its despotic project (Bruff 2014). It generates an antidemocratic culture from below while building synergetic antidemocratic state forms. In this sense, it can be defined as follows:

> *"The intersection of a range of social relations and utilize it to highlight how contemporary capitalism is governed in a way which tends to reinforce and rely upon practices that seek to marginalize, discipline and control dissenting social groups and oppositional politics rather than strive for their explicit consent or co-optation" (Bruff and Tansel, 2018, p. 234).*

This marriage also demonstrates that neoliberalism has stood out for its reinvention despite events that could challenge it, such as the election of Bill Clinton in 1992; the Asian financial crisis of 1997; the "pink wave" in Latin America since 1998; and the financial crisis of 2008 (Plehwe et al., 2020). This lifeboat neoliberalism has provided the mixture of previous economic rationale with an ascendant populism in a middle ground between their previous principles and those of an exclusionary culturalist right (Plehwe et al., 2020, p. 7).

The interplay of authoritarian neoliberalism and neoconservatism has serious consequences for gender, since it is also the defense of a traditional family model – disregarding the constant changes in family structures. The erosion of the public affects especially women: "dismantling public infrastructure and restricting labor rights make the protection and support by and within

the family a necessity" (Biroli, 2019, p. 3). One of the indicators of this movement is the feminization of poverty, a category used to explain the progressive impoverishment of women and the subsequent increase in gender inequalities (Pearce, 1978), which has recently worsened around the world (Novellino, 2016).

In this sense, the preservation of the traditional family model also legitimized setbacks in women's rights and authorized violence against minority groups. In the case of gender, this is due to the limitation of women to the roles of wives and mothers. Woe to those who defy this model. It also calls for a supposedly feminine nature to delegitimize equality policies and proposes that the natural role of the family should replace the welfare state (Cooper, 2020).

In Latin America, broad neoliberal institutional reforms were first implemented after 1973 in Chile by the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and his "Chicago Boys" advisors. Soon after, they became the hegemonic policy prescription in the 1990s. However, due to the democratic surge in the countries of the region at this time, it could not be thoroughly adopted. How this project is being carried out now in Brazil is the objective of what follows.

The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Brazil

Brazil offers a unique case of rising authoritarian neoliberalism and its marriage to neoconservatism in Latin America. Things started to change after the controversial impeachment of the leftist president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, and the country embarked on an accelerated process of democratic erosion that culminated with the election of Jair Bolsonaro (Santos and Tanscheit 2019). While his authoritarianism has been closely tracked internationally, analysts still fail to convey how neoliberalism is a structuring axis of his government (Hunter and Power, 2018). Three aspects must be highlighted.

Regarding neoliberalism, Bolsonaro's government program still has strong support from the country's economic elites. His proposal follows the basic orientation of this prescription: the "downsizing of the State" through privatizations and economic reforms - such as the pension reform that has already been carried out (Santos and Tanscheit, 2019). The dismantling of the incipient Brazilian welfare state has been marked by budget cuts in areas such as health and education (O Globo, 2021), and not even the famous "Bolsa Família", with its strong electoral appeal, has been spared (Veja, 2021). Its Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes, attended the University of Chicago in the '70s and was a professor at the University of Chile in the '80s during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (Montes, 2018). Guedes has frequently invoked the restoration of the Institutional Act Number Five (AI-5) – the most repressive decree of the military dictatorship, suppressing several civil rights from 1968 to 1979 – as a possible measure against anti-Bolsonaro protesters.

In view of the above, this leads us to the inevitable combination of neoliberalism and authoritarianism in his government. In the occasion of the vote for the impeachment of Rousseff, the then parliamentary voted in favor and declared “they lost in 1964, they will lose now in 2016, for the family (…) for the memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra (…) for the Armed Forces (…) my vote is yes”. During his electoral campaign, in 2018, he said that he would have shot petistas (members of the Workers Party, the main leftist party in Brazil), and sent them to the edge of the beach, in reference to an old spawning ground for those murdered by the military dictatorship (Zanotti, Rama, and Tanscheit, 2021). In addition to his vice president Hamilton Mourão being a reserve general, 11 of the 22 ministers were military at least until July 2020 (Brasil Atual, 2020). Since the return to democracy the Brazilian Armed Forces did not have much space in the executive branch.

Last but not least, this process of democratic erosion and the ascension of authoritarian neoliberalism was closely followed by campaigns and policies against gender. In anti-democratic culture, gender has been used as a popular signpost that threatens family values. In anti-democratic state forms, the attack on the principles of liberal democracy related to diversity and equality affects all types of gender policies developed in the last 20 years (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020; Mudde, 2019). In this context, the nomination of Pentecostal Evangelical pastor Damares Alves, a former member of the pro-life movement[1], for the recently renamed Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights[2], does not come as a surprise. It is worth noting that Alves is one of the few ministers who has remained in office since the beginning of the (permanently in crisis) Bolsonaro government, indicating her relevance in his political project.

In sum, neoliberalism and neoconservatism, when countered and allied, are capable of producing a democratic rupture with a democratic appearance (Ballestrin, 2018). In the Brazilian case, this occurs through the dismantling of the Federal Constitution of 1988 - which ended the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the country and is known as the "Citizen Constitution", intended to be the basis of a welfare state (Santos and Tanscheit, 2019). In the context of the pandemic, its effects are overwhelming, with special emphasis on minority groups and, in the case presented here, on women.

Gender-Based Violence and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil

Worldwide, the pandemic affected social groups differently, potentially worsening existing social fractures. In the Global South the public health crisis was not solely due to the arrival of a novel pathogen among a population not previously exposed to it, but a disease that interacted with underfunded public services (Saad-Filho and Ayers, 2020). Since the WHO declared Latin

America the new epicenter of the pandemic, the situation in Brazil is particularly alarming, and the country is experiencing a double pandemic: Covid-19 and GBV.

Violence committed towards women and girls is the most frequent human rights violation in the world, apart from war and civil unrest. The pattern of this type of violence is predominantly male violence perpetrated against family members (Renzetti et al., 2017), and situations of domestic and sexual violence have been common in contexts of humanitarian crisis. Public policies, however, have dealt with women in a narrow context, where they are seen as caregivers or mothers concerning access to healthcare. The services tend to focus on "immediate" problems (such as illness) and suffer from a lack of support to deal with issues arising from gender inequalities, as forms of physical and/or sexual violence (Davies and Bennett, 2016).

In Brazil, the acknowledgement of GBV as a social problem is a consequence of the intensive work of feminist networks and movements since the 1970s. These partially originated during the transition to democracy in the 1980s, with the return of female activists from exile and their integration into networks of women in rural and urban areas (Alvarez 1990). Since then, the defense of women's right to live without violence has been accepted as the responsibility of the state through several international agreements and national policies.

In the 1990s, an era acknowledged by its democratic experimentalism, feminist networks spread in the country. Within the State, the main result of an intense decade of mobilizations was the enactment of *the Maria da Penha Law*[3] in 2006 and the *Femicide Law*[4] in 2015. The first typifies and defines domestic and intrafamily violence against women, stipulating appropriate punishment for the aggressor; the second characterizes femicide as the "homicide committed against women, for reasons of the female sex" and considers it a heinous crime. This is a remarkable breakthrough in a country where every 7 seconds a woman is a victim of violence and 4 women were murdered per day only in 2019 (The Guardian, 2019). The majority of whom are black women, murdered by family members in their own house. The persistence of violence against women in Brazil is a systemic social practice (Biroli, 2018).

The democratic erosion of gender rights in Brazil follows a backlash. From 2016 onwards, there was a significant institutional dismantling and budget cuts in policies for women (Ipea, 2018). There are also several regressive projects concerning GBV underway in the National Congress. One of the most emblematic aims to revoke mandatory, comprehensive, and multidisciplinary care in the Unified Health System (SUS) for victims of sexual violence, and has Bolsonaro as one of its authors (Megale, 2018). It is no coincidence that the pandemic offers a pretext for further erosion of gender rights amid a series of organized attacks against gender in the country (Biroli, 2018).

Brazil is not alone in this conservative backlash, a phenomenon that can be traced back to a reaction to the agreements for the promotion of women's rights in the United Nations (UN) Conferences of Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). Although advances have been made since then, the renewed conservative backlash was put forward by a transnational campaign with dense networks, first by conservative Catholic organizations and then followed by Evangelicals (Biroli, 2020). Serving as one of the main sources of this conservative backlash is the expansion of evangelical confession in Brazil, from 5 percent of the Brazilian population in 1970 to over 22% in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2013), with an agenda mostly related to moral concerns. Some of the expressions that reached the public debate are the denunciation of LGBTI+ social and political inclusion as "gender ideology" and the rejection of any reference to this issue in schools, advocating control over political expressions in the educational system.

It is in this context that we can affirm the existence of a double pandemic, possibly in the world and evidently in Brazil. Bolsonaro has denied the seriousness of the pandemic since its inception. In an investigation produced on the norms of his government during the pandemic, an institutional strategy for the spread of the virus was revealed, promoted by the Brazilian Government under the leadership of the Presidency of the Republic. The analysis draws a map that made Brazil one of the most affected countries by Covid-19 and without a vaccination campaign with a reliable schedule (Brum, 2021).

Unlike incompetence or negligence, the results of Brum's research show the commitment and effectiveness of the government to act for the benefit of the virus spreading, in order to resume economic activity at any cost. According to Eliane Brum,

> *"The timeline consists of three axes presented in chronological order, from March 2020 to the first 16 days of January 2021: 1) Union normative acts, including the edition of rules by federal authorities and bodies and presidential vetoes; 2) acts of obstruction to the responses of state and municipal governments to the pandemic; and 3) propaganda against public health, defined as "the political discourse that mobilizes economic, ideological and moral arguments, in addition to false news and technical information without scientific evidence, with the purpose to discredit health authorities, weakening popular adherence to recommendations based on scientific evidence, and to promote political activism against the public health measures necessary to curb the advancement of covid-19 " (Brum, 2021).*

This violation of the right to life and health of Brazilians is exemplified in Bolsonaro's acts and speeches, fueled by the production of factoids or false news. He calls attention: the coronavirus would be a "small flu" caused by a "Chinese virus". In March 2021, when more than 2,000 people died every day and deaths top 260,000 in Brazil, Bolsonaro asked his supporters: "Stop

all this fussing and whining. How long are you going to keep on crying?" (Phillips, 2021). In this scenario, authoritarian neoliberalism is imposed again.

Bolsonaro resisted until the last moment the approval in the National Congress of emergency aid in 2020, which counted on 5 installments of R$600 (R$1200 for families headed by women) limited to two beneficiaries per family. In 2021, emergency aid was reduced to 4 installments of R$300 (R$ 600 for families headed by women) limited to one beneficiary per family. With its end in April, people's living conditions tend to worsen even more in a country that has 14.5% unemployed (Roubicek, 2020). At the same time, the lack of resources to Covid-19 has been hampering assistance to patients in the public network of states and municipalities. The world was shocked by the lack of oxygen in the city of Manaus, the capital of the Amazon (BBC, 2021). It is important to note that all this is happening in a country that has a Unified Health System (SUS) inspired by the National Health System in the United Kingdom.

One year after the pandemic, there is no Brazilian national plan to fight Covid-19 or GBV. As already noted, men and women are affected differently by epidemics. However, health emergency response plans generally have no mention or analysis of gender-related impacts. Evidence of this is the scarcity of data disaggregated by sex, not only epidemiological but of economic and social effects of the pandemic, as well as the absence of gender-related policies (Lotta et al., 2021).

The pandemic directly affected women's work and income. In December 2020, the unemployment rate was 14.2% in total, with 11.9% men and 17.2% women. There is also a greater presence of women in the sectors most affected by the economy and a difference in race, in which white workers have more stable ties than black workers (PNAD, 2020). At home, the accumulation of responsibilities poses a risk to physical and mental health and exposes women to GBV situations. Contrary to the Zika epidemic, in which Brazil maintained sexual and reproductive health services, currently the government's conduct contravenes international guidelines and national policies, allying itself with anti-gender and anti-right agendas. Difficulties in accessing contraceptive services, legal abortion, and other reproductive health care have increased, and almost half of the few legal abortion services suspended their activities during the pandemic (Lotta et al., 2021). Since this service is also aimed at women who are victims of rape, what support is the state providing to women who suffer violence in the country?

If GBV is not the result of social isolation, but Brazil's patriarchal structure, it is a fact that it worsened during the pandemic. However, a mapping of the Brazilian State's responses to the problem identifies the lack of central and organized public policies for the service network for women in situations of violence. There was a significant increase of 138.1% in calls from Dial 190, the hotline of the police, which seems plausible to consider that it was one of the real

alternatives for women who live with their aggressors. At the same time, as previously mentioned, there was also an increase of 26% in calls to Call 180 (Matos and Andrade, 2021).

From March to June 2020, femicides registered a 16% increase compared to the same period the previous year. A short-term analysis comparing the records in three periods (before isolation, during isolation, and after flexibilization), shows that femicide registrations decreased in the flexibilization period of social isolation (Giannini, et al., 2020). In the state of São Paulo alone, the total number of official aid provided increased from 6,775 to 9,817, and the number of women who died rose from 13 to 19 cases (46.2%) in a comparison between March 2019 and March 2020. Along with this, the number of institutional mechanisms for intervention in violence and an attempt to end its cycle before it causes the death of women was dramatically reduced (Matos and Andrade, 2021).

A recent study showed that if the official website of the government points to an investment of R$106 million in policies for women in 2020, the money spent was much less: R$2 million, less than 2%. To the House of Brazilian Women, a humanized care center specialized in assisting women in situations of domestic violence, the government spent R$66,000, a little more than U$12,000 (Ferreira, 2021). An incredible number for a Ministry that has several public policy councils and commissions to work together with civil society. Minister Damares Alves tried to extinguish these spaces for social participation but was prevented by the Supreme Court (Brandino, 2019).

Minister Damares Alves also declared in May 2020: "domestic violence has no gender" (Domingos de Lima, 2020), a synthesis of gender policies dismantlement in a government whose authoritarian neoliberalism is increasingly consolidated. This same month, the helpline for GBV increased 35% due to abuses committed during social isolation.

Responses to Gender-Based Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action was celebrated in 2020 as an intended groundbreaking guideline for gender equality. However, the celebrations have been left aside due to concerns introduced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although limited, the advances made in the last few decades are under constant risk. In a context of deepening inequalities, women are exposed to vulnerability in different ways, which are further aggravated in contexts of GBV (UN Women, 2021).

Assessments of the Democratic Perception Index of 2020 portray Brazil as the country where the population is most critical of the government's responses to Covid-19, with more than 60% of the society claiming the presidency “has not done enough” to minimize pandemic effects[5]. Of the 24

bills designed to combat GBV due to the pandemic sent between March and October 2020, most of them focused on assisting women in situations of violence and on accountability of aggressors, none was authored by the Executive Branch (Matos and Andrade, 2020). Bolsonaro's government has no effective and concrete proposals to combat GBV in the pandemic, much less prioritization and budgetary funding for the continuity of actions that were already being undertaken (Silva and Barbosa, 2020). The minister of Women, Family, and Human Rights launched campaigns with virtually no diffusion or impact and in almost all of her interviews, she calls attention to violence against the elderly and children (Matos and Andrade, 2021). Given the omission concerning domestic violence of the federal government in this period, responses were proposed by both institutional spheres and activists and feminist movements.

Some examples are the campaigns "Woman, You Are Not Alone" of the Federal District, in the Midwest, "Quarantine Yes, Violence No" of Bahia, in the Northeast, and the "Women Letter " project, prepared by the Court of Justice of São Paulo, in the Southeast. In the latter, the government ordered that Women's Police Stations (WPS) should start to electronically record those cases (Tokarski and Alves, 2020). WPSs have been at the forefront of the fight against violence against women since the foundation of its first one in 1985. Also, a "pandemic's law" of April ruled that the state must provide accommodation vacancies in hotels, hostels, guesthouses, and similar for women victims of violence[6].

Campaigns like these are also taking place through Brazilian and transnational feminist networks that have been on the rise in recent years. In this sense, the pandemic intensified cyber activism that was previously restricted to mainly white and upper and middle-class circles. As data and feminist movements pointed to an increase in GBV, several apps have been developed to curb such violence. *ISA.bot*[7], Welcome Map[8] and the PenhaS[9] apps are three among many other platforms inserted in an online and offline coordination movement. A state attorney also initiated a WhatsApp number to support legal, psychological, and medical support for battered women (Batista, 2020).

Despite these significant efforts, Brazilian GBV remains under-reported: quarantined and confined at home, women fear the revenge of their attackers more than before. Violence escalation is still rising in authoritarian neoliberalism and its neoconservative character in Brazil. It is also important to note that most actions to combat GBV are carried out by non-governmental organizations. During this period, the physical spaces of these organizations are closed or partially operating, hindering access and hosting of women. The actions of a far-right government that normalizes inequalities and aims to prevent women from accessing rights through the use of "family values" (Payne and Santos, 2020) must be understood within the framework of authoritarian neoliberalism. Minister Damaes Alves states: "in this government,

the family will be in focus in every action" (Domingos de Lima, 2020), an example of a rhetorical fight where policies for women are systematically abandoned. The emphasis on a single-family model made by Damares is emblematic of the destruction of former policies that had access to women's health as general guidance. The heterosexual, married and white family promoted since 2019 by the federal government hinders healthcare access for black single mothers as well as reducing gender policies to motherhood.

Other recent government actions point in the same direction. April 2020 marked the launch of a textbook "Women in the Covid-19", with general orientations on pregnancy, domestic violence, and entrepreneurial women[10]. In June 2020 a public call to policies in the Ministry was launched to formulate and monitor "family-oriented public policies"[11]. The obsession with "family values" is to be noted in a Ministry action among blatant neglect, misinformation, and anti-scientific statements. All of this occurred in a country where the pandemic has already taken the lives of more than 400 thousand people.

In 2020, little has been spent in the Ministry's budget and the House of Brazilian Women lacks funding. The House of Brazilian Women was created by former president Dilma Rousseff, in 2013, by a presidential decree, to accomplish the determinations of Maria da Penha Law. Its goal was to integrate the Judiciary, the Public Defense, and the Public Ministry in a network with central areas (e.g. public security, social assistance, health, education, work, housing, etc.) to fight domestic violence. The 25 shelters have been reduced to only 5 fully functioning in the whole country (Anjos and Fonseca, 2019).

The synergy between political and civil society has, at other times, provided a virtuous process of expanding social rights and policies for women in Brazil - as, in addition to the Maria da Penha Law, the world-famous cases of Bolsa Família and Minha Casa Minha Vida denote. This intertwining has been interrupted in recent years and presents a threat to welfare policies. With Bolsonaro in office, this does not seem to be part of the country's agenda.

It is noteworthy that the overall anti-gender notions that guide Brazilian Ministries include a recent foreign policy alignment with Saudi Arabia. The realignment with countries that are emphatic in the exclusiveness of biological sex and the denial of gender has implied the elimination of sexual and reproductive health of all Brazilian health documents. The power of veto, in the Brazilian case, of all sexual and reproductive subjects in UN discussions, is followed by Nigeria and Afghanistan, known by ultraconservative views in gender statements and resolutions, with strong implications for the possibilities of a solution to a Covid-19 gender violence crisis (Chade, 2020).

Worldwide, GBV has been called "a silent epidemic" (Murthy, Upadhyay, and Nwadinobi, 2010; Impe, 2019), and more recently a "global pandemic" (Feldman, 2017). Brazil is no exception to this global scenario. The government response is the main difference between the Covid and GBV pandemics. For domestic violence, the most prevalent type of violence against women: according to the WHO, 1 in 3 women around the world have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence. The Covid-19 pandemic is an example of how - online and remote - civil society responses are, despite the lack of coordination and resources, sometimes more effective and quicker than the anti-gender agenda government solutions.

Final Remarks

In this essay, we discuss how the intertwining between authoritarian neoliberalism and neoconservatism, which has been going on in the country since the very beginning of the Bolsonaro government, has presented a serious risk to gender and democracy. The economic deregulation of markets - a central force in neoliberalism – must be understood in a recent process that combines militarization and the exacerbated use of force, as the presence of military personnel at the highest level of the Federal Government demonstrates.

At the same time, the interplay of neoliberal authoritarianism and the morality-based political rationality of neoconservatism, characterized by complete aversion to the constitutional protection of minority groups, has been further aggravated during the Covid-19 pandemic. The shift of the debate to sociocultural terms is better demonstrated by the increase of the mobilization of a family model which is exclusively patriarchal, in which women's lives are subordinate to those of their male partners or family members.

The increase of GBV numbers since the start of the pandemic was asymmetrically dealt with around the world. In the Brazilian case, the Bolsonaro government is largely responsible for the intensity of this double pandemic. In addition to actions that supported the spread of the virus, without any support for the population in the context of a health and humanitarian crisis, the attack on gender continued at full throttle. Public policies for women have been discontinued, as the lack of application of their budget denotes. More than that, access to care services for women victims of violence, as in the case of the legal abortion service for rape victims, has been hindered. The absence of responses from the Federal Government point to systematic neglect concerning the GBV agenda.

Our essay demonstrated the juxtaposition of neoconservative governments and conjectures of great distress. If the pandemic had public health as an asset, in Brazil the Federal Government's action showed the opposite. Sexual and reproductive healthcare were already precarious under normal circumstances in the country, and Covid-19 might have severely worsened this life-

threatening situation. At the same time, nationwide lockdowns, combined with economic and social distress, are particularly felt by women most vulnerable to GBV. While many countries have mobilized great efforts to set up emergency quarantine centers to protect women from GBV, including shelters for victims, Brazil is an example of the pervasiveness of the anti-gender agenda. In the context of Covid-19, Bolsonaro has acted to dismantle the incipient Brazilian welfare state, and policies with a gender approach are not part of this package. The complete exclusion of psychosocial approaches to this problem will have a lasting effect in our society, still to be addressed by researchers.

The increase in GBV during social isolation is a "shadow pandemic", and being at home is not a safe option for anyone living with abusive partners or relatives. A future research agenda needs not only to observe the attack on gender and democracy under the Bolsonaro government but to propose alternatives to the ongoing political project. This is the only way capable of saving lives and protecting people, especially minority groups and, in the specific case of this essay, women.

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