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Research Article

Anti-gender Populism in Latin America: The Cases of Mexico and Brazil

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Abstract: Latin America has seen significant advances in both women's rights and gender equality in the last three decades thanks both to external pressures (since the Beijing conference in 1995) and the strength of the women's movements in the continent. However, these advances are being threatened by populist regimes and strong conservative and reactionary groups within civil society, especially among Catholic and Protestant churches. This kind of anti-'gender ideology' reactions is part of a backlash that slides in a scale from constant and structural discrimination to open reversals of gender equality previous gains. This chapter will try to illustrate how left and right-wing populism in the case of Mexico and Brazil, limit or setback gender equality gains in several areas, particularly regarding political parity and the fight against gender-based violence (GBV). We chose these two cases as we think they represent two sorts of backlashes, but also because they represent two examples of populism, different in their ideological positioning but not so different in their defence of patriarchal structures and support of family values.

Keywords: anti-gender; Brazil; Latin America; Mexico; populism

1. Introduction

1.1. Anti-gender populism in Latin America: the cases of Mexico and Brazil

Latin America, from Mexico in the North to Argentina in the South, has seen significant advances regarding gender equality in most social areas including health, economy, and political participation in the last 30 years. These changes have been the result of a combination of factors and forces. External factors, such as the UN Women organized conferences that started in the 1970s and culminated in the Beijing conference in 1995, have certainly had an impact. However, these external events should also be seen in combination with the strength of the women's and feminist movements themselves that started their meetings at the continental *Encuentros Feministas* (Feminist Forums) that began in 1981 in Bogota, Colombia, and have continued up to 2017 in Uruguay (for an account of the latest Encuentros see: [1], also for the 14^{th} Encuentro in Montevideo, Uruguay, Nov. 2017, see: [2]). These *Encuentros* were a reflection of the combination of movements of women from all social classes and identities of all Latin America countries. The dynamic of these movements attained its maximum expression with the notable mobilizations around the anti-gender-based violence campaign called *Ni una menos* which started in the Southern cone of the continent but spread throughout Latin America and the Caribbean

and that recently obtained such a significant victory as the legalization of abortion in Argentina.

Nevertheless, as we have witnessed throughout history, sooner or later, social changes provoke a reaction. Manuel Castells speaks of the crisis of patriarchal structures as a reaction to the new era of globalization that started during the 1980s that served to integrate more women than ever in economic activities and education [3]. According to Castells, this crisis provoked a wave of conservative reactions in the form of fundamentalist (Islamic but also Christian) populist movements. In the same sense, Elizabeth Corredor speaks of a 'counter-movement' that gathers anti-gender efforts in a coordinated resistance against feminist and LGBTQ's conquests. And within these movements in Latin America, we see a clear link to structural obstacles including *machista* traditions that are also ingrained in the populist traditions of the region and are manifest both at the right and the left of the political spectrum.

This article will try to illustrate how left and right-wing populism in the case of Mexico and Brazil, limit or setback gender equality gains in several areas, particularly regarding political parity and the fight against gender-based violence (GBV). We chose these two cases as we think they represent two sorts of backlashes, but also because they represent two examples of populism, different in their ideological positioning but not so different in their defence of patriarchal structures and support of family values.

We are aware that there is no general agreement among feminists of what Backlash as a phenomenon means. We share in part some of the definitions discussed during the symposium celebrated in 2019 and published in 2020 by *Signs* [4] meaning that Backlash may be understood as "*... intensifying right-wing opposition to the feminist project that seeks to undo gender equality policies and increasingly attacks gender justice advocates, politically active women, and the marginalized*" (see: [4], p. 265). However, we think that backlashes may also come from the left as we shall see. We are aware there may be a problem to distinguish between backlash and discrimination as we shall discuss later on. Thus, before presenting the case-studies it is important to start with a contextual and conceptual framework that will help us to understand the environment in which these cases take place.

Methodologically, this article is based on a qualitative study of documents and second-hand sources. Important to notice, although we speak about Latin American women, we are aware of the risk of generalisations that do not distinguish the enormous heterogeneous reality of this group. We may speak of general legal or statistical advances however we will try to make the distinctions when we refer to concrete issues or demands. The case studies presented are meant to be an illustration of a similar phenomenon in two different contexts but there is no ambition to make a systematic comparison between them. Our intention is to observe how two differently positioned governments in ideological terms may share similar traits in their anti-feminist and anti-gender attitudes and policies.

1.2. Populism and Feminism in Latin America: Some Theoretical and Contextual Notes

Latin America has a long history of populist traditions. From the 1930's and throughout the twentieth century, "classical populism" took place in the form of social movements and authoritarian governments often led by the military (such were the cases of Perón in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil) [5]. According to Laclau, populism can be understood as a 'political logic based in the discursive construction of the people' ([6], p. 107). Whereas the populism of mid-twentieth century tried to get its legitimacy in the notion of the 'people', the populism that started with the new century, better known as the 'pink wave', referring to the governments to the left (but not communist there the word 'pink') for example in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, gives, in some cases, the notion of 'people' a less homogenous meaning, introducing the concept of 'plurinationalism' through which different national identities become acknowledged in newly created institutions [6,7]. Regarding gender equality, the 'pink wave' regimes, mostly a Latin American phenomenon, showed mixed results as we shall see below. As a reaction to this left-wing populism but also to the recognition of many otherwise marginalized demands (among which sexual orientation but also gender equality), we can see the emergence of a third type of populism, a right-wing populism among civil society groups but also among governments like the one in Brazil since 2018, which we shall develop below.

Although sharing some traits like the rhetorical appeal to the 'people' these different types of populisms respond to their context and time period. The one in the 1940-50s was inserted in the project of a 'nation-building' with corporatist tones in a similar style to the one in Germany or Italy during the 1930s-40s. The one of the 'pink wave' tried to reach not only the workers but all oppressed minorities, like the indigenous groups, and in a limited way some groups of women. There is a big heterogeneity among left orientated populism, the one referred as the 'pink wave'. While some of these regimes were more gender equality friendly and open to LGTBQ groups (like the one in Brazil under the PT governments) others had Contradictory positions regarding these issues (like the one in Mexico under the Morena regime). The 3^{rd} sort of populism, the one to the right is a reaction to the one to the left and to the growing forces of feminist movements and it is led by right wing groups (upper middle class and elite groups) trying to revalue 'traditional values' centred around the traditional heterosexual family. One should notice, however, that the appeal to the 'family' and 'family values' is a trait shared more or less by all sort of populisms, by the one on the 1940s but also in a certain measure by the one represented by the 'pink wave' to the left. This is especially true for the case of Mexico. In this sense when referring to the family, populists in general (with some exceptions) appeal to a conservative heterosexual model of family where traditional gender hierarchies and roles were not questioned. Another issue shared by some

of these populisms: an appeal to the views of the people (through referendums or other forms of popular consultations) to resolve controversial issues.

Another force that has influenced populism in Latin America, especially right-wing populism, is the Catholic church and in later decades of other Christian churches. Even though many Latin American countries have also been influenced by secular, even anti-religious forces, as in the case of the post-revolutionary governments in Mexico, catholic morale has nevertheless been able to influence the way legislation regulates family relations and reproduction and moral principles. This religious-moral influence has also been clear in the case of populist regimes since the 1940s. It has influenced some populist regimes of the pink wave like Nicaragua, or Mexico but its influence is extremely strong among right wing populism. This is particularly clear in the case of the struggle to decriminalize abortion but also concerning women's rights in general. As Maxine Molyneux pointed out, Latin American women had to use a 'gendered citizenship strategy' to obtain civil and political rights [8,9]. That means women had to legitimize their right to have rights, basing their arguments in their duties according to traditional gender roles, as mothers with the responsibility of educating future citizens. Whereas women in most European and other Western countries fought for these rights as part of a liberal and individualistic tradition emphasizing women's autonomy, men and women in Latin America had to shape their demands according to the dominant patriarchal and conservative culture where women's autonomy had no place [8]. That is partly the reason why these civil and political rights in Latin America were attained so late in comparison with the European or North American countries. What is new from the time the Catholic church tried to oppose women's rights at the beginning of the twentieth century to the current situation is the multiplicity of the actors (other Christian churches, civil society organizations, etc), their strategies and their tools.

Something else that needs to be discussed in the case of Latin America is the notion of 'machismo'. 'Machismo' can be understood as a strong sense of masculine pride, demanding obedience and loyalty from the opposing sex but also associated to virtues like caring and protection of the family through strength of character and courage. However, the other side of these 'protective' virtues is aggressiveness, violence and emotional insensitivity [10]. The machismo culture interacts with several forms of masculinity but particularly with a certain type of 'toxic masculinity' [11,12]. The latter is the one assessed as responsible for GBV (Gender Based Violence), it demands a strong differentiation of gender roles and hierarchies and is deeply embedded in the culture of most societies in Latin America. We contend that the backlash phenomenon we see today in the region is strongly associated with a machismo culture linked in many ways to 'toxic masculinity' patterns.

Right wing populism but even some left-wing populist regimes have organised, in response to the increasing force of feminism, 'anti-gender ideology' campaigns. This is what Elizabeth Corredor calls a *"countermovement of national and supranational anti-gender movements as this anti-gender activities go beyond isolated and uncoordinated instances of resistance to coordinate efforts against the feminist and LGBTQ advances"* [13]. This countermovement uses gender ideology rhetoric both as an "epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender and sexuality and as a political mechanism used to contain policy developments associated with feminist and queer agendas" ([13], p. 614). According to Corredor:

Gender ideology can thus be conceptualized as a rhetorical counterstrategy that aims, first, to refute claims concerning the hierarchical construction of the raced, gendered, and heterosexual order; second, to essentialize and delegitimize feminist and queer theories of gender; third, to frustrate global and local gender mainstreaming efforts; fourth, to thwart gender and LGBTQ equality policies; and finally to reaffirm heteropatriarchal conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality([13], p. 616).

As we shall see in the case studies we present, this countermovement assumes several forms. It may be isolated policies or complete reversal to former agendas and policies. This is what we call 'backlash' a term that needs some discussion and clarification.

The term backlash is sometimes questioned. Some authors see backlash "as a momentary retaliation that manifests in a short-lived act or coalesces into a longer-term countermovement" in contrast to the ever-present discrimination against women in politics [4]. Other authors "focus on personal harm level", as GBV could be, and refer to the daily "'policing' of who belongs or not in the polity and in public space as backlash" thus denying the time-bound dimension and the characterization of the phenomenon as 'unprecedented response'([4], p. 266). We contend that our chosen cases can be analysed by both definitions. In the case of Mexico, the present left-wing regime represents a type of populism positive to increase women's political representation (and indeed consistent in doing so at the level of high-level government positions) but reluctant to be coherent in its general gender policies, partly influenced by religious groups, under-prioritizing these policies in crises like the present pandemic. This case would be well characterized by a combination of the "personal harm level" approach with backlash tactics by both government policies and right-wing civil society groups. Our second case, the one of Brazil represents the right-wing populism that can be seen as close to the historic populism, the one represented by military regimes in the 1930-40s in Latin America revived by the Bolsonaro government (recently replaced by a PT government), but with a totally different approach on the economy. Brazil could also represent backlash as a retaliation time-bounded (as part of this extreme-right regime) that "coalesces into a longer-term countermovement" with very aggressive anti-gender actions. In both countries we see the presence of a *machista* culture deeply rooted in social and political structures, a culture very difficult to overcome even by periods of gender-friendly regimes.

2. The Background: Populisms to the Left and to the Right Meet Feminisms

As we already noticed in the introduction, Latin American women have experienced several advances in the last three decades, though some of them had nothing to do with policies to improve gender equality but with the neoliberal economic restructuring that Latin America had to enforce during the 1980s. Such restructuring led first to the massive entrance of women into the labour markets, mostly as cheap labour [14], and as a result of the social costs of restructuring, to the victory of several left orientated, progressive governments at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the twenty-first century, the so-called 'pink wave' [15,16]. Although not revolutionary in the sense of Cuba in 1959 or the Nicaragua Sandinista after 1979, this 'pink wave' emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century, declared its will to redress all sorts of social injustices caused by the neoliberal economic restructuring. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Nestor Kirshner in Argentina, Jose Mujica in Uruguay, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and, later on, Lopez Obrador in Mexico, the 'pink wave' had to position itself to a growing feminist movement, to policy changes already attained and to feminist demands that were not necessarily considered a priority (see: [17]). In fact, neither classical nor left-wing populism of the 21^{st} century saw gender demands as a priority, as an essential part of social justice (see: [18]). Consequently and according to several specialists, the 'pink wave' regimes had mixed results on gender equality in the countries where they attained power [19]. There was clear progress in women's political representation but rather mixed results regarding indigenous women's empowerment, economic autonomy, liberalization of abortion, same-sex marriage or the recognition of LGTBQ+ demands. Policies mitigating GBV (gender-based violence) had already progressed even during conservative governments [17,19,20]. Needless to say, the situation varied much depending on the areas and countries observed but one cannot conclude that the left gave a priority to gender equality just by being 'socially progressive'.

These parties and governments privileged other issues as resource distribution and even, in some cases, ethnic recognition not necessarily with a gender perspective ([19], p. 349). Having a greater impact than what the "left" offered, gender equality progress may have come from the strength of women movements, from the role played by feminist activists within parliaments and from the dynamics triggered by the UN Women conferences and the global women's movement in general. However, regarding the 'pink wave', there is one factor that plays a significant role, the kind of left in power (institutionalized, movement driven) ([19], p. 349). The institutionalised left, coming from more established leftist parties, like in Brazil during the PT governments or in Argentina during Cristina Kirchner's era or in Uruguay during the *Frente Popular* (Popular Front) governments, offered programmatic agendas and opened channels to feminist demands. The populist left, coming from newly emerged parties or movement coalitions, like in Venezuela with Hugo Chavez or Bolivia with the MAS governments, supported feminist demands when these helped the regimes to secure or increase its popular support ([19], pp. 349, 361). Also a newly emerged coalition, the Morena government taking power in Mexico in 2018 was in principle friendly to gender equality but in practice resistant to feminist demands.

Reacting to the 'pink wave' populism, a right-wing populism appealing to upper classes and disaffected middle-class sectors affected economically but especially morally and culturally by globalisation trends, emerged in the second decade of this century [21]. With obvious tones of a strong men *machista* culture, neither the 1940s populism nor the one represented by the 'pink wave' has been completely positive or open to feminist and sexual diversity demands. However, whereas the second one, associated with the 'pink wave', is more tolerant, permissive and in a few cases even encouraging gender-related gains, the right wing one is openly against any kind of feminist advances. Right-wing populism claims that patriarchal institutions are directly threatened by feminist advances and links these advances to globalisation, to the expansion of foreign ideologies (spread by international organisations like the UN). They regard feminist or LGBTQ+ activists as 'neo-colonial actors' infiltrating society [17]. For the right-wing populism, the family is directly under attack, and this attack involves a whole societal risk. In their discourse, family rights are more important than individual rights, and feminist and sexual diversity claims question parental authority (that is to say the authority of the men in the family). Having been trained in securitization strategies, some of the leaders of these groups attack the 'gender ideology' as a security risk that through the destruction of 'family values' leads the way to criminal violence in general [22].

3. Feminist Movements Increasing Strength Confronting Populist Resistance: The Anti-gender Ideology Crusades

The strength and articulations emanating from the feminist mobilisations all over Latin America going beyond middle-class sectors to popular and lower-class sectors, grew substantially during the last decade. This articulation focused around GBV, particularly femicides leading to the massive widespread of the *Ni una menos* campaign but also to the rise of the 'Green tide' (marea verde) called like that because of their wearing symbolic green bandanas, for the decriminalization of abortion [23]. These movements started in the Southern part of South America but soon grew all over Latin America and the Caribbean [24]. The massive mobilizations [25] achieved by these movements especially in Argentina but also elsewhere led to what Graciela Di Marco calls the 'feminist people', that is to say 'the emergence of new feminist identities and feminist movements' radicalization' for the case of Argentina, but also of Brazil

[26]. This articulation, coordination among feminist groups, became a new political identity everywhere in the continent and exercised an increasing pressure over all governments both to the right and to the left. This articulation, coordination among feminist groups, became a new political identity everywhere in the continent and exercised an increasing pressure over all governments both to the right and to the left.

As Corredor has pointed out the notion of 'gender' became a 'nodal point of articulation for conservative sectors dominated by religious actors (Catholic but also protestant from all creeds)' as well as by strong groups within civil society. This could be seen since 2015-2016 when we see massive demonstrations in Mexico opposing gender ideology in schools and same sex marriage. In 2016 Evangelist groups mobilized to stop the ratification of Peace agreements in Colombia because they included the respect for LBGTQ+ and 'were trying to impose the gender ideology' [13,17,27]. The Catholic Church started its anti-gender campaign as a reaction to the UN organized Women's conferences that started since 1975. But the main counteroffensive to 'gender ideology' came after the Beijing conference in 1995. This counteroffensive spread all over the world to be retaken by conservative groups all over Latin America. These groups reject the notion of 'gender' as a social construction that creates hierarchies of power inequalities. They contend that gender differences are based on natural biological differences and should not be questioned.

The members of this countermovement are several actors and institutions which are taking the lead in countering advances in women's rights, among them, of course, the conservative circles within the Catholic or the Evangelical church, and other Christian churches. Their actions with similarly minded civil society groups and NGOs such as the so-called 'Pro-life' or 'Pro-family', that are further linked to religious associated, extreme-right groups, such as the Opus-Dei [28]. They also coordinate with political parties through their own members that become politicians (for instance, the case of Brazil with its 'Bancada Evangélica' – the evangelical congressmen –, that is the coalition of evangelical neo-Pentecostal parliamentarians), through lobby groups or alliances in exchange for political support. Such connections were relevant in the case of the rise of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua who, among other things, spearheaded the total criminalization of abortion, as a concession to the Catholic church in exchange for their support. In contrast, in Mexico City in 2007, free abortion was fully legalised up to the twelfth week. But in response to the legalisation of abortion, in the following years, religious actors together with conservative groups, like *Frente Nacional por la Familia* (National Front for the Families), entered into political alliances to ensure the criminalization at the state level of all types of abortion even those defined as therapeutic, for the protection of the mother's life, previously permitted in most of the 32 states of Mexico. This resulted in the reform of more than half of all state constitutions defining 'life' from the moment of conception until natural death, thus hardening the criminalization of abortion, which became redefined as murder of an unborn being [29–31] Similar groups surged elsewhere, like the movement #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (Don't Mess with my Children) in Peru, opposing sexual education in schools [17].

Feminists speak often of structural barriers to the advancement of women's rights. One of these barriers includes the way legislation in most countries in Latin America has been shaped by catholic morale. As already mentioned, the different churches (Catholic, Evangelist, Pentecostalists) have multiplied their influence through the creation of NGOs and movements, copying the feminist strategies themselves. They have modernized their approach against gender equality and women's rights by making use of all social media, they have formed powerful lobbies and they have invested plenty of resources in all-encompassing campaigns privileging the struggle against the legalisation of abortion but going beyond that to the struggle against the 'gender ideology' as we shall see in the case of Mexico and Brazil.

3.1. Backlash in Mexico: The Conservative Morality of a Left-wing Populism

Women's political participation in Mexico was important since before the Mexican revolution, during its development (1910-1917) but particularly after it, as part of the trade union, peasant and middle-class movements, during the 1930s. Mexico was one of the last countries in Latin America to recognize women's political rights (the right to vote in municipal elections was attained in 1947 and in federal elections in 1953) [32]. In the 1940s, the feminist movement started, mainly among middle-class sectors. Thus, by the time of the first UN Women's World Conference in Mexico City in 1975 feminist activists were mostly middle-class women [32]. It was not until the 1980s that the urban-popular movement (lower-income sectors in the cities demanding housing, education, etc), that had mostly women among its rank and file, started to include women's claims.

Policies regarding political parity (but not much more on gender equality) started in 1993 with a non-binding quota rule of 30 per cent of women that had to be part of the electoral lists in 1996 [33]. It is only in 2008 these quotas increased to 40 per cent of women to be included in binding alternate lists (one man–one woman) for proportional majority candidates. This signified an important change to give women's demands a certain influence in politics. However, there were strategies to circumvent these quotas, such as letting female candidates that had been elected at several federal or local positions leave their seats in favour of their deputies, always men, as soon as the new legislative bodies started to function [33]. These seemed to be agreements previously planned where parties managed to convince or manipulate women candidates in exchange for other positions or monetary compensation. Moreover, elected women know their job as elected officials is not easy to perform.

Attacks on their personal lives are part of the problems they confront political violence, political harassment [33–38]. Although many politicians endure this, the problems seem worse for women politicians. A study made through surveys and interviews by ONU Mujeres (UN Women) in approximately 248 Mexican municipalities in 2018, shows as one of its main findings the extreme normalization of gendered based political violence (sexual harassment in most cases) that women assume as 'part of the rules' for participating in politics [39]. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s women parliamentarians had organised a Bicameral Commission called the Women's Parliament. By the beginning of the 21^{st} century, there was a good cross-party cooperation among parliamentary women and with the National Women Institute's Consultative Council to implement a gender equality agenda. As part of this agenda in the next legislative period (2003-2006), the General law for women's access to a life free of violence was approved. Political parity reforms became more effective in 2014 and 2019 and budgets earmarked for women's advancement policies were attained [40]. Women attained also advances in the judiciary by the ruling of the Supreme Court of Justice in 2008 that upheld the legalisation of abortion in Mexico City obtained in 2007. Also, the Federal Electoral Tribunal preceding the 2012 elections made it compulsory for political parties to follow the quota rule [40].

Women's representation at the national legislative level increased since the 1990s, from 7.8 per cent in 1991 to 32.8 per cent in 2012 and 51 per cent in 2018 in the upper chamber. In the lower chamber, their percentage went up from 7.4 per cent in 1991 to 42.6 per cent in 2015 and 49 per cent in 2018 [33,41,42]. Furthermore, the new federal government led by President Lopez Obrador, candidate of the *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional* (Morena – National Regeneration Movement) elected in July 2018 appointed eight women as ministers sometimes in key sectors like interior security, labour, environmental issues, energy and economy and this female team promised to have gender equality as one of its priorities [43]. On the other hand, only nine women became governors (in 32 states, all through history) and by December 2017 only 14.2 per cent of the elected mayors in Mexico were women [39].

The new government can be considered as part of a late 'pink wave' populist to the left, that is to say, to be permissive and empathic to feminist demands and sexual diversity in principle but ready to sacrifice them when other demands compete or in times of crisis like the one provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic. Several examples illustrate the lack of comprehension and priority given to gender demands by this government. One of the first to be applied was the closure of a whole system of day-care centres serving working-class women on the argument that there was corruption in the administration of these centres. Instead of cleaning the administration of this corruption, the new government decided to close it and give a limited subsidy to the families so the 'grandparents could take care of the children' [44]. Another example is the lack of seriousness given to the struggle against GBV. Mexico is one of the countries of the world worst affected by GBV, where it is calculated that ten/eleven women are murdered every day, femicides went from 891 in 2018 to 983 in 2019 and the rate of murders is 1.9 for 100,000 women between January and May 2020 [45]. The pandemic has intensified this trend. Before the Covid pandemic started, women demonstrations to protest the increase in GBV were massive and the president's response was disappointing. The restrictive measures (strong recommendations to stay at home and partial closures of production and services) taken by the government led to escalated (as elsewhere in the world) GBV and increased femicides, facts that the government was reluctant to accept [46]. Moreover, in response to the enormous increase in the calls of help regarding domestic violence to the lines designed to provide help, the president declared that 90 per cent of these calls were false' [46]. Consequently, among the austerity measures decreed by the government in July 2020, there was a cut of 33 per cent (1.6 mill USD?) to different measures to combat GBV. Although the government denied this would affect targeted anti-GBV programs, several reports confirm these cuts. Even the National Institute of Women (*Instituto Nacional de la Mujer*) saw a cut of 75 per cent of its budget [47]. In a typical populist-moral concerns style, the president also insisted that the pandemic-induced confinement/isolation had brought a "re-encounter among the families" and not more domestic violence. This was seriously questioned by most feminist groups and independent mass media in the country [48–50]. Another recent issue is that as the historical victory of the pro-choice movement regarding abortion in Argentina became known in Mexico, the Mexican president declared that he could initiate a referendum to decide such a legalization [51]. A typical populist reaction that ignores the fact that what women are fighting for is for the recognition of their right to decide over their own body. Feminists have argued that organising a referendum to legalise abortion is as absurd as subjecting the right to vote in elections for both men and women to a referendum.

The insistence of the president on the importance of 'family values' and on the special need for women to take care of children and the elderly has reflected his closeness to Evangelical groups that supported his presidential campaign. The Social Encounter Party (PES) was part of the MORENA party coalition that made it possible for Lopez Obrador to attain the presidency in 2018 [52]. Representing a growing number of neo-Pentecostals, the PES won 30 of the present legislatures of 500 seats [40,53]. Together with Catholic sectors, the PES has promoted a legislative agenda fighting secular education despite the separation of the state and the church since the 1917 constitution. This agenda would allow private funding (from Churches) to parties. This would also support the right-wing movement, the National Front for the Family in its campaign opposing LGBTQ+ rights including the acceptance of same sex marriage. A legislative proposal in 2018 in favour of same sex marriage was defeated and currently only eleven states (of 32) have approved equal marriage rights [40]. Moreover, in

the present administration, the Ministry of the interior approved on May 31, 2019 a regulation that proposes Church participation in 'social reconstruction and peace culture projects' all over the country, thus undermining the traditional secularism of the Mexican state [54].

According to Latinobarometer, the Mexican population continues to include a majority of Catholics (80 per cent) by 2017, in contrast with Latin America at large where this percentage had decreased to 59 per cent the same year. However, Pentecostals, neo-Pentecostals and Evangelical groups are growing and according to the ministry of the interior, in 2018 there were 3,446 Catholic Associations while those declared as Pentecostalist were 3,439 [55]. Organisations like CONFRATERNICE (National Confraternity of Evangelical Christian Churches) whose leader has met and prayed with the Mexican president several times, has created and massively disseminated a 'Moral booklet' [40]. In the same tone, several of these pro-family groups have obtained a legislative victory in mid-July 2020 in Aguascalientes, a state in the centre of Mexico, through the approval of the 'parental pin', that is, the right of the parents to veto any inclusion of sexual education, sexual diversity rights and gender perspectives in educational materials. The offensive from these groups is supported by PES and is expanding in most other states [56].

Recent research on Mexican leading pro-family organisers in Mexico shows that in the context of pressing security concerns and historic low levels of trust in institutions the pro-family strategists use the 'gender ideology' discourse from a security thinking perspective, associating it with a 'Culture of Death', thus increasing its effectiveness. 'Gender ideology' is thus constructed as a 'death threat' to the family and traditional social values [22]. This focusing on 'gender ideology' as a threat to the family and to society in general is similar to the strategies followed by extreme-right populism in Brazil as we shall presently see.

As a response to increased rates of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), to the above mentioned framing of a 'gender ideology' as a threat and to the insufficient results from government policies, feminist mobilisations have never been so huge and strong. The 8th of March demonstration gathered around 80,000 women, the one in 2023, 90,000 [57,58]. The intersectionality of social class, gender and age was reflected in these demonstrations although we see a growing gender awareness of especially young women. Several feminist groups have protested and criticized the July 2020 budget cuts of GBV projects and institutions and although their strength is more limited in some regions of the country their voice is still strong.

At the same time, the populist strategies followed by the government in power in Mexico seem to give priority to 'social diversity' (inclusion of young people, senior adults, women, indigenous groups) more than to gender equality [59] This type of left-oriented populism goes beyond the homogenizing notion of 'people' and 'nation' in order to target, for example, indigenous people as those especially victimized by corruption and neoliberalism. But this recognition of indigenous people's rights goes never so far as to target indigenous women.

Finally, Mexico's advances regarding gender political parity (that started before the arrival of this government but advanced much during this presidency) and other types of legislation against GBV is notorious but is confronting serious setbacks. Political parity has given women more presence at the National Congress, state level congresses and other political institutions but not necessarily more power given the challenges of political violence they must confront and the fact they must prioritise their loyalty to the president and party over any gender solidarity [60,61]. The legislation trying to fight GBV and to attain a better education that could change stereotypes against women and sexual diversity is not strong enough as the sexual harassments and feminicide figures show. From about 850 feminicides in 2018, they increased to nearly 1000 for 2021, the Interamerican Commission for Human Rights had a very critical report to the Mexican government in 2022.

Moreover, feminists are fighting against a powerful campaign from religious and civil society groups that securitize the 'gender ideology' discourse within a populist rhetoric focused on family values, shared and spread by the Mexican president himself. We see thus in Mexico a combination of personal harm level approach with backlash tactics by both government policies and right-wing civil society groups. This left-wing populism may be more gender equality friendly in its rhetoric but contributing to the countermovement offensive we see elsewhere in the continent. This case reflects a deep entrenchment as well of a masculinist culture reluctant to any changes threatening its hegemony.

4. Backlash in Brazil: 'Gender Ideology' as a Political Platform

In Brazil, the situation is even more serious. The quota system for women implemented in 1997, before the pink wave, when Workers Party (PT) government came to power, ensured a small increase in female representation, which in the last general elections (2022) resulted in 17.7% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 14.8% per cent in the Senate [61,62]. Although modest, this increased representation of women, as elsewhere in Latin America, is the result of feminist and women's movements that resist the right-wing populist wave, whose agenda includes a major setback in women's rights, and which uses as a platform the campaign against the so-called 'gender ideology'. And, also as elsewhere in the continent, not all elected deputies are feminists or even defend women's rights to some degree.

In tandem with the campaign that resulted in the coup d'état against the first female president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff of PT, a regressive campaign against women's rights, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights and all that is considered 'gender ideology' increased in its intensity [63].

This campaign was underway for some years, specially since The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1995, but it very much increased in Brazil since 2013, in

tandem with the conservative turn in politics thar resulted in Bolsonaro's government (2018-2022). For Miskolci and Campana [64], it is a conservative reaction, promoted by sectors of the Catholic and Evangelical churches in a *sui generis* alliance against advances in the direction of rights for the above identified groups [65].

It is important to note that from 2003 to 2016, Brazil went through a period that was completely different from all that had preceded it in many senses, in the so-called 'pink wave'. Although far from being a revolution, and without destroying any fundamental structures, the PT government brought about significant changes regarding social inclusion and income redistribution as other left-wing populist governments [66,67]. Regarding gender equality, advances were achieved in the form of legislation favouring labour rights for domestic workers, that are 95% women, and to combat violence against women. As regards to GBV, the main laws were the Maria da Penha Law specifically against domestic violence that makes the state responsible for the persecution of aggressors when they are husbands or partners and also deals with educational measures against this kind of violence; and the Femicide Law, with harder penalties on the murderers of women that committed the crime based on gender issues. Other achievements came as decisions of the Supreme Court of Law, such as the right of homosexual couples to marry and the right to abortion in the case of anencephaly of the foetus.

At the same time, however, the countermovement represented by civil society and religious groups articulated themselves against the 'gender ideology' in tandem with the growth of right-wing discourses. Led by many Christian churches and other civil society organizations, it took shape on the occasion of the National Education Plan vote in 2013 and was spread all over the country creating a moral panic [68]. Complaints began to rain down on teachers accused of practising 'gender indoctrination' in schools. The moral panic was stirred by the idea that teachers would want to 'teach children to be homosexual' or to 'practice sex' in schools.

There were several court cases against teachers and even university professors, that were accused of feminist, communist or homosexual indoctrination. Only in 2020 a decision of the Federal Court pronounced such accusations as unconstitutional. This campaign was continuously and increasingly evident. In 2017, the American philosopher Judith Butler came to Brazil for a series of lectures to launch her book about the Palestine-Israel conflict. She was subjected to a series of attacks organized by conservative groups, who accused her of promoting 'gender ideology'. Art museums with exhibitions that included performances by naked people, or even contained paintings of nudes, were also targeted.

As Elizabeth S. Corredor states, the rhetoric of "gender ideology" was originated by the Catholic Church in their reaction against feminism and LGBTQ+ movements on a global scale and has been used in many parts of the world and appropriated especially by right-wing political forces ([13], p. 616). In Brazil, it has been used as a political weapon that allowed the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff of PT and the election of Jair Bolsonaro, with a right-wing populist platform.

After the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the elections of 2018 brought to the presidency the far-right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro representing by his military past and sympathy to the latest military dictatorship in Brazil the first type of populism. During the campaign, this candidate made ample use of social networks, particularly WhatsApp, with the help of specialized companies to electronically multiply messages, in order to spread fake news, stereotypical images and hate speech. Bolsonaro's discourse had components of economic liberalism regarding privatisation of public services and reducing the monitoring power of the state, for example, of labour or environmental laws. It also included combating urban violence with violence and allowing ordinary citizens to arm themselves, combined with claims of corruption within the PT. However, a key element of his populist discourse was the use of *machista*, misogynistic, anti-feminist and anti-diversity messages. He accused his rival, Fernando Haddad, former Minister of Education from PT, of distributing a 'gay kit' to the schools that would teach how to be a homosexual to the children, as well as to distribute bottles in the shape of penises to kindergartens [69]. In a typical right-wing populist, machista style, Bolsonaro posed as the champion of 'the families', the strong man against the 'gender ideology', feminism and communism [70]. Appealing to morality and traditional values in his first discourse as president in the Congress, he declared: *"We will unite the people, value the family, respect the religions and our Judaic-Christian tradition, we will fight against the gender ideology, keeping our principles. Brazil will again be a country free of ideological bonds"* [71].

What is perhaps more remarkable and makes Bolsonaro one of the most extreme right populist leaders in the world is his manipulative use of conservative-religious precepts with a strong appeal to the neo-Pentecostal Evangelical churches and the Charismatic group of the Catholic church, which denounce the notion of gender as an ideology, feminists as 'denatured' women, LGBTQ+ groups as the sick who need to be cured, religions of African origin as 'the stuff of the devil', and science as unnecessary and 'against God'. His discourse is an exacerbation of hate speech: anti-communist, racist, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-feminist and misogynist, through collective or individual means, and episodes of violence. The 'gender ideology' discourse, used as a trigger for moral panic, was essential to Bolsonaro's election and continues to be used in his government to justify measures that cut funds constitutionally reserved for schools and universities, threaten the censorship of teachers and teaching material, favour private education and the home-schooling of children.

This populist and machista narrative constitute the discourse of the countermovement described by Elizabeth Corredor ([13], p. 618). However, there is a powerful resistance to this countermovement. The different social move-

ments, left-wing parties and alternative media [72] have relentlessly exposed the processes of far-right populism evident across Brazil. These movements have been instrumental in the fight against far-right populist and anti-gender rhetoric, including Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - MST (Landless Rural Workers' Movement) [73], the trade unions and workers leaderships, the indigenous people and their supporters, and the women's and feminist movements, among many others.

Many women and even many men have revolted against the conservative wave that seems to have swept across Brazil in a consistent, articulated and large-scale manner. Moreover, in the present context, it is women who seem to take the leadership of the most expressive movements. The mass demonstrations and groups of women who invaded Brazil's streets are not restricted to a generation or spatiality. From 2011 on, Brazil has seen the Marchas das Vadias (Slut Walks), featuring young women, but we also had the Marcha das Margaridas (Daisies' March) attended by more than 100,000 female rural workers from all over Brazil [74], and in 2015, a Black Women's March. In addition, there were protests against retrogressive laws, and thousands of high school students occupying schools in São Paulo, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul in 2015 and nationwide in 2016, including university campuses, with debates on gender and many young women participating, organising and leading the protests. From 2011 women's groups, the so-called *Coletivos* began to appear in schools, unions, universities and neighbourhoods, all across the country. From 2017, the 8th March was marked by strike actions and many other demonstrations, called the 8M, uniting women from all over Latin America [75]. All these movements confirm the thesis of 'feminist people' created by Di Marco, already mentioned, and also the thesis of Corredor of the anti-gender rhetoric as a countermovement.

During the 2018 elections, in tandem with the Bolsonaro candidature, #EleNão (NotHim) protests sprung up all over the country. A Facebook group called #MulheresContraBolsonaro (Women Against Bolsonaro) was set up and attracted more than one million members in less than a week, and they went on to organizing huge demonstrations. These demonstrations made it clear that women's movements are opposed to Bolsonaro. To counter these movements, Bolsonaro's followers distorted images from the demonstrations or 'cut and pasted' from other manifestations, such as the SlutWalks, showing bare-breasted women, for example, on platforms such as Whatsapp. In a typical right-wing rhetoric, feminists were presented through stereotypical images by various government sectors as ugly, hairy, unhygienic (!) and hysterical women, converting them into enemies to be defeated.

Brazil is a very good example of extreme right-wing rhetoric: conservative, *machista*, anti-scientific and indeed fascist messages coming from a countermovement including the former president, a congress composed of a conservative majority, tied to the same elite groups as ever, either military or the neo-Pentecostal churches and their theology of prosperity; and a disaffected middle class that did not feel represented by the Worker's Party governments.

It is difficult to see where the backlash in Brazil is going to go. The political polarization arising from the recent conjuncture and the rise of the extreme right to power during the years 2018 to 2022, and the subsequent victory in the elections of President Lula with a coalition list, intensified the dispute around the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ people, that appear as central, along with ethno-racial and environmental issues [76]. It is a game of forces that are at stake in this new Lula government, surrounded by threats of a coup. In society, these issues translate into persecution of teachers who talk about gender in their classes [77], a very high level of daily violence against women and LGBTQIA+ people, and are interconnected with racial insults. As the legislature remains very conservative, each law, each issue, is a tug of war, and requires a lot of negotiation, internal and external support, and leadership power from the government. Feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements need to remain vigilant and active.

5. Final Reflections

Latin America in 2020 is not the same as that one before 1995. The 'feminist people' as Di Marco calls it, exists and grows everywhere in the continent as the 'strategic gender' consciousness spreads out. Strong evidence of this was the legalization of abortion at the end of 2020 in one of the most catholic dominated countries in Latin America, Argentina. Latin America has one of the (if not the) best organised women and feminist movements in the world. Women and LGTBQ+ mobilisations especially among young generations are extremely strong. Gender as a strategic consciousness giving women (and other sexual identities) the awareness of their rights is here to stay. More and more women have become conscious of what is at stake, the 'feminist people' are growing and will not let the clock go back. They have become aware that they are half of the population and want half of the power whatever the means and no matter what the patriarchal structures put on their way.

This is the movement that the anti-gender countermovement is trying to stop. Populist Dynamics are helping this countermovement and the cases we have just presented illustrate this situation. The creation of the special relationship strong men (personified by the presidents) and 'the people', making use of strong moral rhetoric (openly or subtly anti-gender, anti-feminist) helps the countermovement in several ways. These strong men have a mission, it can be the struggle against corruption and for social justice as in the case of Mexico or the defence of traditional family values and the elite's privileges as in Brazil. In any case, such a mission ignores or frankly attacks gender-related gains because they are regarded as less important or openly threatening the social order this populism wants to impose. Feminist movements are seen as disturbing or openly threatening this social order. The countermovement is right in a certain form, gender justice and the implementation of feminist demands would mean

the true emancipation of women as individuals with all rights and the demise of *machista* cultures so impregnated in Latin American societies.

The anti-gender ideologies populisms in Latin America share many traits with those elsewhere in the world. For example, their nationalism and perception of feminist ideas as 'exogenous' and neo-colonial (or influenced by pernicious global cultures). But they also adapt to local context realities and are framed in a 'securitizing' way, that is to say, presenting feminist ideas as direct security risks when security associated to criminality is one of the main social challenges, for example in the case of Mexico. In this case, feminists are portrayed as a threat to family-based values thus encouraging criminal behaviour among the new generations. And even if the left-wing populist government drives an 'including women' policy, its actions clearly threaten any previously achieved gender equality gains.

Both types of populism exemplify a reaction against the challenges to patriarchal structures reflecting a sort of aggressive masculinity, a machismo taking the form of an attitude and ideology deeply ingrained in Latin American societies. The dimension of this countermovement is also a reflection of the movement it's trying to stop, a movement that is clearly here to stay.

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