The Backlash against Gender Equality in Latin America: Temporality, Religious Patterns, and the Erosion of Democracy

by **Flávia Biroli** | Universidade de Brasília, Instituto de Ciência Política | flaviabiroli@gmail.com

A conservative backlash against gender equality has been identified in different parts of the world. It can be traced to the 1990s, when new coalitions against gender rights were formed to oppose feminist and LGBTQ movements in the United Nations international conferences of Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). Many advances have been made since then, but we face a renewed conservative backlash put forward by a transnational campaign with dense networks. It was first led by conservative Catholic organizations, but Evangelicals have assumed an important role in recent years, especially in Latin America (Bracke and Paternotte 2018; Machado 2018).

Those fighting a war against gender denounce a supposed decay in moral standards and identify feminist and LGBTQ movements, the United Nations, and international "elites" as its promoters. They oppose sex education, same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex couples, and one's right to define their own gender identity (Biroli 2019). But they do not stop short at sexual rights. Issues thought to be less controversial, such as equal political participation and policy against domestic violence, are also at stake (Caminotti and Tabbush 2019). At the same time, they have joined previous anti-abortion networks.

None of these issues were previously easily accepted or consensual. Reproductive and sexual rights have always been especially contentious. But how did conservative actors bring "gender" to public debate as a fundamentally negative agenda in the 2000s? And what have been its effects in Latin America, where the campaign against "gender ideology" has brought thousands to the streets of different cities to protest against sex education and same-sex marriage?

In this article, I will briefly present three chains of facts, ideas, and actors which could help us approach these questions. The answers are not to be found in any one of these factors alone, but in how they intersect in this precise context. The first corresponds to the temporality of "gender" as a politically disputed set of moral and political values and proposals. The second takes us more directly to the changing patterns of religious adhesion and political action. Finally, the third focuses on the complex relations between the backlash against gender and the democratic backsliding in the 2000s.

The Temporality of Gender

Disputes over the framings of sexual and reproductive issues in international documents and local law and policy have presented a dynamic of reactions and counterreactions at least since the 1990s (Corrêa 2018). Feminist and LGBTQ movements have acted to institutionalize new rights or guarantee existing ones, redefining human rights from a gendered perspective. On the other hand, conservative religious actors have built up new alliances to bar reproductive and sexual rights, disputing the language used in international documents and framing contentious issues from a religious perspective. Moral, ethical, and political struggles concerning gender roles, family, and the legitimate standards and aims of sexuality and sexual relations found these actors in opposite positions, engaged in dynamic disputes.

In the 1980s, feminist intellectuals began to resort to the term "gender" to address the relations between the sexes, understanding that the distinctions defining the feminine and the masculine are fundamentally social (Scott 1986). The historical and relational approach to sexual roles and identities became relevant in academic research, norms, and policy at the international, regional, and local levels. The reactive politicization of reproduction and sexuality (Vaggione 2017) is part of the temporality of gender politics. The very notion of gender has been politicized since the mid-1990s, and the expression "gender ideology" would for the first time appear in a Catholic document in 1998 (Faúndes 2019). From this view, a necessary complementarity between the sexes would define relationships, instead of positioning concrete arrangements as the starting point for understanding and overcoming hierarchies, injustices, and violence. As stated by the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World," from 2004, men and women would have different natures and must work together: "man by his temperament is better able to deal with foreign affairs and public affairs," while "the woman has a greater understanding of the delicate problems of domestic and family life and a more secure touch to solve them, which, of course, does not mean to deny that some can show great capacity in any sphere of public life."[1]

This also meant opposition to specific laws, court decisions, and public policy. Some examples are the program "Brazil Without Homophobia" from 2004, the Argentinian Law 26150/2006 creating the National Program for Comprehensive Sex Education, and similar actions proposed in different countries to combat prejudices, discrimination, and violence against women and LGBT people. In the 2000s, several countries in the region recognized same-sex civil unions and/or marriage through specific laws (Argentina, 2009; Uruguay, 2013) or by decisions of their constitutional courts (Mexico, 2010; Brazil, 2011; Colombia, 2016; Costa Rica, 2018; Ecuador, 2019), with a variety of decisions concerning adoption by same-sex couples. Regional arenas such as the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have also become spaces for disputes.

The state is an important actor if we want to understand the changing patterns in these disputes. It promotes or restricts the agendas advocated by feminist or conservative religious groups. The different branches of power and government could be thought of as varying in their permeability to these actors, depending on political balances and social pressures. Roggeband and Krizsán (2018) suggested that a triangular relation between feminist movements, conservative movements, and the state should be considered. This way we could understand the reciprocal influence they exercise on each other's strategies, the role played by the state, and the selective closure of the civic space.

Religious Adherence and the Patterns of Political Action

In Latin America, as in other parts of the world, the "state's approach to religion is a major factor shaping the degree of sex equality in family law" (Htun and Weldon 2010, 452). It intersected and conflicted with opposition claims when center-left parties governed many countries in the region (Friedman and Tabbush 2018). The legal framework that rules over family and sexual rights is profoundly rooted in the Catholic Church's worldview. Conservative Catholic activism today resorts to science and networks of politicians and attorneys to update what is proposed as an "objective moral order" (Vaggione 2016, 41–42). From the 1960s but particularly with the beginning of nearly three decades of the papacy of Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II), in 1978, the Church fought alternative discourses promoting reproductive autonomy and sexual diversity, characterizing them as "moral relativism" (Vaggione 2016). The control over the sexed body increased, accompanied by actions to restrict public policies guided by values other than the reproductive, familial, heteronormative morality.

[1] "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

This process took place as internal conflicts appeared. Progressive social movements such as the Theology of Liberation were dismantled, and "Charismatic Renewal" emerged as a reaction to them and to the growth of Pentecostalism (Pierucci and Prandi 1996). The recent papacy of the Argentinian Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who became Pope Francis in 2013, raised new questions about the conflicts within the Church and the guidelines concerning gender. He has condemned discrimination against LGBTQ people[2] but has also expressed his concern about "gender ideology."[3]

The new role played by Evangelical churches and leaders in Latin America is also fundamental to the understanding of the struggles concerning gender in the region. In recent decades, Latin America witnessed a sustained decrease in Catholicism with a correspondening increase in Evangelical religions (Pérez-Guadalupe and Grundberger 2019). Catholicism is still the main religion in the continent, but it fell from 92 percent of the population in 1970 to 67 percent in 2014 (Pérez-Guadalupe and Grundberger 2019, quoting Latinobarometro 2014). The growing percentage of those declaring themselves Evangelical is accompanied by that of those with no religious affiliation, which is higher in Argentina and Uruguay. In Central America, Evangelical and Catholic proportions have almost leveled in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. New patterns of religious political action could also be found in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Peru, where Pentecostal groups became an "active minority"[4] disputing public debate and elections.

As with Catholicism, the Pentecostal movement went through important transformations in the 1970s, opening space for neo-Pentecostalism and the "theologies of prosperity and spiritual war" that followed it (Oro and Alves 2013, 123). In the 1980s, there was a sharp increase in the presence of elected representatives in countries such as Brazil, where Pentecostals have become the leaders of a "vigorous combat" against "alternative conceptions of sexuality, the public policies inspired by them, and the attempts at legal regulation of new forms of gender relations" (Machado 2017, 352).

Brazil, Colombia, and Peru offer interesting cases. In these countries, Evangelicals found space for political action with the processes of democratization after the 1980s. In Brazil, the public sphere became more plural and diverse with the transition to democracy. New political opportunities were opened for them at the same time that feminist movements and human rights advocates also met more favorable circumstances. The trajectory of these struggles overlaps that of recent democracies in the region. Even though Evangelicals are not the majority of the population in these countries, they have developed successful political strategies. Brazil is a blatant example. The Congress elected in 1986, which was in charge of elaborating the new democratic Constitution after twenty years of military dictatorship, counted 33 self-declared Evangelical deputies. They would number 70 after the 2010 elections, 74 in 2015, and 83 in 2019. In the 2000s, Evangelical churches and the parties connected to them became important in coalitions supporting governments. After 2018, the election of the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro gave unprecedented protagonism to Pentecostal leaders in ministries, secretariats, and policy agencies focused on women's rights, human rights, scientific research, and education.[5]

New alliances between the Catholic Church and Evangelical churches opened new opportunities for conservative activism. The campaigns against "gender ideology" have been an important base for them. Since 2016, they have brought thousands

[2] "Pope Compares Politicians Who Rage against Gays to Hitler," Reuters, November 18, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/pope-compares-politicians-who-rage-against-gays-hitler-n1084821.

[3] "Dialogo del Santo Padre con i Vescovi della Polonia (Kraków, 27 luglio 2016)," Bollettino, August 2, 2016, http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/08/02/0568/01265.html.

[4] Maria das Dores Machado has described them as such in private conversations. For the concept of "active minority," see Moscovici and Faucheux 1972.

[5] Bolsonaro is a Catholic but had close relations with conservative Evangelical sectors in Congress as a former deputy. He was also baptized by a Pentecostal minister in the waters of the Jordan River in 2016, in what was seen as an effort to enlarge his identity as a Christian and approach the Evangelical electorate.

of people to the streets of different countries and cities of the region to protest against sex education, educational content discussing gender equality and sexual diversity, same-sex marriage, and adoption by same-sex couples. They reacted to public policy and court decisions. While the campaign can be traced to political and intellectual efforts by conservative Catholic groups and is still strongly supported by them, the mobilization resulting in these protests is clearly due to Pentecostal leadership, at least in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Costa Rica (Biroli 2019).

Gender Backlash and Democratic Backsliding

Democracy and gender have been intertwined in many ways during the period in which liberal democracies increased in number and consolidated as electoral regimes, from the end of the 1980s until the first decade of the 2000s. The increase in the number of democracies in the world and the strengthening of its conceptual definition as an institutional alternative capable of guaranteeing both pluralism and fundamental civil rights have never been enough to engender democracies. However, there was an opportunity to set challenges for existing democracies and transition politics, encouraging national actors to commit to institutions and policy referenced by gender equality and sexual diversity defined as democratic values. The Platform of Beijing, which is now 25 years old, was an important tool for that.

We now face a different context. Changes in both the institutional and the normative dimensions of democracy, eroding its public dimensions and compromising basic requirements, are seen as signs of de-democratization (Ballestrin 2019; Brown 2015, 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). But how are they connected to the changing patterns of gender conflicts?

One of the answers refers to the patterns of current inequalities and precarization. The setback in social guarantees and the dismantling of public infrastructure affects women in particular ways because of the sexual division of labor. The understanding that politics could not be insulated from inequalities was stressed by the most critical approaches during the decades of democratization (Phillips 1991), anticipating criticism of the depoliticization of public life (Young 1990). The more recent debates address the new inequalities related to financial capital, information, and scientific-technical knowledge (Tilly 2003, 42), as well as corporate power (Crouch 2004, 39). Both the capacity and the legitimacy of the state are compromised by austerity measures (Fraser 2015), adding to anti-politics trends. The effects of the backlash against gender could be the discontinuance of public policy promoting gender equality or its reframing, setbacks in legislation, and also repressive measures against feminist and LGBTQ groups, as well as censorship.

A second answer is thus that illiberal measures could be legitimated by a moral agenda focused on the "defense of the family." Censorship is probably the most evident face of the backlash, as vetoes to the discussion of gender violence and inequalities in educational content have been made in Brazil and Paraguay and were proposed in Colombia and Peru, among other places. Not only feminist movements but women in politics could become the targets of violence as their equal right and capacity to participate is questioned (Biroli 2018).

Neoliberalism and conservatism converge in the definition of family values from a privatizing and conventional perspective (Cooper 2017), as well as "in producing the contemporary landscape of political intelligibility and possibility" (Brown 2006, 693) in which the public is displaced as the space where alternatives could be built. The family is key to the moral and the economic dimensions connecting the erosion of the public, the backlash against gender, and de-democratizing trends. The dismantling of public infrastructure and the restriction of economic and labor rights make the protection and support by and within the family a practical necessity and an antidote to uncertainties and precarity (Biroli 2020). At the same time, the preservation of "the family" can legitimate setbacks in individual rights, censorship, and violence against minorities. It is also a renewed way to define women by their roles as mothers, appealing to nature to delegitimate equalitarian ideas and institutions.

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