

Far-right ascendancy in Brazil: CEDAW evaluation of women's rights

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Abstract. Since 2010, the international landscape has witnessed significant transformations in the domain of international politics and the global surge of far-right movements. In numerous countries, far-right leaders have not only entered the political arena but have also clinched electoral victories, forming governments. Over time, a pattern has emerged: disenchanted populations rallying behind extremist candidates, driven by a fervent desire for radical political changes that align with their religious, class, racial, or gender-based interests. Throughout the past decade, a myriad of approaches has emerged aiming to analyse this global phenomenon. This research, however, adopts the prism of feminist political theory. It contends that the far-right agenda and the gender agenda are intrinsically intertwined. The global far-right movement shares a common commitment to the defense of traditional family values, whether rooted in religion or not, invariably impacting women's rights. Here we underscore the necessity of integrating a gender perspective into the study of international politics. Concentrating on the surge of far-right movements in Brazil, this study aims to elucidate the gaps in international politics analysis concerning women's rights, emphasizing the urgent need for this transformative perspective in the ongoing quest for global justice.

Keywords. Women's rights; Far-Right; United Nations; CEDAW; Brazil.

1. Introduction

Since 2010, the international landscape has witnessed significant transformations in international politics and the global surge of far-right movements. In numerous countries, far-right leaders have not only entered the political arena but have also clinched electoral victories, forming governments. Examples include Brazil, India, the United States of America, Hungary, Turkey, and others. Over time, a pattern has emerged: disenchanted populations rallying behind extremist candidates, driven by a fervent desire for radical political changes that align with their religious, class, racial, or gender-based interests. Throughout the past decade, numerous approaches have emerged aiming to analyze this global phenomenon [1][2].

However, it has been noted that most studies, besides focusing on the democratic limits and dangers in these situations, also concentrated on economic aspects, public opinion, electoral campaign strategies, and the establishment of policies. It is a thoroughly studied phenomenon in Political Science [3], although not as extensively in the domain of International Relations. Many authors have evaluated the foreign policies of such governments [4][5], analyzing impacts and distinctions compared

to former governments [6][7], yet there is not as much work focusing on analysis in International Politics. In this sense, more than the bilateral or multilateral relationships of these governments, and beyond their discourses internationally, it would be very useful to identify how the ascendancy of these far-right governments has impacted the general dynamics in the International System, and what role international norms play or do not play in these cases. Some studies have approached how International Organizations are weakening through the participation of more far-right governments in summits; nonetheless, there is almost no existing work that looks at the response of International Organizations to these circumstances.

This research aims to approach the far-right ascendancy from an International Politics perspective, but within feminist lenses. Since the far-right agenda usually embraces conservative family values and religious traditions, it impacts the women's rights agenda in many ways (reproductive rights, matrimonial rights, economic rights) [8]. These impacts are mainly analyzed nationally within case studies. Therefore, it is relevant to explore how the global far-right ascendancy impacts the women's rights agenda internationally. In this work, with Brazil as our case study, we have analyzed whether

the far-right ascendancy in the government has raised concerns within the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), since it is a body that produces country reports individually, aiming to establish a dialogue to ensure that countries are aligning themselves with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, one of the most important international norms concerning women's rights in international politics and international law [9].

To address this problem, we first drew upon two timelines: the period "before the far-right" and "after the far-right." The periods of time were 2005-2013 and 2014-2022, covering 9 years of governance each. In Brazil, the second period corresponds to the period when Dilma Rousseff was impeached as a maneuver of the right-wing and Jair Bolsonaro was then elected as President. Secondly, we looked at CEDAW's reports on Brazil and separated the reports according to the stipulated period of time. Then, we read all the report pages, taking notes on patterns, signs of concern, solutions, or recommendations that touch upon the far-right attacks towards the women's rights agenda.

This analysis is new for the field of International Relations and Political Science, since most approaches are through other paths, such as foreign policy or domestic policies. This new glance allows understanding the extent of far-right ascendancy to impact international norms and dynamics, and if there is a reasonable response from international organizations towards these movements. Far-right governments attack women's rights and the gender agenda as a whole, so it is expected that the human rights and women's rights gatekeepers in the international system react to this threat.

2. Methodology

2.1 Feminist theory in International Politics

International Politics studies are dominated by white-cis-male scholars from Global North. When approaching international politics's matters with mainstream theories, it is hard to run from this pattern. The first theoretical developments were very state-centric, which means only the states were considered relevant actors to analysis. Nowadays, it is easier to work with theories that also cover Organizations, Governmental or Not. But a feminist perspective to this is much more recent, when considering, besides states and organizations, that the international system is constituted by people and societies; and that societies are patriarchal and subject women to exploitation and discrimination. These societies, coming from this structure, are the ones that generate the international environment where rulers, predominantly men, interact and make decisions. So this paper departs from this point of view: the international system is a product of the patriarchy. As patriarchy, we understand: it is about

male domination over women in society as a whole, in its private and public sphere [10] [11].

Throughout the years, the feminist movement - a transnational movement, articulated beyond borders - was able to add to the international agenda gender equality and women's rights. In the United Nations (UN) agenda, it became something recurrent, and besides many conferences, conventions, declarations [12], here we highlight two UN mechanisms that were chosen to be looked at: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) from 1979 [13], and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which reports about the alignment of countries with the 1979 Convention, producing lists of issues and of recommendations [14]. The Convention is one of the most important tools to international law, used as the main reference when talking about women's rights [12]. Then, the Committee analyses how each country is doing according to the Convention articles. They produce a list of issues/concerns, in which the country is able to respond, and then they produce final observations along with recommendations to the state, so it can be more aligned with the international norms [14]. This mechanism is very relevant to feminist analysis, since it puts women's rights as something necessary to be followed by states.

2.2 CEDAW Reports

Considering the importance of CEDAW reports, since they evaluate each state based on the items on the 1979 Convention, it was chosen as the main data in this paper. The reports, as said above, are three types: list of issues/concerns; answers from the state; final observations/recommendations. It is a good panel to see the whole picture of how the Committee sees the country; how the country defends itself and tries to fit into the Convention items; how the Committee evaluates the initiatives from the country.

Once the reports written by the Committee are elaborated by professionals from the women's rights area, and they have the CEDAW (1979) as main reference, the reports constitute a dialogue that is worth checking. Also taking into account that the United Nations is the main International Organization that speaks out on women's rights, how they analyse each state matters.

In the selected case, Brazil, the far-right ascendancy began in 2014, in Dilma Rousseff's second election, in a crescendo through her impeachment in 2016 and Bolsonaro's election in 2018. Therefore, seeking to understand whether the shift to the right has impacted how Brazil is seen in terms of its international gender agenda, we separated the reports from before 2014 and after 2014. Before 2014, we went back until 2005, and after, we went up to 2022. In this division, we looked into 12 reports - 10 from 2005 to 2013; 2 from 2014 to 2022. It comprehended 3 cycles: the first one 2005-2007; the second one 2010-2014; the third one 2020-2022.

The total summed 326 pages. All the reports were found in the CEDAW database.

2.3 What to analyse in the reports

In each report, we looked at three main aspects: 1) considerations towards patriarchy structure; 2) preoccupation with attacks from conservative and far-right movements towards women's rights agenda; 3) data availability.

These aspects allow a more deep perception of the reflexes of the progress on women's rights in the international agenda, since it shows that the notion of the patriarchal structure is inherent in the construction of international norms, as well as in the analysis of state's behavior. Also, as the most important International Organization to look for women's rights, observing if they perceive the far-right ascendancy as a threat to women's rights - as it really is - is a relevant aspect to check on the efficiency of the organization to address the correct paths to combat and find solutions. Finally, the availability of data provided by the state can show commitment towards international norms regarding women's rights, once they show detailed information about projects and initiatives to achieve what is proposed by the CEDAW Convention.

3. Results

After familiarizing with the reports and reading it in depth, the analysis of the previous aspects was made. Below, we show the first results.

3.1 Patriarchy

Talking about patriarchy came in the second cycle of reports, which covered from 2010 to 2014, and third cycle, which covered from 2020 to 2022. Out of 6 reports on the second cycle, 3 cited patriarchal structures and cultures, being 1 from the Brazilian government and 2 from the committee. Below are the items in which it appeared:

"Some variables can explain such under-representation: the persistence of a **patriarchal** culture, which associates men with the public spaces and women to private ones" [15].

"In the Judiciary Power, the lower representation of women in the spaces of power and decision-making shows the social roles experienced by women and men in a **patriarchal** culture with the 'masculinization of the command and feminization of subalternity'" [16].

"During the reporting period several laws have been passed and/or amended but there is a concern that there are gaps in the legislation regarding emerging issues affecting women, such as genetic developments, technological advances and sexual-orientation issues and while the judiciary is sensitive to the social emergence of new values, it reproduces social stereotypes with a predominantly **patriarchal** attribution of social roles." [17].

"Please provide information on measures taken to overcome the persistence of **patriarchal** attitudes which impede women's participation in political and public life referred to in paragraphs 141 and 164 of the report." [18].

"However, it regrets that the persistence of **patriarchal** attitudes and stereotypes as well as the lack of mechanisms to ensure the implementation of temporary special measures adopted, continue to impede women's participation in parliament and in decision-making positions at the state and municipal levels of the public

administration" [19].

"Carry out awareness-raising campaigns targeting both men and women aimed at eliminating **patriarchal** attitudes and stereotypes regarding roles for men and women and at highlighting the importance of women's full and equal participation in political and public life and in decision-making positions in the public and private sectors and in all fields." [20].

"However, it is concerned at the disadvantaged position of women in rural and remote areas, who often are the most affected by poverty and extreme poverty, face greater difficulties in obtaining access to health and social services and rarely participate in decision-making processes, due to **patriarchal** attitudes prevalent in rural communities." [21].

In the third cycle, which is constituted by 2 reports, it only appeared in the list of issues produced by the committee (the government did not include patriarchy in their report):

"Please also provide information on awareness-raising campaigns aimed at eliminating **patriarchal** attitudes and stereotypes and at highlighting the importance of women's full and equal participation in political and public life, including through representation in decision-making positions." [22].

3.2 Far-right

When examining the perception about the Far-right ascendancy, it was perceived as "conservative forces", but only in the second cycle. The committee observed it once, but the government at the time pointed it out six times in the same report. However, after so many mentions, the committee did not address concerns towards this movement. Here are the extracts related to "conservative":

"Please inform the Committee on specific measures in place to address the issue of unsafe abortions in the State party (CEDAW/C/BRA/7, para. 266) and discrimination against women and adolescents who come to health centres with initiated abortions or are victims of violence because of **conservative** cultural patterns." [23].

"The Gender and Diversity in School teacher training program also includes valuable content on the question of **conservative** values in regard to sexuality and family relations." [24].

"However, there have been setbacks along the way due to pressures exerted by **conservative** and fundamentalist groups, including the indefinite suspension of the school kit to combat gay violence." [24].

"On the issue of genetic research, Brazil enacted positive legislation, successfully overcoming the opposition of **conservative** forces that sought to prevent research of any kind based on, for example, the use of embryonic stem cells." [25].

"The shift away from **conservative** positions in regard to the roles of men and women in our societies has moved more slowly than might be desired" [26].

"Securing the Bill's failure poses a major challenge, as the composition of the Chamber of Deputies is projected to have a more **conservative** bent in the coming legislative session than it did in the previous Congress." [27].

"Although Brazil's Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations, **conservative** and fundamentalist views endure in Brazilian society" [28].

3.3 Data availability

Concerning the detailed data presented in the reports by the Brazilian government, the first cycle is the most detailed one. However, some data shown do

not explicitly involve women's rights projects or initiatives towards gender agenda - some of them are about race in general, other about general vaccination programs. The second cycle offers more focused data on gender initiatives towards women's rights, such as reproductive rights, empowerment and educational programs. The third cycle has very vague information about initiatives, with few data related to it. Besides that, the first and second cycles covered subjects such as black, indigenous and poor women, reproductive rights, matrimonial rights. Nonetheless, these topics disappear in the third cycle.

4. Discussion

It is remarkable that the second cycle was the most intense when talking about patriarchy and conservatism. It can be a reflection of a period in Brazil where the president was a woman, and progress was being made towards women's rights. However, the progress was a motive for the religious fronts to articulate themselves. In the 2010 election, Dilma Rousseff's election main opposition was Aécio Neves, and he started dialogues with religious movements to talk against Dilma, accusing her of being the candidate that would legalize abortion, so she should be combated. Rousseff won, but the sexist attacks against her grew, talking about her as a "non-attractive" woman, as a dumb woman, as a person incapable of running a country, besides other bad words used against her, that come from a misogynist perspective. This period was important for the feminist movement in Brazil due to Dilma's representation as a woman in front of the most valuable role in a country. So it constituted a dualist moment, when sexism was really heated, but also feminist agenda was walking towards better directions [29]. The fact that the patriarchal structure appears more in this period can be related to this political moment, when these topics were trending in Brazil, and the feminist fight was active. Also, the conservatism started showing up more and more during Rousseff's mandate, which culminated in fired-up elections in 2014, and her impeachment in 2016, headed by religious, conservative, far-right leaders. The main concerns that came up in the reports regarding conservatism were overall related to reproductive rights, and family values that impose roles to men and women in society.

Considering that the second cycle ended in 2014, and only in 2020 the new cycle began, there is a bigger gap between the second and the third cycle, than between the first and the second cycle. So there aren't reports during the years of Rousseff's second mandate, her impeachment, and Michel Temer's mandate. Then, the third cycle covers Jair Bolsonaro's mandate, a far-right leader who was elected in 2018, and was Brazil's president from 2019 until 2022. The lack of detailed information about projects and initiatives towards women's rights is a prominent mark in the third cycle, as well as the lack of relevant topics about marginalized women, reproductive and matrimonial rights. It can

be related to the far-right agenda that seeks to mine the gender agenda as a whole, considering that progress in this area represents a threat to traditional family values. Hence, not recognizing patriarchal structures as a concern is completely aligned with far-right proposals, since the patriarchy actually represents the structure they wish to be maintained. Also, it is not in their interest to bring marginalized women to the stage, once these women suffer dominance and repression as a way of keeping the elite and the powerful in their position in society. Finally, reproductive rights and other aspects related to women's freedom are items against the religious beliefs, because women need to serve as wives, mothers, caregivers - so the patriarchal structures can be kept alive. Bolsonaro's mandate was made of these ideas, which could explain the results of the reports analyzed.

5. Final Remarks

In this paper, we concluded that besides being an important phenomenon to look through international politics lenses, the ascendancy of the far-right should also be more looked at by international feminist lenses, since international women's rights and the efficiency of international organizations in defending these rights can be evaluated through this. Also, the CEDAW reports are a great source of data to understand the situation of the country when aligning with the Convention, but also to understand the movement of the governments to provide the necessary information and follow the recommendations.

It was shown by the analysis that the reports are able to reflect the political situation in Brazil, since the language used and the topics covered in each period make sense with the priorities and behavior of the governments. So, Brazil during Dilma Rousseff's first mandate would address patriarchal structures with concern, as well as the growing conservatism in the political sphere. Vulnerable women were targeted for programs and initiatives, and rights fought by the feminist movement, such as reproductive rights, were also addressed. On the other hand, during Bolsonaro's mandate, these aspects disappeared.

Even with the clear switch in approaching women's rights after the far-right ascendance, the Committee did not address specific issues and attacks made by the government. It can demonstrate negligence in the CEDAW monitoring, since women's rights suffered many damages in Bolsonaro's government, but the Committee seemed to just follow patterns when looking at the situation in Brazil, instead of identifying a big threat to the elimination of discrimination against women.

This work is important to identify gaps in feminist international politics analysis of the global movement of the far-right, and also explore new ways of looking at the phenomenon. However, other aspects can be brought to light when analysing the reports (instead of patriarchy and conservative,

specific policies can be selected to look at the differences through the years). Also, a more in-depth review of the politics in Brazil, parallel to the periods of the reports should be made.

In next steps, it is possible to cover these issues, and also bring new methodologies, such as process tracing of the far-right ascendancy in Brazil, interviews with staff members from CEDAW and from the governments who wrote the reports, and looking at other sources, such as the discourses of the presidents in UN forums (such as the General Assembly, Human Rights Council) can be analysed.

Nonetheless, international politics, far-right movements and feminist lenses are things to be more explored together. If women's rights are international norms, they should matter to states' relations. When there is a far-right government mining progress in this agenda and the main organization responsible to monitor it cannot notice, we should worry about it.

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