

The political agenda and impact of Bolsonaro and Milei: examining their impact on sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil and Argentina

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Introduction

On September 29, 2018, various social movements and feminists occupied over 200 Brazilian cities in protest against then-presidential candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro¹. During his election campaign, Bolsonaro put forth several proposals with a moral undertone, advocating for the “family” and “good customs”, and declared himself firmly against abortion. His controversial statements caused collective unease among leftist movements, feminists, Black and LGBTQIA+ movements, culminating in protests that gathered over 700,000 Brazilians chanting: “Not Him”².

Just over five years later, it was the turn of Argentine social and feminist movements to take a stand and lead the fight against a president with neoliberal policies, austerity proposals, and a moral stance on sexual and reproductive rights. Inaugurated on December 10, 2023, Javier Milei promised a new “era of freedom and progress”³ for Argentina, as the audience applauded him. “Freedom” was the rallying cry of the day. However, the question loomed: Freedom for whom? The answer came in less than two months of his administration, when, on January 24, 2024, unions declared a general strike in Argentina. “Milei, sexist! Latin America will be all feminist!”⁴. This was how the Brazilian organization Catholics for the Right to Decide expressed their support for their feminist sisters, joining over 40,000 people mobilized in the streets of Buenos Aires in support of the strike and against Milei⁵.

Political disputes around moral issues, such as abortion, sexual education, gender equality, and same-sex marriage, have been persistently evident throughout history. This is not a passing trend or something new. Since the 1960s, human sexuality and reproduction have been politicized⁶. The United Nations’ international conferences in the 1990s, in Cairo and

¹ Bolsonaro was elected and assumed the presidency of Brazil from 2019 to 2022. He ran for reelection at the end of his term, but was not reelected.

² Brasil de Fato, 2018.

³ Poder360, 2023.

⁴ Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir, 2023.

⁵ Neves & Cotrim, 2024.

⁶ Azevedo, 2005.

Beijing, broadened the global visibility of feminist demands for sexual and reproductive rights⁷. At the same time, traditional Christian sectors, such as the Catholic Church, positioned themselves to block these demands⁸.

As we entered the 21st century, the response to the establishment of sexual and reproductive rights, grounded in feminist perspectives, has seen a marked intensification of both institutional and disruptive reactions, defying international recommendations⁹. The recent developments in Brazil and Argentina exemplify this global trend¹⁰, signaling the growing influence and reach of policies that actively oppose women's rights and the rights of diverse groups, a pattern spreading across Latin America and beyond¹¹. This article offers an analysis of the political agendas of Bolsonaro in Brazil and Milei in Argentina, particularly focusing on their impacts on sexual and reproductive rights. These administrations, by failing to acknowledge gender inequalities as a critical socio-political issue, neglect the needs of socially vulnerable groups, most notably, black women, economically disadvantaged individuals, and members of the LGBTQI+ community, in their public policy frameworks.

The Abortion Issue in Brazil and Argentina

Both Brazil and Argentina reflect a dynamic scenario, shaped by similar socio-political conjunctures. Although constitutionally secular states, both countries share a history of social and political formation marked by intense processes of Christian colonization, “which involved not only economic exploitation but also the imposition of customs and the Christian religion, especially Catholicism”¹². This continues to reflect today in a population predominantly guided by Christian values. According to a survey conducted by the *Corporación Latinobarómetro*¹³, in 2023, out of 1,204 individuals interviewed in Brazil, 636 declared themselves as Catholics; and out of 1,200 in Argentina, 814 identified themselves as Catholics. This means, within a safe margin of error, that more than 50% of the population in these countries are Catholic. The Evangelical religion is on the rise, especially in Brazil. The graph below helps us to visualize, in an expanded form, this scenario across Latin America:

⁷ Barsted, 2009.

⁸ Lamas, 2007.

⁹ Birolli *et al*, 2020.

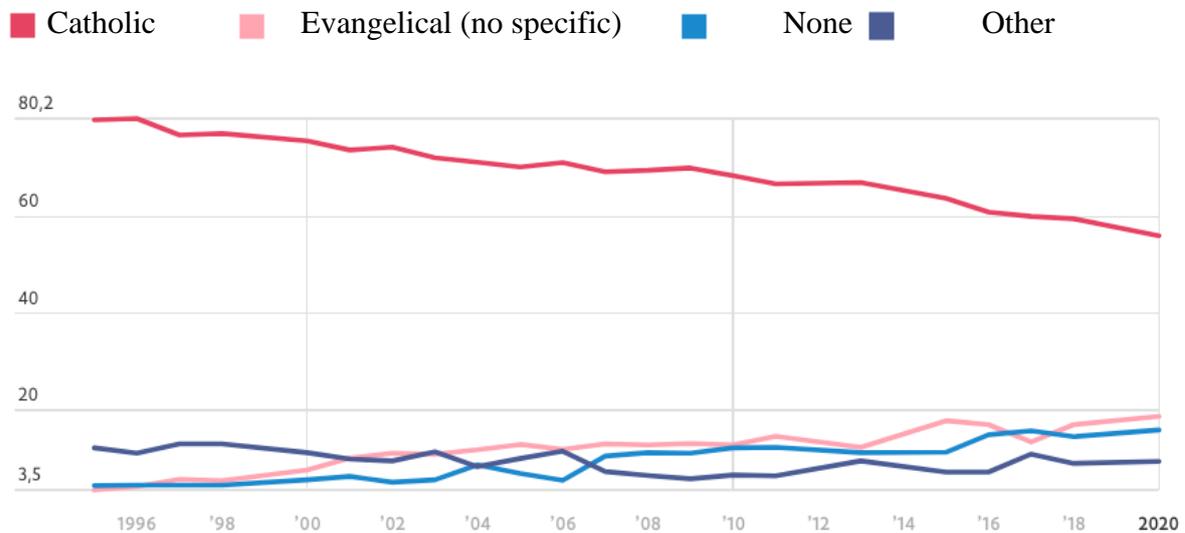
¹⁰ Equipo de redacción de La Mala Fe, 2023; Oliveira, 2023.

¹¹ Batthyány, 2023.

¹² Dirino, 2020, p. 149.

¹³ Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2023.

Graph 1 - Religion Over Time in Latin America (1996-2020)



(Graph developed by Folha de São Paulo, 2022, based on data from Latinobarómetro - own translation)¹⁴.

As Sales and Mariano (2019) demonstrate, politics and religion intersect, and this socio-political framework directly affects the debates, political mobilizations, and legislation surrounding sexual and reproductive rights in the region. During the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005), for instance, the Vatican orchestrated an anti-abortion network aiming to introduce the "right to life from conception" into the Constitutions being drafted in Latin American countries undergoing democratization, such as Brazil (1988) and Argentina (1994)¹⁵.

More recently, as part of the processes of politicization of sexuality and reproduction and also the secularization of National States, religious groups, particularly those of traditional Christian lineage, and social movements opposed to abortion rights have translated their views on morality and good customs into technical terms, articulating their values through scientific and bioethical arguments – a “strategic secularism”¹⁶. This strategy, on one hand, emulates social movements in favor of women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights, and on the other, masks Christian values in political discourse.

Regarding legislation, Latin America is one of the regions in the world with the most restrictive abortion laws¹⁷. In Brazil, abortion is not criminalized only in three circumstances: if the pregnant person's life is at risk, in cases of pregnancy resulting from rape (Penal Code,

¹⁴ Balloussier, 2022.

¹⁵ Faúndes, 2012.

¹⁶ Faúndes, 2015.

¹⁷ Galli, 2020.

1940), and in instances of severe fetal anencephaly (ADPF-54, 2012). Although legislation guaranteeing the right to abortion has been advancing in some aspects, such as the case of the right to Therapeutic Anticipation of Childbirth, granted in 2012 through judicial action, the actual implementation of these rights still faces significant challenges. Issues such as access to contraceptive methods, legal abortion, and sex education remain controversial topics in the country. According to data from AZMina Magazine¹⁸, annually, the Unified Health System (SUS) performs more than 100,000 uterine curettages on individuals in situations of abortion, a procedure considered obsolete by the World Health Organization (WHO) for over a decade.

The Argentine legal framework notably excels in the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights. As a signatory, like Brazil, of the *Belém do Pará* Convention (1994), which aims to eradicate violence against women, Argentina distinguishes itself by acknowledging the State as a potential rights violator in cases of failing to ensure comprehensive protection for women¹⁹. The landmark decision to legalize abortion in 2020 underscores Argentina's progressive approach towards reproductive autonomy. As reported by the Gender and Number Association²⁰, in 2021, the Eva Peron Public Hospital performed 1,100 legal abortion procedures. This is in stark contrast to 2007, when estimates suggested approximately 500,000 clandestine abortions annually²¹. These figures underscore the ongoing struggle to dismantle abortion stigma and to uniformly implement access to abortion procedures for all child-bearing individuals.

Both, Brazil and Argentina, grapple with intricate challenges in fostering inclusive dialogues and crafting effective public policies to ensure the full exercise of rights that encompass diversity²². In Brazil, unsafe abortion represents a significant public health issue, being a primary cause of hospitalization and maternal mortality. From 2008 to 2015, the Hospital Information System (SIH) reported approximately 200,000 hospitalizations annually due to complications from abortion procedures²³. Moreover, the criminalization of abortion predominantly impacts women in heightened states of social vulnerability, especially poor and black women, thereby perpetuating existing social disparities. In Argentina, despite the progressive step of legalizing abortion, this right is currently under threat from the new federal government, which has pledged to revoke this legislation. This move rekindles the abortion

¹⁸ Suarez, 2023.

¹⁹ Dirino, 2020.

²⁰ Bruno, 2022.

²¹ Dirino, 2020.

²² Galli, 2020.

²³ Cardoso *et al*, 2020.

debate at the heart of national public health discussions, especially considering that, as per the Vital Statistics System of the Republic of Argentina, abortion was the leading cause of maternal death in the country from 2007 to 2016²⁴.

Minimal State and Strong Family in Bolsonaro and Milei's Political Agendas

The political stances of Bolsonaro and Milei converge significantly in two central axes of their policies: market and morality. Both believe in a minimal state with a lean apparatus focused on the social sector and a free market, and a strong family, placing the normative family model at the heart of the social structure. As highlighted by Brown (2019), neoliberal and neoconservative principles intertwine, forming a political rationality based on a free market with little or no state interference, and a conception of social justice rooted in traditional Christian morality²⁵.

Not coincidentally, Bolsonaro and Milei express opposition to the right to abortion and sex education for children. To logically substantiate and articulate these positions, they link abortion rights and sexual education to the so-called "gender ideology" and "cultural Marxism". In both cases, Bolsonaro and Milei, utilize broad and polarizing interpretations, simplifying feminist and LGBTQI+ social movements and groups and their demands as part of a Marxist left. By doing so, they argue that such movements disguise their pursuit for the full exercise of rights in favor of the supposed "gender ideology" and communist values.

Regarding same-sex marriage, there are differences. Bolsonaro, on one hand, has declared he would prefer a "dead son in an accident to a homosexual"²⁶. On the other hand, Milei has publicly stated his support for same-sex marriage, but controversially compared non-heterosexual relationships to zoophilia: "For me, the sexual choice (of a person) doesn't matter at all. If the person wants to be with an elephant, and if the elephant consents, it's a problem of the person and the elephant. What can not be done is impose something from the state"²⁷. In both cases, albeit to different extents, there is a noticeable lack of commitment to acknowledging and protecting the inherent rights of the LGBTQI+ community.

The systematic dismantlement of governmental structures dedicated to addressing inequalities and discrimination against women and LGBTQI+ communities marks a notable similarity in the policy approaches of Bolsonaro's and Milei's administrations. Under the

²⁴ Dirino, 2020.

²⁵ Rezende & Cruz, 2020.

²⁶ Equipe de redação Terra, 2011.

²⁷ Corrêa & Carmo, 2023.

Bolsonaro government, in 2019, federal funding for the protection of women in situations of violence was zeroed²⁸. The then-president abolished Ministries and merged others into large ministerial portfolios. The Ministry of Human Rights became the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, overseen by Damares Alves (a long-standing anti-abortion rights activist). The emphasis on “Family” in the ministry’s name symbolized a narrow focus on traditional Christian family values, sidelining the diversity of family structures and the needs of minority groups in public policy²⁹. In Argentina, Milei made a significant move by reducing the total number of ministries by half with his first decree. From the original 18, only 9 ministries³⁰ remained, notably eliminating the Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity. These actions not only deprioritized these crucial areas but also represented a stark departure from previous commitments to advancing and protecting the rights of women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and diverse communities.

These governments, by advocating a minimal state against a strong (normative) family as the base of social structure, concurrently, dismantle state support for vulnerable individuals and promote moralistic Christian-value-driven policies. This approach restricts the rights of women and diverse groups regarding their bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health.

Conclusão

In summary, the rise of leaders like Javier Milei in Argentina and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil highlights a complex landscape where sexual and reproductive rights remain pivotal points of political and social conflict. The agendas of both Bolsonaro and Milei, grounded in neoliberal ideology, converge on the promotion of a minimal state and the valorization of the traditional Christian family as societal cornerstones. Their rhetoric, which vehemently opposes "cultural Marxism" and "gender ideology", operates as a potent mechanism for political mobilization. This approach predominantly leads to the implementation of policies that undermine sexual and reproductive rights. The dismantling of ministries dedicated to women's and diversity rights reflects an institutional lack of commitment to safeguarding and advancing minority rights.

Despite some legislative advancements regarding sexual and reproductive rights in both countries, there is a clear need for public policies that enable broad and equal access to these

²⁸ Rezende, 2020.

²⁹ Chagas & Moraes, 2023.

³⁰ Cotrim, 2023.

legally guaranteed rights. The Christian-based social formation of these countries entails a political debate and policy-making landscape intertwined with moralities. Thus, feminist mobilizations aimed at normative changes are crucial. Equally essential are public appeal debates, sexual education programs, and actions that expose the power structures perpetuating gender, ethnic-racial, and economic inequalities.

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