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How Bolsonaro's behavior runs counter to fighting gender violence

In 2019, 1,310 women were killed in Brazil, a 7.2% increase from the previous year. The escalation must be analyzed in the context of the president's misogynistic rhetoric.

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Latin America is known globally for high rankings in homicide rates. Our region leads in the murder of nature defenders, many of them indigenous, black youth, and now in the number of femicides, spreading to a scale unheard of in other regions. Far from being a novel phenomenon, femicide has been unveiled thanks to intense feminist activism at work since the 1980s that contested long-lasting and deeply rooted seals of patriarchy and new legislations adopted in the 2000s under this ongoing political pressure.

Brazil runs high in the pack. Strangely, however, femicide is escalating whereas the number of overall homicides has slightly decreased over the last two years. In 2019, 1,310 women were killed, according to the Brazilian Forum of Public Security a 7.2% increase vis à vis 2018, when 1,222 cases were reported and typified as femicide. Data released by Brazil's Ministry of Justice for January-August 2019 alone report 3,257 female murders. Defining a crime as femicide remains technically contentious, making it difficult to accurately characterize widespread forms of domestic and gender violence that reap women's lives.

An article recently published by The Guardian informs that, in the UK, despite more than 50 years of feminist campaigning against male violence, the number of women and girls dying at the hands of men is also hiking. Although the magnitude of femicide rates in Brazil and in the UK are not comparable, in the UK, as it also happens in Brazil, women are most often assassinated with sharp instruments and as a quasi-general rule by a partner or ex. Killers are usually someone who is very close to the victim and whose primary and senseless motive is to rebuffing a "no", "not anymore".

A well-designed number of legal instruments are available in Brazil to punish various forms of gender violence. The law Maria da Penha created in 2006 was followed by the tightening of sentences for rape (2009) and sexual misconduct (2018). A Femicide Law was also sanctioned in 2015, but so far these legislative reforms haven't proved effective to consistently curtail female killings for no other reason than being a woman.

Multiple lenses are needed to better understand that growing Brazilian femicide rates and the ineffectiveness of existing laws are also intertwined with the country's overall political environment after president Bolsonaro took power in January 2019. To begin with, as observed by Careaga, Pecheny and Corrêa, across Latin America, gender and sexuality-based violence deeply intersects with war on drugs, high levels of violence perpetrated by both narco-dealers and state actors and the criminalization of poverty. In that regard, it is worth noting that the anti-crime policy package of the new administration implies measures that can potentially increase the incidence of femicide. The law has been changed to facilitate access to arms possession and included a provision to diminish or even waive criminal penalties when homicides are committed "under stress". Though this latter provision was not approved, it may come back through other means, accounting for a major risk for women because femicide perpetrators often argue to have killed because they were under severe emotional strain.

Another key element to be taken into account is that, across Latin America, expanding levels of gender-based violence cannot be fully grasped if the reactiveness of dominant masculinities to feminism and greater women autonomy are not taken into account. In the case of Brazil, this means that the mounting numbers of female homicides registered since 2019 must be connected with the repugnant climate of anti-feminism and misogyny installed since the election of president Jair Bolsonaro. How can we expect a decline in femicide rates, rape and sexual harassment when the president systematically and proudly portrays himself as the forerunner in the matter?

The president is notorious for his rudeness, disrespect and vulgarity when addressing his critics or opponents, be them journalists, artists or scholars. His virulence is especially harsh when his targets are women. A week ago, president Bolsonaro publicly slandered journalist Patricia Campos Mello, from Folha de São Paulo, with allegations that she tried to get a scoop by

sexually insinuating herself to one of his informers. The truth is that Patricia Campos Mello has investigated and released robust evidence on the unregulated use of WhatsApp communication strategies by Jair Bolsonaro's electoral campaign in 2018.

This was not the first time that president Bolsonaro openly aggressed the journalist but never before so brutally and viciously, crossing the line of misdemeanor. Given the unusual outcry that shook the national public debate, his son Eduardo Bolsonaro, who is a Congress member, came to his father's aid in a House debate yet again assaulting women. He replicated the gesture president Bolsonaro uses against journalists every time he dislikes their questions, giving female parliamentarian the finger.

This regrettable episode is just another block in a long and cumulative series of disgusting speech acts performed by president Bolsonaro that started even before he took office. However, more clearly than it has happened before, the vicious attack on Patricia Campos Mello quite evidently violates explicit rules of how a president should behave making him potentially subject to judicial action for presidential misconduct. The question to be asked is why this is not happening as it would have been expected?

In the course of last two weeks, multiple voices from the academic world, the press and civil society called for Bolsonaro's repugnant speech act to be judicially legally interrogated. On the other hand, quite regrettably, key leaders from across the political spectrum either remained silent or made appeals for political restraint and historical patience.

In contrast, as it is well known, in 2016, president Dilma Rousseff was ousted from office despite insufficient and truncated evidence of misconduct. Her impeachment was a spectacle of aggressiveness, sexism and prejudice that compels us to also eventually conclude that in Brazil, the rule of law is deeply gender biased in favor of male dominance in all spheres, most notably in politics.

Link original: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/jair-bolsonaro-gender-violence/>