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Gender, religion and politics are deeply entwined in Brazil. The far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, came to power in January 2019, promising to combat crime, clamp down on corruption and restore ‘traditional’ family values. Bolsonaro regularly refers to God and Christianity in order to give his policies moral legitimacy, and his election is linked to support garnered from conservative Christians who like his stance (Fachin, 2019). Colloquially known as the ‘Trump of the Tropics’, he has said that “gender ideology is the work of the Devil” (Carta Capital, 2019). One of his first moves as president was to remove LGBT rights issues from the Brazilian human rights agenda, and he appointed Damares Alves, lawyer and Evangelical pastor, as head of the newly amalgamated Ministry for Women, Family & Human Rights. Alves, who says she rejects feminism and defends the right to life from conception, promises to run the Ministry with “Christian principles” prioritising the family (Exame, 2019).

Bolsonaro is an ex-army captain who defends the days of Brazil’s dictatorships, and he has taken measures to curb the Truth Commissions set up to address rights abuses committed by the state during the military regime (Amnesty International, 2019). Concern for human rights is also connected to Bolsonaro’s relaxation of rules on gun ownership, and he has given police great latitude in their use of lethal force (ibid.). Brazil is currently one of the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights activists, evidenced in particular by the brutal assassination of the feminist politician Marielle Franco in 2018. In fact, Brazil’s first openly gay MP, Jean Willys, and Debora Diniz—an anthropologist, law professor and one of Brazil’s most prominent abortion rights activists, are but two of the growing number of people who have fled the country due to growing hostility and death threats. Highlighting concern over policies for women, Diniz argues that under Alves, “the language of human rights will merely be cosmetic vocabulary for the gender-traditional, family-oriented policy framework into which women will be pushed” (Diniz, 2018).
Evangelical Protestants (mainly in the form of Pentecostals) have risen in number and gained increasing power in politics since democratisation in the 1980s. The conservative Evangelical lobby (Bancada Evangêlica) campaigns in Congress—sometimes in conjunction with the Catholic lobby (Bancada Católica) and the Family lobby (Bancada da Família)—to attempt to limit rights such as access to the morning after pill, abortion and marriage rights for gay couples. This has led Brazilian feminists to decry a turn to Christian conservatism which they say impinges on women’s rights and those of the LGBT community (Diniz, 2018; Orozco, 2009). Although neither Evangelical Protestants nor Catholics are unanimous in their support for Bolsonaro, many do seek a return to social standards which they feel that have been lost due to a leftist social agenda that has welcomed diversity and the expression of minority identities—weakening, in their view, the ideal of the family in Brazilian life (Fachin, 2019). It would therefore appear that under Bolsonaro, women’s rights and those of the LGBT community are under serious threat, while gender and religion are at the very heart of this debate.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which women’s lives, women’s rights, gender roles and gender relations have been shaped in Brazil, influenced by patriarchal institutions such as the state, the Catholic Church and more recently the rise of conservative Evangelical Protestantism. I argue that in order to understand where modern Brazilian women find themselves today, it is important to understand women’s history in the formation of the Brazilian nation, and I provide a gendered analysis (by no means exhaustive) of some of the political, cultural, historical, legal and religious contexts which have shaped Brazilian women’s lives from colonialism until the present day. Women’s success in gaining rights and equality has not been linear, and this chapter demonstrates that their empowerment has, at various times, been both supported and stymied by religious institutions and the state. A historical perspective demonstrates that controversy over gender and control over women’s bodies has been at the heart of Brazilian society since colonialism, because gender is a fundamental category of social organisation and a major means by which social relations and (in)equality are structured (Molyneux, 2000). This suggests that gender and women’s rights will remain contested categories for the foreseeable future, and that current controversy actually represents the norm rather than the exception.

The chapter is set out as follows: in the following section, I underscore the important roles of the Portuguese Imperial government and the Catholic Church in colonial Brazil, which created a lasting framework for gendered expectations of men’s and women’s roles, and women were systematically, ideologically and structurally subordinated, based on the hierarchical domination of patriarchal systems which further intersected with divisions such as race and class (Myscofski, 2013). Next, as the country gained its independence in the nineteenth century, I point out that although liberalism, the striving for modernisation and increasing secularisation led to more women in work, the Napoleonic Code meant that patriarchal rule was maintained in both domestic and public spheres, leaving women with few rights (Dore, 2000; Molyneux, 2000). Women’s voices began to be heard more concretely from the 1920s onwards, as first-wave feminists demanded voting rights. But it was the combination of the growth of social movements and workers unions during the 1960–1980s, as military dictatorship was increasingly rejected, that women’s movements truly came to the fore. In section 4, I explore the important role of the Catholic Church in supporting these movements, due to its focus on liberation theology, which inadvertently led to the empowerment of poor women (Drogus, 1997). Moreover, women’s movements and feminist movements helped to secure important gains for women’s equality as the country moved towards democratisation. In section 5, I explore the growth in conservative Evangelical Protestantism, its connections to the current polemical debate surrounding gender, and the fear of a retrocession of women’s hard-won rights. In the final section, I end with some concluding remarks about the possible impacts of growing Christian fundamentalism on Brazilian women’s lives.
Women, religion and the state

Colonial arrangements of gender and sexuality

In colonial Brazil, society was shaped by the Portuguese Imperial Government and Luso-Catholic ecclesiastical institutions. According to Carol Ann Myscofski (2013), the Roman Catholic Church was the dominant cultural institution of the Portuguese empire, creating a framework within which men and women were given certain social and gendered expectations of their role in society. Moreover, this varied not just according to gender, but also according to race, ethnicity and class. Indigenous communities were exploited, and Africans were brought to the country as slaves. The Catholic Church and state helped to inculcate norms for clothing, comportment and activities that limited women’s bodies, and models of honour formulated in medieval Europe were transferred to the colony (Marcilio, 1993). A woman’s virtue and morality were therefore developed by the gender-specific teachings that the Catholic Church provided.

For the first 200 years of colonialism, women had little access to education, which was run by the Catholic Church in accordance to Portuguese Catholic standards of feminine behaviour (Myscofski, 2013). For example, the Church focused on nominal instruction in religious doctrines as well as training in domestic and social skills. The Virgin Mary and other female saints were cultivated as the appropriate inspiration for women’s identity, while female submission and silence were praised as important female attributes (ibid.).

Christian-based cultural myths around concepts of male and female sexuality, virginity and an honour/shame dyad also had gendered and racial implications. Women’s honour rested on their sense of ‘shame’: women were expected to hide their heads and bodies from public view and their behaviour from public scrutiny (Myscofski, 2013). A woman who failed to cover up or behave correctly violated her honour and therefore revealed her social and sexual immorality based on her shamelessness (ibid.). Indigenous and enslaved African women were considered dishonoured because of their failure to adopt European dress; this dishonour also confirmed their shamelessness and made them vulnerable to seduction, sexual attacks and abuse (ibid.). Essentially barred from public life and public office, honour for elite women was gained through seclusion, chastity and later marriage and motherhood, while elite men claimed honour through public rank, family lineage and personal conduct (Myscofski, 2013).

The Catholic Church defended matrimony, partly to limit abduction and underage marriages, ostensibly protecting some women and girls but also giving the Church increased authority over women, who could be married against their will or to perpetrators of violence (Marcilio, 1993). Marriage possibilities for impoverished and marginalised Indigenous or African women were severely limited. According to Myscofski (2013), the patriarchal, religious discourse expressed in the colony tried to create a single ideal for women, on the basis that a good Christian woman would maintain her own and her family’s honour by guarding her virginity, marrying well and removing herself from the public by focusing on the domestic sphere. Yet, other poor, black, mixed-race, Indigenous and enslaved women could not remain virgins, marry or withdraw from the public sphere. The slave culture made this ideal unobtainable for some women, who were then punished for not living up to its standards.

In addition, across the Latin American region, Spanish and Portuguese legal systems justified male violence, such that men could beat and even kill their wives with impunity, especially when male ‘honour’ was at stake (Uribe-Uran, 2013). In colonial times, a man was legally allowed to kill both his adulterous wife and her lover, should they be caught together (Besse, 1989). A husband could justify his violent actions by citing his wife’s disobedience or insolence, and her infidelity or attacks against his honour, which would be considered extenuating circumstances under the law (ibid.). In Brazil, this patriarchal authority legalising violence against women (VAW) continued into the twentieth century: it was only in 1940 that ‘crimes
of passion’ were no longer accepted as a legal defence in courts of law, after campaigning by middle-class women and later men (Besse, 1989). Furthermore, it was only in 1980 that ‘legitimate defence of honour’ was finally legally excluded as courtroom defence for wife killing in Brazilian courts (ibid.). Sadly today, the historical legacy towards VAW appears ingrained—Brazil consistently ranks among the top 10 countries in the world for VAW (Ipea & PBSP, 2019).

A lack of historical data makes it hard to know of acts of resistance undertaken by women within this colonial, normative patriarchal system, although Myscofski (2013) notes that based on diverse social, religious and personal motives, some women chose to withdraw from married life altogether by living as recluses, nuns and sisters in formal and informal convents. Moreover, in opposition to the dominant religious, social and cultural norms of the time, Myscofski finds that some women became healers, diviners and practitioners of magic, areas which, according to the author, opened up new realms of power and creativity for women. However, she cautions against the tempting conclusion that marginalised women used magic to obtain small improvements in their lives; women’s confessions and denunciations during this period point to the loss of virtue and honour that women experienced through contact with magical practices, and Myscofski argues that they found little recompense for these skills in wider society.

Independence, liberalism and the maintenance of patriarchal rule

Liberalism and independence in the nineteenth century brought legal reform which decreased the Catholic Church’s power and increased state power, although both Maxine Molyneux (2000) and Elizabeth Dore (2000) argue that the generally accepted view that these changes brought steady ‘progress’ and expanded women’s rights is wrong. Seeking to legitimise their power during this unstable period, successive governments took over powers previously held by the Catholic Church, such as the regulation of marriage, annulment, sexuality, the legitimacy of birth and education, which led to the increasing secularisation of society (Dore, 2000).

While the state was keen to modernise patriarchal rule, it did not want to abolish it. For example, the adoption of the Napoleonic Code in Latin American postcolonial states maintained patriarchal authority in both the domestic and public spheres. Although women were increasingly visible in public life as workers, traders, shop assistants and professionals, the Napoleonic Code meant that women still had no rights in the family. Women were legally obliged to hand over any earnings to their husband, they had no automatic rights to marital property, they could not testify in court or hold public office, and they had no legal authority or claim to their children under patria potestad (parental authority) (Molyneux, 2000). Women were considered “outside citizenship”, because they were perceived to lack rationality and be too weak and impulsive to be equal to men (ibid.: 43). As full female suffrage was only granted after the outbreak of World War II, more than a century after independence, political citizenship could only be claimed by some men (and even then, in most Latin American states, this meant only men who were literate, who had property or had done national service).

Furthermore, increasing secularisation did not necessarily improve women’s lives. As early as the Council of Trent (1563–1581), the Catholic Church had established the indissolubility of marriage, which also had to be performed by a Church official to be considered valid (Htun, 2003). The Brazilian state wrested control over marriage from the Church in 1890, making civil marriage compulsory. However, Dore (2000) points out that the clearest difference between religious and secular regulation of marriage lay in the attitude towards adultery. While Catholic doctrine views adultery by wives or husbands as equally sinful, the civil code made adultery virtually legal for men, whereas it was criminalised for women. This suggests that secularisation permitted double standards by codifying existing customs and attitudes, and it remained so until...
Divorce, on the other hand, remained illegal until under the military government in 1977. Moreover, it was only achieved through annulment and separation, because the concept of the indissolubility of marriage was still upheld, arguably leaving the Catholic Church with a moral and cultural authority over marriage that could never really be dissolved (Htun, 2003). This could influence the stigma that still exists around divorce today: despite legal changes in 2010 making it easier, Brazil has the eighth lowest divorce rate in the world (Rio Times Online, 2019).

According to Dore (2000), the nineteenth century was arduous for women, and organisations made up of women and developed for women only emerged towards the end of the century and well into the twentieth century, as female-led movements lobbied their governments for social change by opposing policies and sometimes entering into opposition to military rule. This is explored in the following section.

**Dictatorship, democracy and changing gender relations**

Brazil experienced a military coup in 1889 which established the first Brazilian Republic. The country also experienced dictatorship during the Vargas eras (1930–1934 and 1937–1945) and military dictatorship (1964–1985), which according to Mala Htun (2003) had contradictory effects on gender relations and women’s positions in society. The military regime was keen to restructure state and society in a bid for modernisation. This included industrial development, a reorganisation of the political system into a two-party system and suppression of labour movements and of the Communist Party (ibid.). These economic policies pushed vast numbers of women into the workforce, inadvertently serving to break down public/private distinctions and allowing for challenges to traditional gender roles (Htun, 2003). Women’s rapidly changing place in society—linked to the presence of female workers who also participated in strikes and demonstrations demanding better pay and conditions, as well as the growth of women who engaged in commercial sex—violated understandings of women’s proper place in society and signalled transgressive female behaviour which threatened family life, considered the bedrock of the nation (Molyneux, 2000). First-wave feminists such as Bertha Luz and Nísia Floresta founded the Brazilian Federation for Women’s Progress in 1919, and they were pioneers in the fight for voting rights and the right to work without a husband’s authorisation.

However, during the mid- to late twentieth century, as military dictatorship was increasingly rejected and the country moved inexorably towards democracy, social movements involving both men and women demanding improved citizen and workers’ rights began to form in earnest, leading to important changes in women’s roles and women’s rights (Alvarez, 1994; Drogus and Gambino, 2005). What is more, the Catholic Church played a crucial role during this period, supporting—perhaps inadvertently—the empowerment of poor women.

**The Catholic Church, liberation theology and the growth of women’s movements**

The Roman Catholic bishops had been supportive of the military government and dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945), and they had welcomed the 1964 military coup against leftist president Goulart as necessary to eliminate a communist threat (Alvarez, 1994). The Catholic Church was also supportive of the governments of Castelo Branco (1964–1972) and Costa e Silva (1967–1969) (ibid.). However, there was a profound State and Church break due the Catholic Church’s reorientation after the Second Vatican Council in 1962–1965 and the Latin American bishop’s meeting in Medellín in 1968 (Htun, 2003). The Church’s doctrine and
organisational practices changed to include greater emphasis on lay participation, with a focus on a ‘preferential option for the poor’ and actions to benefit the poorest and most marginalised sectors of the population (ibid.). This was the basis of liberation theology. Many priests and bishops criticised the human rights abuses committed by the military government, and the traditional, historical allegiance between the Catholic Church and the military broke down. This meant that some churches and priests came into conflict with the government’s repressive policies and human rights abuses, whose economic policies had also added to the economic inequality. The Catholic Church formally opposed the government and served as a hub for networks of social movements struggling to bring an end to authoritarian rule (Alvarez, 1994; Htun, 2003).

The influence of liberation theology and the expansion of Catholic Ecclesiastical Base Communities (Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base), known as CEBs, during the 1960s–1980s, created the basis for the growth of many social and political movements towards the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of democratic construction (Alvarez, 1994). In Brazil, CEBs involved more than 2 million people in the early 1980s (ibid.). In addition, organised church-based popular groups sought to maintain the loyalty of parishioners by advocating for the poor in national politics, as they were also faced with high levels of competition from the growth of Protestant sects (Alvarez, 1994; Drogus, 1997; Htun, 2003). The Brazilian Worker’s Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) and workers’ unions were formed around this time, as well as women’s groups in low-income areas in the form of Mothers’ Clubs (Clubes de Mães). These women’s movements focused on women’s practical interests and demanded crèches, improved sanitary conditions, running water and access to universal healthcare (Alvarez, 1994; Drogus, 1997; Drogus and Gambino, 2005). Gender appeared to bind poor, urban women together to demand social action, and one of the most important by-products of the CEBs was the personal empowerment of poor women, which allowed for increased political awareness and a strengthened sense of citizenship (Drogus, 1997).

However, there has been debate on the differences between women’s movements and feminist movements, especially in the Global South, where Molyneux (1985) argues that both movements have been closely associated with agendas for social reform. This means that both women’s and feminist movements involve grassroots activism and claims on the State for women’s rights and social rights more generally. In noting differences between the two forms of mobilisation, Molyneux points to the importance of differentiating between women’s strategic and practical interests. Women’s practical interests derive from their needs (hence mobilising around the need for crèches, healthcare and utilities in women’s movements), while women’s strategic interests are linked to the transformation of gender relations and female emancipation (and therefore linked to the aims of feminist movements). These differences are discursively constructed within the historic origin of the movements and the different socio-economic and cultural contexts in which they have arisen (Molyneux, 1985). In Brazil, while liberation theology allowed women to carve out greater roles in the public sphere through mobilisation and demands on the State for social change, there were also attempts by the Church to squash rising gender consciousness (ibid.). This was because mobilisation for women’s needs was promoted in support of family and neighbourhood issues, which were linked to the belief in women’s unique abilities—springing from their maternity—to perceive and rectify certain kinds of problems in these spheres (Drogus, 1997). Mobilisation beyond this, into women’s political and strategic needs, was discouraged by the Church and hence the constraints inherent in women’s culturally and religiously defined gender roles ultimately limited mobilisation and change (ibid.).

The CEB-influenced women’s groups all but disappeared with the end of liberation theology, as did the CEBs themselves, and a new era of charismatic Catholicism was ushered in (Drogus
and Gambino, 2005). This form of Catholicism focused more on a personal relationship with God and less on social activism (ibid.). Pope John Paul II, elected in 1978, chose to counter liberation theology and replace its popular and participatory approach with a ‘Polish model’ that emphasised unity, hierarchy and discipline (Htun, 2003). Power was centralised in the Church; theologically conservative bishops were appointed to Latin American posts and measures were taken against outspoken proponents of liberation theology such as Gustavo Gutierrez in Peru and Leonardo Boff in Brazil (ibid.). Pope John Paul II took a very hard, conservative line on divorce, abortion and birth control, and the institutional changes implemented meant that these strict, official views were reflected at all levels of Church activity (ibid.). In Brazil, low-income women whose roles had expanded within the Church and the public sphere under liberation theology now found their growth stymied by the return of stricter, patriarchal Church control and centralised, hierarchical power returned to local male Church priests. It must be noted, though, that liberation theology had a lasting impact on the women who were involved in it and inspired the work of important figures such as Ivone Gebara, a Catholic nun and feminist theologian, and led to the creation of many NGOs for women, including the pro-abortion rights group ‘Catholics for Choice’ (Católicas pelo direito de Decidir).

Democratisation and women’s changing rights and roles

Social mobilisation in the late twentieth century was also marked by the simultaneous worldwide focus on women’s rights and women’s health (Alvarez, 1994; Htun, 2003). Htun argues that reforms in family law in Western Europe created “demonstration effects” in Brazil: the process by which political change in some countries encourages change in other countries with similar problems or traditions, through contagion, diffusion, emulation and snowballing (2003: 117). For example, the UN marked 1975 as the start of the Decade for Women leading to the creation of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the creation of the World Plan for Action against Gender-Based Violence (Uribe-Uran, 2013). Further UN and world conferences were held to open a worldwide dialogue on gender equality and the advancement of women, and both Brazilian women’s organisations and feminist organisations took an active role, particularly in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 (ibid.). In addition, in 1979, the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obliged states to eliminate all legal restrictions on women’s full and equal participation in the economy and society (Uribe-Uran, 2013). This was endorsed by the General Assembly in 1979 and ratified by Brazil in 1984. Therefore, growing international conventions and treaties on women’s rights and gender equality also influenced change in the family, society and politics in Brazil.

In 1985, when Brazil’s first democratically elected civilian president in over 20 years took office, he created a National Council on Women’s Rights (Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher, CNDM) housed within the Ministry of Justice and staffed with feminists who had strong connections to women’s social movements (Alvarez, 1994). Their activism meant that the formulation of a new constitution in 1988 allowed for the promotion of gender equality and all citizens—male and female—became constitutionally equal in rights and status for the first time (ibid.).

Since the 1980s, Brazil has experienced democratisation, liberalisation to a free-market economy, globalisation and dramatic changes in gender roles, in particular relating to the workplace. For Brazilian women, the changes have been enormous. According to a World Bank Report (2013), in 1960, only 17 per cent of women worked outside of the home, one of the lowest rates of female participation in Latin America, and women had an average of six children. In 2013, 44 per cent of women formed part of the labour force and the fertility rate
had dropped to just 1.8 children per woman, the lowest in the region apart from Cuba (ibid.). Women are ahead in education, too, with girls outperforming boys at school and representing 60 per cent of university graduates. The opening up of markets and trade and greater access to education has pushed women into work and given them increasing access to power, particularly in the form of economic independence, although the gender pay gap is still considerable (ibid.).

Initially hailed as one of the ‘BRICs’, Brazil had been seen as a potential “country of the future” (Bittencourt, 2016) as other more established economies stagnated. However, since 2015, the economy has struggled, in part due to massive corruption scandals, notably at Petrobras, the state petrol company, which revealed that the equivalent of billions of US dollars were being diverted into private funds (ibid.). Although not found to have taken part in the scandal, ex-President Dilma Rousseff was impeached and accused of economic mismanagement. She was replaced by the Vice President Michel Temer, who formed an all-white, all-male government, causing social movement groups to express concern about a ‘retrocession of rights’ for women and minority groups (Católicas Pelo Direito de Decidir, 2017). During his fairly brief stint in office (2016–2018), Temer gained strong support from the Evangelical lobby, mirroring an international growing trend towards religious conservatism in politics, as witnessed in countries such as the US, Turkey and Russia, where women have also been experiencing a retrocession of rights. In the next section, I examine the growth of Evangelical Protestantism in Brazil and the impact of growing religious conservatism on women’s rights.

Women and the growth of Evangelical Protestantism

Protestantism arrived in Brazil in 1822 in the form of Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-Day Adventists, Anglicans, Methodists and Congregationalists, who all established churches during the first waves of foreign immigration when Brazil gained independence from the Portuguese Crown (Medcalf, 1987). However, at this time, Catholicism had become a national symbol and to be Brazilian was to be Catholic, with conversion to any other religion or form of Christianity seen as a rejection of national heritage and culture (ibid.). Therefore, Catholicism held a religious monopoly in Brazil since its colonisation until well into the twentieth century (Medcalf, 1987). Yet, in one of Latin America’s most dramatic demographic shifts, Brazilian Protestants increased from 6.6 per cent of the population in 1980 to 31 per cent of the population in 2016, and the majority of these Protestants are Pentecostal (Datafolha, 2016). Catholicism dropped to around 50 per cent in 2016; there are also small percentages of adherents to the Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda, as well as Kardecists and Spiritualists (ibid.). Atheists only form approximately 14 per cent of the population (ibid.), but Brazil can now claim to be one of the world’s largest Catholic and Evangelical Protestant nations simultaneously.

Initially, the growth in Evangelical Protestantism was fuelled predominantly by the conversion of working class, low-income women from urban suburbs. Early theorists noted that Evangelical conversion is sometimes viewed as a strategy for dealing with poverty (Rostas and Droogers, 1993; Stoll, 1990), as well as being a new form of social organisation that increases physical and economic security (Stoll, 1990) and gives converts a sense of empowerment (Rostas and Droogers, 1993). For women, the strong family focus reorients the man towards the feminine goals of family, entailing a certain ‘domestication’ of men (Brusco, 1995), and activities such as drinking, smoking, gambling and extramarital sexual relations are forbidden. However, the focus on female submission to male headship means that Evangelical Protestant Churches certainly do not set out to undermine dominant gender patterns and gendered inequality. Pentecostalism’s Prosperity Theology—the focus on financial success—is attractive to many and more recently, conversion to Evangelical Protestantism has grown in popularity among other
classes with the number of Evangelical Protestants predicted to overtake the number of Catholics by 2032 (Zylberkan, 2020).

**Pentecostals in politics**

Evangelical Protestant groups—relatively diverse and not always representing a united front—have taken clear aim at political power and have linked themselves to political parties in various ideological, financial and structural ways. The powerful United Church Kingdom of God (UCKG) (Igreja Universal Reino de Deus, IURD), positioned itself as strongly favourable to Dilma Rousseff’s candidacy in 2014, although they distanced themselves from her during her impeachment in 2015. Since then, both Edir Macedo, leader of UCKG, and Silas Malafaia, leader of the Assembly of God Church, have shown support for Bolsonaro, whose “rhetoric of loss” closely echoes their own (Fachin, 2019). The rhetoric of loss is based on the idea of a return to order, safety and unity, a return to something that has been lost and most Evangelical Protestant churches lament the loss of so-called traditional notions of gender and sexuality.

The Evangelical lobby, also colloquially known as the ‘BBB’ lobby, referring to the ‘bullets, bibles and bulls’ (Bala, Biblia e Boi) from which many integrants earn their money, campaigns forcefully to stop the inclusion of discussions on gender and sexuality in education, highlighting how supposedly secular education is influenced by religious organisations. For example, material in the form of pamphlets, books and videos were produced for schools by the Ministry of Education and LGBT activists, aimed at reducing homophobia in schools (Projeto Escola Sem Homofobia). However, in 2010, Catholic and Evangelical lobbies dubbed it the ‘gay-kit’, arguing that it was an attack on families, was against God’s will and encouraged children to become gay (Vital and Lopes, 2013). Their campaign was successful, and schools were forced to remove the material. Later, in 2016, states across the country were asked to produce their ‘Municipal Education Plans’. In the run-up to the creation of the plans, Catholic and Evangelical lobbies argued strongly against the inclusion of ‘gender ideology’ and any issues related to gender equality or sexuality11 (Boehm, 2017). These conservative Christian lobbies claimed that school was not the place to discuss questions of gender, and their campaign was successful: across the country, the issues of gender and sexuality have been left out of the education plans and therefore the subjects are not addressed in school (ibid.).

Yet Brazil’s shockingly high levels of VAW, racial abuse, sexual assault, femicide, violence against the LGBT community (Ipea & PBSP, 2019) and its leading world ranking in the murder of transgender people (TGEU, 2016) suggest that gender and sexuality most certainly do need to be talked about, especially as most of these are forms of gender-based violence (GBV), linked to power inequalities based on ideas surrounding gender roles (UN, 1993). Moreover, these indices of violence grew in 2018 against the backdrop of Bolsonaro’s incendiary election campaign, suggesting that the increase in inflammatory and divisive rhetoric has led to increased polarisation and violence (Phillips, 2019). Yet important, conservative Christian, governmental figures such as Damares Alves reject discussions of gender and even the concept of gender equality itself. Alves conversely blames gender equality for inciting violence against women and girls, saying, “As soon as you say that girls and boys are equal, boys will think: she’s equal, therefore she can take a beating. No, girls are different from boys. Let’s treat girl like princesses and boys like princes” (Exame, 2019). This position could mean that indices of GBV will continue to rise, putting the lives of many women and the LGBT and transgender communities at risk. This is despite the creation of the Maria da Penha Law (11.340) in 2006, which criminalised domestic violence for the first time, and the Femicide Law (13.104) in 2015, which recognised the specific nature of killing of women based on their sex.12
In addition, while abortion is illegal under the penal code except in cases of rape, to save a mother’s life, and in cases of anencephaly, the Evangelical lobby have promoted the ‘Unborn Statute’ (Estatuto de Nascituro), which defines life as beginning from the moment of conception. The bill, which has yet to be fully approved, includes a stipend for rape victims in order to encourage them to keep the child. The small amount of money (R$85 per month, approx. US$20) is to be paid by the rapist, or by the state if the rapist’s guilt is not proven or until he is found. Critics call it the ‘Rape Grant’ (bolsa estupro) and argue that it sends the message that rape is acceptable as long as men pay for it afterwards, thereby overlooking the sexual abuse of women, and forces victims into a long-term relationship of financial dependence on the rapist (Lindner, Marini and Lima, 2018). The statute is of fundamental importance because should it go through, the legalisation of abortion will become virtually impossible and, clearly, instances in which legal abortion should be obtainable are being eroded. On the other hand, despite numerous illegal, backstreet abortions that leave many women in need of medical help and in fear of prosecution (Orozco, 2009), the legalisation of abortion is largely unpopular in Brazil among both men and women, who often cite religious grounds as a reason for their opposition.

Women’s rights are therefore clearly negatively impacted by the growth of conservative Evangelical Protestantism. Brazil has one of the largest feminist movements of Latin America, and transnational movements such as ‘SlutWalk’ or the #MeToo movement have found fertile ground. However, feminist ideals have on the whole tended to remain in the small realm of the whiter, richer, middle to upper class, while the majority of low-income, darker-skinned working class, who experience low levels of education, remain more conservative, both socially and religiously. Moreover, Pentecostal churches tend to be the most proactive organisations working in low-income areas, often attempting to support women’s needs, but within a conservative gender-traditional framework.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the role of the state, the role of the Catholic Church and the growth of Evangelical Protestantism in shaping gender roles and relations, from colonisation to the present day. In addition, I have demonstrated how the organisation and structure of gender have also been influenced by changing political and socio-economic climates, as well as national and international women’s and feminist movements and changing global gender norms, which have led to both growth and retrogression of women’s rights. During the colonial period, power and control over women and their bodies was symbolically, structurally and normatively concentrated in patriarchal and hierarchical institutions, which also had strong racial and class-based intersections. Liberalism and secularisation led to change while maintaining patriarchal control over women, but the growth of social, faith-based and feminist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries improved women’s rights, also creating an important social fabric within a burgeoning democracy. Moreover, changing Church-State relations under military government as well as the advent of Catholic liberation theology had contradictory effects on female emancipation. However, while feminists helped to push forward women’s strategic gains, such as constitutional equality between the sexes in 1988, conservative Christian voices—both Catholic and Pentecostal—continue to undermine gender equality by maintaining a strong focus on men’s and women’s biological roles.

A historical perspective therefore highlights the ways in which debates over gender have been at the heart of Brazilian society since its inception, representing continuity rather than change, in present-day polemics. Churches and faith-based organisations clearly represent important forms of support for many Brazilian women who face a multitude of struggles,
including poverty and high levels of violence. On the other hand, as Brazil’s growing Christian fundamentalism seeks to deny the social construction of gender, advancements in women’s rights are stymied, while some women and those whose gendered identities or relationships do not conform to so-called traditional ones grow ever more vulnerable to Brazil’s high levels of male violence. Gender is a fundamental category of social organisation and a major means by which social relations and (in)equality are structured, and this chapter demonstrates that the role of religion and religious institutions will continue to play a pivotal role at the heart of these debates.

Notes

1 See for example Amnesty International (2020).
2 Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal doctrines are very similar, although Pentecostals place stronger emphasis on gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, miracles and divine healing. Therefore all Pentecostals are Evangelical, although not all Evangelicals are Pentecostal (Pew Forum, 2006). In Brazil, all non-Catholics are known as and refer to themselves as Evangélicos (Evangelicals), although Pentecostals form the largest and fastest-growing group of Protestants (Datafolha, 2016).
3 Colonial Brazil comprises a 315-year period beginning in 1500 with the arrival of the Portuguese, until 1815, when Brazil became a kingdom with Portugal, known as the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves (Myscofski, 2013).
4 VAW includes physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state in any situation, within spousal or non-spousal relations and violence committed at home, work, within institutions or in public (UN, 1993).
5 Brazil declared its independence from Portugal and became the Empire of Brazil in 1822.
6 The Napoleonic Code is the French civil code established in 1804. Formed during and after the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), it was designed to replace patchwork feudal laws through clearly written, accessible law. It heavily influenced the law of many countries around the world, especially in Latin America (Lobingier, 1918).
7 CEBs were a form of de-centralised church groups formed by community members which functioned relatively independently of official Church structure and priest leadership (Drogus, 1997).
8 CEDAW carries legal weight in signatory countries, meaning that citizens can file suits in national courts on the grounds that their rights have been violated under CEDAW, and judges can make decisions based on CEDAW in addition to or instead of local laws (Htun, 2003).
9 Developing countries with fast-growing economies and growing international influence (Brazil, Russia, India, China).
10 Since Trump’s ascension to the US presidency in 2016, funding to women’s health centres (e.g. Planned Parenthood) which support abortion has been limited or cut (Davis, 2017). In addition, days after being sworn in, Trump signed the Mexico City Policy, also known as the ‘Global Gag Rule’ which blocks US funding from going to any NGO around the world that provides abortion counselling, even if the money is not used for abortion-related services (Davis, 2017). These moves have been strongly supported by fundamentalist Christian groups. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a conservative Islamist, abolished the Women’s Ministry in 2014, replacing it with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies (similar to moves by ex-President Temer in Brazil) and declared that men and women were not equal. In 2016, Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) tried to amend the penal code to make it possible for men who rape girls under 18 to be exonerated if they marry their victims; they also tried to reduce the alimony payments a divorced man must make to his wife; and mandate a wife—even one who is a victim of domestic violence—go through a government ‘reconciliation process’ before leaving her husband (Asquith and Fairweather, 2017). Although these measures did not pass, the recent constitutional changes could imply that legislation such as this will pass more easily (Zillman, 2017). In addition, in Russia, Putin has approved legal changes that decriminalise some forms of domestic violence, where according to some estimates, a woman dies every 40 minutes from domestic abuse. The amendment makes ‘moderate’ violence within families (described as beatings that result in bruising or bleeding but not broken bones) an administrative rather than a criminal offence, punishable by 15 days in prison or a fine, if it does not happen more than once a year. Previously, this carried a maximum jail sentence of two years (Walker, 2017).
While most Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal churches are understood to have conservative views on gender relations, this position is also similar within the Catholic Church. Pope Francis has warned that "gender theory" is a part of a "global war" against traditional marriage and family values and warned against the "ideological colonisation" of developing countries by the West (Osbourne, 2016).

Catholic and Evangelical Protestant lobbies refused to support the law unless the word 'sex' was used instead of 'gender'.

Anencephaly is the absence of a major portion of the brain, skull and scalp that occurs during embryonic development. It is a cephalic disorder that results from a neural tube defect that occurs when the rostral (head) end of the neural tube fails to close, usually between the 23rd and 26th day following conception (CDC, 2018).

References


Women, religion and the state


