BRAZILIAN FEMINIST RESPONSES TO ONLINE HATE SPEECH:

SEEING ONLINE VIOLENCE THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Horacio Sívori
Lorena Mochel

Introduction

Brazilian women have always had a prominent role in global feminist mobilisations. Over the past decade, street mobilisations such as the *Marcha das Vadias* (Slut Walk)[1] and hashtags such as "*Chega de fiu fiu*" (No more catcalling) and "*Meu primeiro assédio*" (My first harassment) generated intense engagement and increased the visibility of gender-based violence in its variety of forms.[2] That engagement and visibility came to include, in 2018, the "*Ele Não*" (Not Him) movement against presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, in the aftermath of the political assassination of Rio de Janeiro Councilwoman Marielle Franco, attributed to local militias with ostensive ties to the Bolsonaro family.
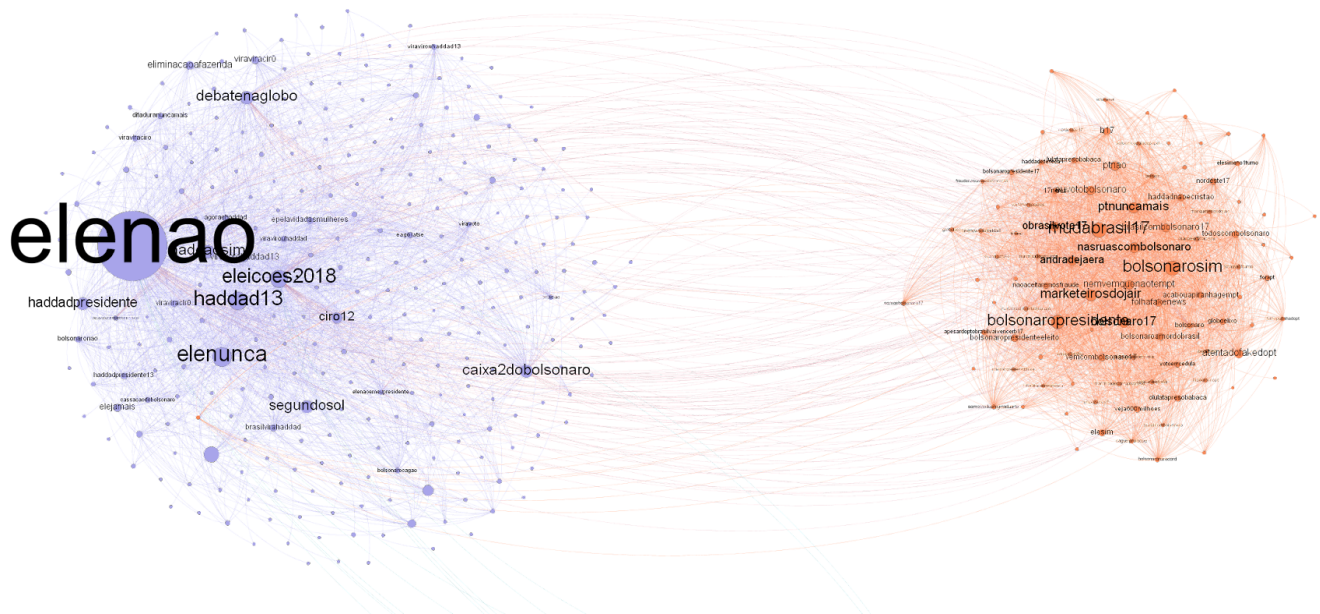
As we noted in an earlier report, the execution of Marielle, a Black, feminist, bisexual woman raised in a favela and a movement leader, and of her driver Anderson Gomes on 14 March 2018, marked a turning point in public understandings of political violence. That crime also revealed, as we noted:

> [T]he role of gender, sexuality, race and class in the targeting of a victim. In [its] aftermath, while street protests, in mourning, demanded a thorough investigation, offensive memes and factoids circulated on social media disputing police and press reports and attacking [Marielle's] reputation. The slogan Ele Não ("Not Him") condensed Bolsonaro's deadly misogyny, authoritarianism and disrespect for institutions. [At that time] on Twitter, #EleNão and #EleNunca *(Not Him, Not Ever)*, promoted by the Women United Against Bolsonaro movement gained traction.[3]

[1] Gomes, C., & Sorj, B. (2014). Corpo, geração e identidade: A Marcha das Vadias no Brasil. *Sociedade e Estado, 29(2)*. https://www.scielo.br/j/se/a/M3nBJJtyMYm4qd4TQdGpryR/?format=pdf&lang=pt

[2] Almeida, H. B. (2019). From shame to visibility: Hashtag feminism and sexual violence in Brazil. *Sexualidad Salud y Sociedad - Revista Latinoamericana, 33*, 19-41. https://www.scielo.br/j/sess/a/BhrLr74htzxgLK8BVtNW49z/?format=pdf&lang=en

[3] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). *Anti-rights discourse in Brazilian social media digital networks: Violence and sex politics.* CLAM & APC. https://firn.genderit.org/research/anti-rights-discourse-brazilian-social-media-digital-networks-violence-and-sex-politics; Néris, N., Valente, M., Cruz, F. B. C., & Oliva, T. (2019). *Outras Vozes: Gênero, raça, classe e sexualidade nas eleições de 2018.* InternetLab. https://www.internetlab.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/OutrasVozes_2018.pdf

Twitter *"elenao"* user-hashtag network.[4] The graph also shows the pro-Bolsonaro *"ele sim"* (yes him) hashtag in response.

It is our hypothesis that the brutality of Marielle's assassination operated as a critical event[5] in the transformation of feminist debates on online gender-based violence in Brazil. It brought to the centre of the national political stage a dimension already raised by feminist voices in debates on memory and justice in relation to victims of state violence: the gendered character of political violence. "That image of extermination inhabits us all," one member of a transfeminist dyke editorial collective said in a 2020 online Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights/Feminist Internet Research Network (CLAM/FIRN) seminar, recorded on YouTube,[6] recalling Marielle's political assassination as a turning point in Brazilian feminist mobilisations.

All acts of gender, sexuality or race-based violence are essentially political, as they publicly express a will to power. Their intention is to punish subjects for not conforming to their subordinate role, "to show them their place," or to eliminate identities, behaviours and expressions considered unnatural.[7] However, broader and more restricted definitions of hate speech on the one hand, and of political violence on the other, reveal conceptual distinctions and articulations between, and the overlap with, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and racism.

[4] Sívori, H., et al. (2020). *Anti-Feminist and Anti-LGBT Discourse Networks in Brazil: qualifying social media engagement around the 2018 presidential election*. SMART Data Sprint 2020. Digital Methods: theory-practice-critique. Project Report. https://smart.inovamedialab.org/2020-digital-methods

[5] Das, V. (2006). *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3SZ-46QisI&t=5148s

[7] Gómez, M. M. (2006). Usos jerárquicos y excluyentes de la violencia. In C. Motta & L. Cabal (Eds.), *Más Allá del Derecho: Género y Justicia en América Latina*. Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, CESO, Centro de Derechos Reproductivos, Red Alas.

The mobilisations in response to Marielle Franco's assassination help explain the development of a frame by feminists in Brazil and elsewhere that interprets political violence in the light of the articulation of gender, race and sexuality and gender expression. Acts of public violence committed against Black women and queer and Indigenous people who occupy positions in the institutional political field are understood not only as motivated by partisan ideology, but predominantly marked those intersectionalities. That intersectional understanding also frames the interpretation of, and responses to, state-sponsored violence against the largely racialised population of Indigenous, Black, quilombola, landless peasant, working class, homeless and favela-dwellers. We argue that those understandings and responses have been shaped by decades of feminist struggle against gender-based violence. Significant for those struggles have been the categories used for the naming different forms of online violence.

In view of their becoming a political issue *tout court*, we set to explore the changing meanings of those acts as they also came to be framed as an intersectional feminist issue. For that purpose, in this article, we consider public responses to online hate speech, as well as other forms of online gender and sexuality-based violence in Brazilian social media since the year of Bolsonaro's election as president. We first discuss how issues of gender and sexuality-based online violence and of hate speech have been addressed in internet regulation debates in Brazil.

Then, to map the public meanings of this issue, we take a two-pronged approach: from our empirical exploration, we explored narratives addressing episodes of violence against women and LGBT+ people mobilised among what we may call contemporary Brazilian feminist and queer online counterpublics[8] in social media. Finally, based on our literature review, we bring the categories created to address online violence in research reports, toolkits and other publications by feminist and LGBTIQ+ civil society organisations. In our analysis, we elicit how, from the point of view of feminist and queer social and political actors with different forms of public engagement, race, gender, sexual orientation and other markers of oppression shape digital dynamics and vice-versa.

---

[8] Friedman, E. J. (2017). *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America.* Oakland: University of California Press.

Violence in internet regulation debates

> *"* **The consequences of these great nineteenth-century moral paroxysms are still with us. They have left a deep imprint on attitudes about sex, medical practice, child-rearing, parental anxieties, police conduct, and sex law (...) The notion that sex per se is harmful to the young has been chiseled into extensive social and legal structures designed to insulate minors from sexual knowledge and experience.[9]** *"*

Gayle Rubin's remarks, originally proffered in 1982, not only remind us of how sexual morality as a form of control has persisted in what she called "new attitudes". Her reference to the role of medicine, education and police control also pinpoints the modern (colonial) discursive framework that will be called upon once and again by conservative pastors, politicians and other moral entrepreneurs to mobilise moral anxieties over sexuality. Jeffrey Weeks identified those fears as the engine of sexual politics, that is, the threats and anxieties that shaped the political moment of sex in the 20th century.[10] Moral panics are still relevant in order to grasp current motivations for violence against LGBT+ persons and the role of reactionary politics as the milieu where that violence arises.

In a report for APC's EROTICS research project, over a decade ago,[11] we identified a moral panic about online child sexual abuse as the main public concern in early Brazilian parliamentary debates about internet regulation.[12] According to Carolina Parreiras,[13] a few years after, child pornography and digital piracy had already become the main issues that shaped public discourse and set legal standards on digital security and internet regulation in the country. Beatriz Accioly Lins,[14] in turn, read popular and experts' anxiety over the leak of "nudes" on the internet as

[9] Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Pandora Press.

[10] Weeks, J. (1977). *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. London: Quartet.

[11] Corrêa, S., et al. (2011). Internet regulation and sexual politics in Brazil. In Kee, J. (Ed.), *EROTICS: Sex, rights and the internet*. APC. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/EROTICS_0.pdf

[12] Lowenkron, L. (2010). Abuso sexual infantil, exploração sexual de crianças, pedofilia: diferentes nomes, diferentes problemas? *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad - Revista Latinoamericana, 5*, 9-29. https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/SexualidadSaludySociedad/article/view/394/804

[13] Parreiras, C. (2015). *Altporn, corpos, categorias, espaços e redes: um estudo etnográfico sobre pornografia online*. PhD Thesis, State University of Campinas, São Paulo.

[14] Lins, B. A. (2019). *Caiu na rede: mulheres, tecnologias e direitos entre nudes e (possíveis) vazamentos*. PhD Thesis. University of São Paulo.

a trigger for contemporary forms of blaming women for their sexuality. Intriguingly over the same period, "hashtag feminism" has arguably transformed the ways women's movements organise, communicate and represent themselves in the Brazilian public arena.[15]

In turn, increasingly over the successive electoral periods since 2015, communications activists and experts have highlighted two issues: digital security and the role of digital communications in political campaigning. As we claimed in our earlier FIRN report,[16] among ultra-conservatives, shameless slander, overt homophobia, misogyny and racism operate as a primary political language. The Responsibility for Internet Freedom and Transparency Bill (PL 2630/20), better known as the "Fake News Bill",[17] has transited the Brazilian Congress since 2020. That bill also constitutes a so far unsuccessful attempt to address the issue of online hate speech.

According to Brazilian anthropologist Leticia Cesarino,[18] in the context of a "crisis of confidence" that affects all forms of public representation, undermining the institutionality of science, democratic debate and the rule of law, the "neoliberal architecture of digital media" has favoured what the author has termed as a sort of "digital populism," whereby political antagonism is exacerbated by "the performative power of social media to remake political identities."[19] This form of political engagement and movement-making was instrumental to Bolsonaro's election as president in 2018 and has contributed to the transformation of the Brazilian social media sphere into an environment increasingly hostile toward minorities and feminist and LGBT+ activists in particular.

Arguably, anti-gender panics have been instrumental to a deep tilt towards the far right across the West, and in the Americas in particular.[20]

[15] Gomes, C., & Sorj, B. (2014). Op. cit.
Ferreira, C. B. (2015). Feminisms on the web: Lines and forms of action in contemporary feminist debate. *Cadernos Pagu (44)*, 199-228. https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/cadpagu/article/view/8637329/5098;
Piscitelli, A. (2017). "#queroviajarsozinhasemmedo": New registers of the relations between tourism, gender and violence in Brazil. *Cadernos Pagu (50)*. https://www.scielo.br/j/cpa/a/LyQtLJcG7mMd6qB6fbN9QFR/?format=pdf&lang=en;
Almeida. (2019). Op. cit.

[16] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). Op. cit.

[17] Brasil, Câmara dos Deputados. (2020). Projeto de Lei PL 2630/2020 e seus apensados. https://www.camara.leg.br/propostas-legislativas/2256735

[18] Cesarino, L. (2021). Pós-Verdade e a Crise do Sistema de Peritos: uma explicação cibernética. *Ilha - Revista de Antropologia*, 23(1), 73-96. https://periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/ilha/article/view/75630/45501

[19] Cesarino, L. (2020, 14 September). When Brazil's Voters Became Followers. *Anthropology News*. https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/when-brazils-voters-became-followers-2/

[20] Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. Eds (2018). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against Equality*. Lanham MD, Rowman & Littlefield. Corrêa, S. Ed. *Anti-Gender politics in Latin America. Country Case Studies Summaries* Rio de Janeiro: ABIA, 2020, 47-65, http://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf

Right-wing populists mobilise anti-gender discourse to construe feminist and LGBT+ people as enemies of "nation" and "family". Social media platforms have provided an effective medium for mobilising misogyny and homo-lesbo-transphobia as an increasingly legitimate political language. At the receiver's end of that hostility, hate speech and prejudice condemn the status of minorities as morally inferior, producing forms of material and symbolic violence that reveal the workings of their oppression.

In their literature review for APC's mapping of research on gender and digital technology, Anri van der Spuy and Namita Aavriti claim that "[i]n the 2000s, the work carried out online by feminist groups and women's movements on forms of online gender-based violence was responsible for shifting the focus away from looking only at the emancipatory potential of technology."[21] In the context of a new rise of anti-gender politics as unbound hostility against feminism, LGBT+ identities and sexual and reproductive rights, those mobilisations took place originally as responses to online and offline gender-based violence, read as seamlessly connected. In this article, we turn to recent Brazilian feminist research on gender and sexuality-based violence and digital technologies to address the link between those politics, that public hostility, and the way gender and sexuality-based violence is understood and conceptualised by Brazilian feminist and queer activist researchers. We ask, more specifically, how those conceptions have been transformed by the alliances, disputes, displacements and arrangements taking place after 2018.

In line with Sonia Álvarez's insights about creation of a diverse yet somewhat unified "discursive field of action" of Latin American feminist activism,[22] we explored how Brazilian women's queer feminist, transfeminist, hashtag feminist voices and bodies are producing knowledge about the role of gender, sexuality, race, class in violence against women and LGBT+ on digital media. In an earlier report we advanced a hypothesis about the constitutive role of political disputes (namely the 2018 and 2020 electoral processes and the governmental response to the new coronavirus pandemic) with regard to the hostility against feminists and LGBT+ that we documented.[23] That led us to further interrogate that connection,

[21] Van der Spuy, A., & Aavriti, N. (2018). *Mapping research in gender and digital technology*. Association for Progressive Communications. https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/mapping-research-gender-and-digital-technology

[22] Álvarez, S. (2014). Para além da sociedade civil: reflexões sobre o campo feminista. *Cadernos Pagu, 43*, 13-56. https://www.scielo.br/j/cpa/a/9Y7dMKrDrFSGDyCJLW45Gpw/?format=pdf&lang=pt

[23] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). Op. cit.

captured by a broad definition of gender and sexuality-based political violence. More specifically, within that perspective, in this article we survey intersectional understandings of misogyny and LGBT+phobia in the same period.

After verifying a gap in academic research on online gender and sexuality-based violence about the role of disputes in the public sphere as a motivation for that type of violence, we chose to concentrate on research and interventions by activist networks and organisations. Our selection privileged document sources authored or sponsored by Brazilian civil society organisations, in the form of reports, guides, brochures and dossiers. In order to address the larger issue of the role of violence and technology in Brazilian feminist and queer contemporary mobilisations, our main guiding questions are: how is intersectionality in online violence experienced and conceived; and in what ways the visibility and public recognition recently achieved by Black women and trans persons have shaped emerging forms of, and responses to, online violence.

From "hate speech" to "political violence"

Communication law scholarship and policy debates have addressed current gaps in the constitutional definitions of online hate speech, whether it should be protected by the principle of freedom of expression, how context, intention and medium should weigh in its characterisation as such, who should be responsible for the protection of its victims, and by what legal means. The transnational reach of social media platforms and their configuration as global corporations point to the limitations of national legal frameworks and to the challenge of making them accountable to international human rights laws.[24] As highlighted by Brazilian sociologist and legal scholar Yasmin Curzi in her entry on hate speech for a Glossary of Platform Law, for some scholars and social movements, "the debate around hate speech should be centered on how some groups in society are being historically silenced and are powerless against several violations – such as women, non-white men, and other minorities."[25]

[24] Silva, B. M. (2020). Discurso de ódio nas normativas transnacionais de empresas de mídias sociais: Uma abordagem acerca das possibilidades da autorregulação regulada. *Brazilian Journal of International Relations, 9*(2), 406-433.
[25] Curzi, Y. (2021). Hate Speech. In L. Belli, N. Zingales, & Y. Curzi (Eds.), *Glossary of Platform Law and Policy Terms.* Rio de Janeiro: FGV Direito Rio. https://hdl.handle.net/10438/31365

The evidence about online injurious speech against feminists and LGBT+ persons gathered in our earlier report reveals such imbalance.[26] As Judith Butler claims in her indispensable volume *Excitable Speech*,[27] drawing from J. L. Austin's speech act theory,[28] our bodies and identities are constituted by language. The necessary act of naming may paradoxically insult, diminish, destroy. This is in effect the case in online hate speech. In interviews conducted for this research, narratives showed no distinction or emphasised a conceptual continuum between the injury performed against them on social media platforms based on their gender, sexuality, race and feminist politics, and any offline version of themselves and how their body felt.

In our research, political violence serves as a frame of reference for a reflection about specific forms of politicisation adopted by feminist agendas in Brazil. However, such perspective does not constitute, in turn, the establishment of a hierarchy between different types of violence, but interrogates aspects, dimensions and nuances that emerge in feminist debates, as well as a confluence of interests and an opportunity to qualify our approach to this complexity. In that vein, this article addresses the general issue of how contemporary Brazilian feminisms conceive online gender-based violence; what shifts and transformations occurred in the public meanings of this category; and related to what mobilisations.

Methods

Our previous report focused on online episodes that illustrate social media engagement in response to homophobic hate speech by or attributed to Bolsonaro. In an online survey and subsequent interviews, our research also explored the reception of, and responses to, public hostility against feminists and LGTB+ persons.[29] In this paper we further interrogate the intersectional nature of that sort of online violence. Some attacks, particularly those against public figures, in turn prompted

[26] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). Op. cit.
[27] Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative.* New York: Routledge.
[28] Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
[29] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). Op. cit.

online mobilisation in defence and vindication of feminist and queer victims of hate speech. A majority of those episodes, since the year of Bolsonaro's election, took place on Instagram and Twitter and had emerged in our online ethnography of feminist, queer and anti-gender networks during that period. As an illustration, we briefly discuss two cases that show changes in the public meanings of online gender-based violence, collectively produced by public figures, social organisations and social media users who engage social media as feminist and queer-identified individuals and allies.

We selected the case of Lola Aronovich, a university professor of Argentine origin residing in northeastern Brazil, known for her feminist blog *"Escreva Lola Escreva"* (Write Lola Write), created in 2008.[30] "Native of the internet", her case as victim of a defamation campaign on and offline, as well as of offline death threats, is emblematic of the connections between, and evolving understandings of, anti-feminist hate speech and other forms of online violence against women in Brazil. Her resistance inspired the passing of Federal Act 13.642/2018, the "Lola Aronovich Law" in 2018,[31] enabling the Federal Police to investigate the online dissemination of misogynous content. Our second case is about Benny Briolly, a trans councilwoman in the city of Niteroi, State of Rio de Janeiro, who in 2022 became the target of a hate campaign because of her defence of Afro-Brazilian religion. Her case, characterised as one of religious racism and transphobia, is also a story of online community mobilisation for the survival of victims of such dehumanising violence.

After verifying the scarcity of references to the public sphere disputes (other than those related to the legal internet regulation framework) in academic research on online gender-based violence, we chose to explore the production and circulation of data related to this category in feminist productions that introduce an intersectional perspective, i.e., one that articulates race and sexuality in their gender analysis. To elicit the concepts and practices that guide civil society responses to online violence, we conducted an online mapping and review exercise. We started with online searches carried out on the websites, blogs and platform profiles maintained by feminist organisations, networks and collectives that invest in issues of digital media and information and communication technologies.

[30] https://escrevalolaescreva.blogspot.com/
[31] https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/lei/2018/lei-13642-3-abril-2018-786403-publicacaooriginal-155161-pl.html

The field of Brazilian feminist news agencies and alternative media is vast and there are many research centres, organisations and networks. Several of them generate data on the internet as their priority, in perspectives whose scope they identify as feminist or relative to gender, LGTB+ or other descriptors of sexual diversity. Feminist hashtags and campaigns during this period also guided our collection of sources. This is the case of the Marielle Franco Institute, created after the assassination of the Rio de Janeiro councilwoman. This collective is representative of a form of public intervention that has been gaining ground in the digital feminist field of action, that is, the production of data on violence that articulates gender to other social markers of difference, in particular race, class and sexuality.

This flow led us to a scope of feminist perspectives that share a common investment in intersectional analyses. This focus allowed us, in turn, to interrogate the variety of classifications, themes and intersectionalities addressed in the documents selected, that is, how different feminisms operating in the digital field generate specific classifications. To privilege the diversity with that field, we took into account criteria of sexual identity, gender expression, race/colour and regional representation within Brazil.[32]

Our corpus of literature is made of research reports, brochures, guides and dossiers located by search using isolated terms and further combining descriptors such as "violence", "LGBTphobia" and "digital", among other variations. We noticed that some websites had pre-set combinations of some of our chosen categories, alerting us about their relevance in popular searches or the organisation's priorities. That was the case with "online gender violence", "domestic violence", "family violence", "sexual violence", "femicide", "racism" and "LGBTphobia". Although other contents of the websites, blogs and profiles visited were not within our analytical scope, their study can provide insights about emerging mobilisations within this feminist "counterpublic" or "discursive field of action". This fact is no less relevant, insofar as it suggests the consolidation of an agenda of (broadly defined) feminist engagement with digital technologies. Nevertheless, our specific aim is to grasp the ways in which online violence is discussed in documents produced by feminist and LGBT+ mobilisations on the intersection of gender, race and sexuality in digital technologies.

---

[32] See a list of the selected sources at the end of this article.

Our final selection included documents that address violence against feminists and LGBTphobia over the period between 2018 and 2022. Those found explored two main thematic cores: elections and digital security. This core, in turn, does not only address events involving candidates for public office, although most of the works take that approach. We acknowledge that, like in all research, our choice of actors and search categories has limitations. Our approach, in turn, followed the pathways developed by actors in the field of Brazilian feminist internet research, as represented in our corpus, to generate knowledge about gender, sexuality, race and violence in digital technologies.

In general, as the authors of one of the reports in our corpus of analysis indicate, public data on LGBT+ people is scarce in the country, and historically based on "media analysis and information gathered mainly by means of network support and contacts."[33] We corroborate that report's argument that the lack of a larger, better qualified body of quantitative data on the LGBT+ population in Brazil complicates the selection criteria for the research target.[34] Samples are often assembled either by indirect means or by intentional selection, as was the case with our own online survey for this and earlier APC research partnerships.[35] However, it is worth mentioning that official reports produced by the federal government and international organizations are often based on data gathered by those same Brazilian feminist and LGBT+ activist organisations and collectives.[36]

Our initial searches started from previously cited sources and our own contact networks, Google, some academic platforms and cross-references in the files we catalogued. At a second moment, for the direct search of documents, we selected the platform profiles and websites of civil society organisations or NGOs and institutes. We excluded results corresponding to journalistic reports, as well as documents that were not authored by the organisation hosting it in their website or blog, or originally produced outside the period before Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaign. Another exclusion criterion was for documents that, despite

[33] Gênero e Número. (2021). *Violência contra LGBT+s nos contextos eleitoral e pós-eleitoral.* http://violencialgbt.com.br/dados/190321_relatorio_LGBT_V1.pdf

[34] Carrara, S., & Ramos, S. (2005). *Política, direitos, violência e homossexualidade. Pesquisa 9a Parada do Orgulho GLBT - Rio 2004.* Rio de Janeiro: CEPESC. http://www.clam.org.br/uploads/arquivo/paradasp_2005.pdf

[35] Sívori, H. F., & Zilli, B. (2017). Sexuality and the internet: 2017 survey findings. In M. Palumbo, & D. S. Sienra (Eds.), *EROTICS Global Survey 2017: Sexuality, rights and internet regulations.* https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/erotics-global-survey-2017-sexuality-rights-and-internet-regulations

[36] In 2022, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) included a field for sexual orientation for the first time in its household survey forms.

using the term "digital" or mentioning information and communication technologies, did not address them in their analysis.

Correspondences addressing our particular analytical interest in LGBT-phobia online emerged among organisations whose projects are carried out individually or in coalition with other groups. The denominations and formats in which research results are shared and interventions are conceived are varied. Dissemination takes place mostly through their networks and as the result of partnerships with national and international feminist and human rights organisations. Despite their diversity, feminist and LGBT+ data and mobilisations are concentrated in the south and southeast, the more urban, richest regions of Brazil. As the critique by Black, lesbian, queer and mestizo feminist thought to the universality of the category "woman",[37] which came to be known as intersectionality,[38] has shown, the analysis of how differences become inequalities must address social class as one among other articulators of violence.[39]

The intersectional tale of online gender-based violence against feminist and queer public figures

Write Lola, Write

As part of our research project, in late 2020, we conducted in-depth interviews over Zoom with volunteers, on digital engagement, violence and the internet. All interviewees narrated an overwhelming feeling of discomfort and helplessness with regard to verbal violence and hostility against feminists and queers, which had worsened since the 2018 general election and into the COVID-19 pandemic. The electoral mobilisation of anti-gender discourse and sex panics seemed as intense as before

[37] Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute; Davis, A. (1981). *Women, race and class.* APA, 6th edition.
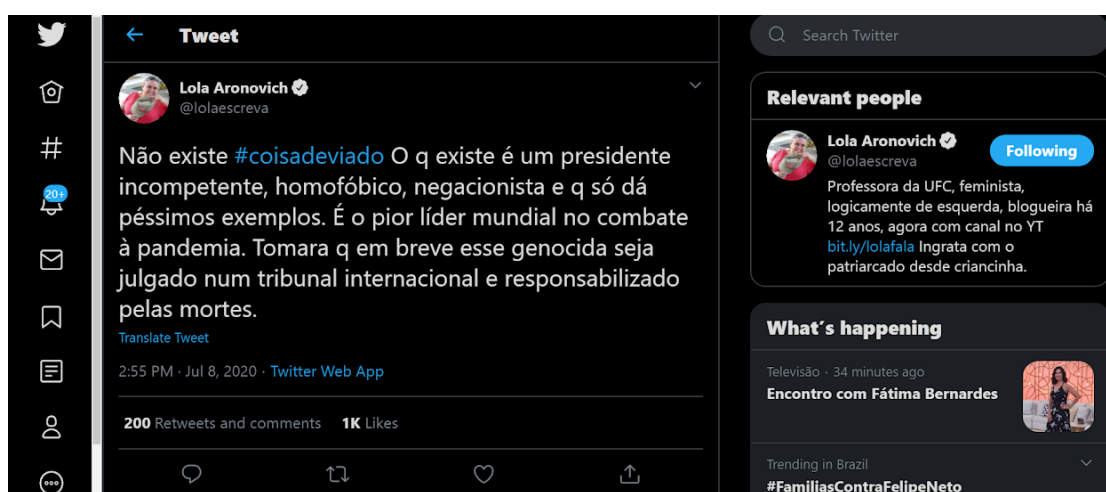
[38] Crenshaw, K. W. (2002). Documento para o encontro de especialistas em aspectos da discriminação racial relativo ao gênero. *Estudos Feministas*, 10, 171-188. https://www.scielo.br/j/ref/a/mbTpP4SFXPnJZ397j8fSBQQ/?format=pdf&lang=p

[39] Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities.* London/New York: Routledge.

and during the 2020 municipal elections that had just taken place. In that regard, a 29-year-old bisexual woman of Japanese background from a metropolitan area in southern Brazil narrated attacks by the men in her family who banded in support of the offensive comments in response to her politically progressive posts. That had made her quit Facebook for some time and since then her access has been only sporadic. Speaking about those negative experiences, she recalled the ordeals other people went through, particularly public figures. She mentioned the case of Lola Aronovich, the university professor and feminist blogger who years before had been the victim of especially virulent attacks by haters.

Earlier on, in our field observation notes about the online repercussion of a homophobic quote attributed to Bolsonaro during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, described in an earlier paper,[40] we wrote (slightly adapted):

> An icon of Brazilian online feminism tweeted about the episode with significant repercussion. Lola Aronovich (@lolaescreva), who has been under attack by haters, including several death threats, tweeted: "There is no #fagthing. What there is an incompetent, homophobic, negationist president who only gives the worst example. He is the world's worst leader in the fight against the pandemic. Hopefully soon he will be tried for genocide in an international court and held accountable for the deaths."[41]

Source: Twitter

---

[40] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2022). Covid-19, Homophobia and the Bolsonarista Vernacular: Hate speech on Brazilian social media. *Feminist by Design: APRIA Journal #4*. https://apria.artez.nl/covid-19-homophobia-and-the-bolsonarista-vernacular/ (The description of this case was finally not included in that paper.)
[41] https://twitter.com/lolaescreva/status/1280923532583714819?s=20

Not unlike other feminists and queer subjects, our female interviewee's narrative of male relatives' verbal attacks on Facebook connects to Lola's tale at different levels. To her, in a direct manner, it illustrates the pervasive atmosphere of insecurity generated by relentless attacks and a sort of hostility that, as for other interviewees, is critically present in the intimacy of their family, church, work and school online networks and, due to the primary character of those networks, populated by family and peers, inevitably, splashes into offline spaces. That leads them either to avoid social media altogether or to the also frequent self-policing of contents shared, in order to avoid conflict.

On another level, her empathy with Lola's ordeal establishes a bond, a sense of community whereby an individual traumatic experience – in our interviewee's case intersected by her identity as an educated Brazilian of Japanese descent,[42] female, bisexual, left-wing feminist – acquires public meaning, further materialised by participating in a research interview about violence and online feminist engagement. Furthermore, Lola's decade-long record as a pioneer of feminist blogs places both narratives in the time perspective of Brazilian web-feminist movement building.

Religious racism

In the municipal elections of 2020, Benny Briolly was elected councilwoman for Niterói, the second largest city in the State of Rio de Janeiro, with the highest count of votes. She is not the first Black transgender person to be elected for a legislative post in Brazil but, like others, she was forced to leave the country after receiving numerous death threats of racist and transphobic content. According to a survey by the National Association of Transvestites and Transsexuals (ANTRA), among trans elected officials, 80% said "they did not feel safe to hold their positions".[43]

After her return to Brazil in 2022 to occupy her seat as councilwoman, she was part of the movement to promote PL 09/2022, a bill that

---

[42] The social status of Brazilians of Japanese descent who migrated to southeastern Brazil since the turn of the 20th century is predominantly equated to that of white European settlers, sharing equivalent privileges as farmers and qualified professionals or, today, part of the urban middleclass.

[43] Benevides, B. G., & Nogueira, S. N. B. (2021) *Dossiê dos assassinatos e da violência contra travestis e transexuais brasileiras em 2020*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, ANTRA, IBTE.
https://antrabrasil.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/dossie-trans-2021-29jan2021.pdf

institutes Maria Mulambo Day, after an Umbanda (Afro-Brazilian religion) sacred entity that would thereby be declared protector of the city. When she took the chamber floor to argue in favour of the bill while holding a sculpture of Maria Mulambo, Briolly was booed and shouted at by other councilmen and by protestors, who told her to "Go away!" as "Jesus is the Lord of Niterói". After that, the controversy continued over social media. The Black trans councilwoman's profiles became the target of attacks orchestrated by religious intolerance, mostly from Christian conservative evangelicals. However, our focus here will not be the content of posts against her or in her support. We are interested, rather, in the way she mobilised the violence by which she was being targeted in her own social media networks. She set out to use that hostility against her as ammunition to combat religious racism and transphobia on Twitter and Instagram, as she had been doing throughout her mandate. That is, she gave a name to the violence to which she had been subjected.

Credit: Priscila da Cunha[44]

The day after she was verbally attacked in the council chamber, Briolly, who was used to denouncing the death threats she had constantly received since the beginning of her mandate, shared her speech in her social media profiles. Many clips were edited by followers, matching her voice with Afro-Brazilian chants in the background. In addition to

a cascade of supportive comments and the creation of hashtags such as *#intoleranciareligiosa* (religious intolerance) and *#racismoreligioso* (religious racism), the movement mobilised artists (image below), adding to the online chorus that denounced the intersectional sort of violence unleashed on the councilwoman.

Source: Instagram[45]

The episode was picked up by Veja, a nationwide news magazine that featured a studio photo of Benny (reproduced here from Benny Briolly's Instagram) and an extensive quote by her, narrating the verbal attack by a fellow councilman (not reproduced here). Her original speech at the chamber was in defence of the secular state, but the engagement created on Instagram around her figure after her response to the aggression is emblematic of the intersectionalities at play both in the deployment of hate speech against minority candidates and in the collective response it produced. The attack against her was a racist attack against *o Povo*

---

45 The post reads: "It's in the news! I will not bend my head down. Giving up is not, never was and never will be an option. The oppression of a sexist, transphobic and misogynist society only makes me want to offer my body, my politics and my struggle to my people, the Black people, the LGBT+ population, the favela people and all those who somehow have been historically silenced or made invisible. [...] I really believe that Rio de Janeiro will be all ours and not theirs. [dark brown raised fist] https://www.instagram.com/p/CeFC8Wyp35O/

de Santo (followers of Afro Brazilian religions), but it was primarily lesbophobic in content (which we choose to not reproduce here for its offensiveness). Such intersectionalities are shaping the ways in which Brazilian feminisms create collective discourse and forge connections based on affect with politically engaged publics on social media.

The intersectionalities of "political violence" on digital media

In this iteration of our research, we interrogate how feminist research and interventions in digital technologies conceive online violence against LGBT+s in the contemporary political scenario, from 2018 to 2021. The word cloud below, featuring the most used categories in our corpus of analysis, points to some present shifts shown in the meanings attributed to violence in feminist mobilisations:

Word cloud of terms from the corpus of reports, guides and brochures compiled for this review.[46]
Source: Own elaboration. Tool: https://wordart.com/

[46] See list at the end of this article.

Political violence is an emerging theme that runs through a corpus of recent civil society reports, guides and brochures, classified in different subcategories. One of them is "electoral violence," which distinctively affects minority groups. The Marielle Franco Institute report cites an effort to promote a debate on electoral political violence against Black women.[47] On the other hand, an effort on behalf of Black women elected candidates to leverage the expansion of the debate on the intersectionality of gender-based violence, has led to the term *race and gender-based political violence*.[48]

In some of the documents, distinctions are drawn between political violence and electoral violence related to elections and party disputes. In others, such as the Monitora report,[49] "political violence" has a larger scope, referring to the field of political rights in a broader sense, as actions intended to impede women from accessing political representation in public life. The report introduces the term based on international declarations, such as that of the Organization of American States and partner entities.

Parts of the selected documents do not feature "online violence" as a central category. In the case of the report by the Marielle Franco Institute,[50] the violence addressed is that which affects Black candidates, regardless of the medium, intersected by LGBT+phobia as part of the interpretive framework that the authors put forward. "Virtual violence" is referred to as one of the modalities of gender and race-based political violence, alongside with others such as moral and psychological, physical, sexual, institutional, racial, gender and LGBT+phobic violence. Arguably that categorisation as a distinct type of violence is bound to the period when the research was carried out. "Virtual violence" came to occupy a more prominent place for candidates later on, when political campaigns became massively digital – or exclusively, as in the case of the 2020 municipal elections after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The "Elections and internet" guide,[51] by Coding Rights, in turn, affiliates the term to technical notes that contribute to the proposal of constitutional

[47] Instituto Marielle Franco. (2020). *A Violência Política Contra Mulheres Negras: Eleições 2020*. https://www2.camara.leg.br/atividadelegislativa/comissoes/comissoes-permanentes/cdhm/arquivos/pesquisainstituto-marielle-franco

[48] Petrone, T., de Jesús, A., Malunguinho, É., Francisco, M., Souza, R., & Monteiro, D. (2020, 18 November). A violência política contra parlamentares negras. *Folha de São Paulo*. https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/opiniao/2020/11/a-violencia-politica-contra-parlamentares-negras.shtml

[49] Azmina & InternetLab. (2021). *MonitorA: Report on online political violence on the pages and profiles of candidates in the 2020 municipal elections*. https://www.internetlab.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5P_Relatorio_MonitorA-ENG.pdf

[50] Instituto Marielle Franco. (2020). Op. cit.

[51] Souza, L, & Varon, J. (2021). *Eleições e internet: Guia para proteção de direitos nas campanhas eleitorais.* Coding Rights. https://www.codingrights.org/docs/eleicoes&internet.pdf

amendments (PEC). That strategy suggests the various institutional levels involved in the effort made by the authors to expand the scope of political violence beyond the electoral process. By enunciating "digital political violence and its intersectionalities", the guide indicates how these paths relate to LGBT+phobia insofar as the most affected candidates are groups that are vulnerable due to gender, race and sexual orientation. Hate speech, the most common category in previous documents, is identified here as a form of political violence. The Coding Rights guide makes us realise how this and other categories are mobilised as a way of exercising violence against candidates. In the guide, political violence is linked to LGBT+phobia, racism and ageism. Political violence is different from hate speech and may intersect with it.

All documents build on pre-2018 intersectional understandings of online violence. Current works reinforce this conceptual frame at identifying the intersections between specific markers of difference mobilised by the digitally mediated aggressions that surged with the rise of Jair Bolsonaro. This line of interpretation increases understanding of how, in cases such as that of Councilwoman Benny Briolly, the deployment of violence with the intent of resolving a public controversy raised in the context of an institutional process, in this case at a city legislature, activates the intersection of gender, race (coded by proxy as religion), and sexuality (here coded as gender expression).

Arguably, the opposite is also true: when exercised against minorities, the intersectionalities involved are structurally constitutive of political violence. When it is claimed that race, gender and sexuality operate intersectionality, it means that they are mutually constitutive in their operation, as they have come to be in episodes of online violence and political violence marked by race, gender and sexuality.

We interpret a shift in the semantic field of political violence as a result of the effort to systematise narratives of digitally mediated violence against Black and LGBT+ candidates and elected officials after 2018. While the sorts of online violence that affect LGBT+ persons are recognised as having increased during the recent electoral periods, divergences in the choice of core categories point to different emphases and nuances in its conceptual approach, as well as in the kind of identity politics. Furthermore, they expose the challenges faced by subject social categories that embody different markers of difference and social

hierarchies. Nevertheless, as the cases above also show, although often limited and disputed, the internet also offers ways to respond to physical and verbal politically motivated attacks.

While they too deal with the electoral landscape, other analytical claims and contributions are made to the naming of online violence. The report on "Violence against LGBT+s in electoral and post-electoral contexts"[52] refers more directly to what it calls an "escalation of violence" against sexual minorities after Bolsonaro came to office. The choice of the term "escalation" reflects on the perception of an increase in violence performed not only by or against certain political actors as members of specific subject categories, as in the conventional restricted use of "political violence," but to a broadly generalised hostile environment, identified as a type of violence different from those practised in other historical periods. In addition, the report cites how the engagement with hashtags such as #EleNão, cited by us in an earlier paper,[53] and banners such as "LGBTs against Bolsonaro" showed forms of involvement with the elections that are not limited to party politics.

The report, "Dyke visibility online: Between violence and solidarity"[54] introduces the concept of a "virtual lesbian existence" as an opportunity to leave invisibility behind to occupy a space in digital networks. The voices of six Black and white lesbian women, some of them involved in party politics, tell about the difficulties they faced on social media, such as having their images and texts associated by algorithms with pornography, or the blocking words like "lesbian" or "dyke" from their posts and searches. Similarly to the LGBT+ report mentioned above, political violence is not the prioritised category here.

Unlike narratives that refer to political violence marked by gender and race as a way of confronting gendered and racialised violence against candidates, violence against LGBT+ persons is portrayed as a constant that merely escalated in the electoral period. Despite efforts to depart from its persistent equation to electoral violence, we notice that the term is just not used in reports that prioritise violence against LGBT+ persons. When the electoral landscape is addressed, it is not in order to analyse the cases of candidates or elected officials; therefore there is no overlap with conventional restricted understandings of political violence.

[52] Gênero e Número. (2021). Op. cit.
[53] Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). Op. cit.
[54] Figueiredo, I., & Varon, J. (2020). *Visibilidade sapatão nas redes: Entre violência e solidariedade.* São Paulo: Coding Rights. https://codingrights.org/docs/visibilidade_sapatao.pdf

In conclusion

From our perspective, looking at the transformation of categories created to generate knowledge and interventions about online violence marked by gender and sexuality can provide a significant interpretation of contemporary challenges to a feminist internet. In this article we brought interrogations raised in our empirical exploration of the meaning of online anti-feminist and anti-LGBT+ hate speech in Brazilian social media over the past two electoral periods and into the COVID-19 pandemic. The categories in our corpus of analysis represent a certain degree of articulation between online hate speech and gender-based violence in particular and to political violence in general. Responses to an online environment hostile to those social and political categories, in particular in the contemporary electoral mediascape, have been transformed by the ways in which Brazilian feminisms (including Black feminism, queer-feminism and transfeminism) understand and produce knowledge about online violence.

In line with FIRN's acknowledgement of feminists' pioneering role in the change of focus away from the emancipatory potential of digital technologies and in the production of insights about the continuity between online and offline violence, Brazilian feminist denunciations of the ineffectiveness of current legal frameworks and lack of accountability by large platforms for providing protection against (ever intensifying) violence are ways of creating and circulating knowledge produced at this intersection. In that conjuncture, the construct of intersectionality has allowed online and offline feminist and queer communities and people of colour to reappropriate their gendering, racialisation and sexual identities as forms of affirmation and resistance.

Documents reviewed

Source / translation	Year	Institutional authorship or sponsorship	Document type
Como documentar casos de violência de gênero na internet de forma empática e segura? Um guia prático baseado na difusão de material íntimo sem consentimento How to document cases of gender violence on the internet in an empathic and safe way? A practical guide based on the dissemination of intimate material without consent https://acoso.online/site2022/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/documentación_portugues.pdf	2020	Acoso Online	Handbook/ Brochure
Eleições e Internet: Guia para proteção de direitos nas campanhas eleitorais Elections and the Internet: Guide for the protection of rights during electoral campaigns https://www.codingrights.org/docs/eleicoes&internet.pdf	2020	Coalizão Direitos na Rede (Coding Rights and Me Representa)	Handbook/ Brochure
Instituto Marielle Franco. (2020). A Violência Política Contra Mulheres Negras: Eleições 2020 *Political Violence against Black Women: The 2020 Elections* *https://www2.camara.leg.br/atividadelegislativa/comissoes/comissoes-permanentes/cdhm/arquivos/pesquisainstituto-marielle-franco*	2020	Instituto Marielle Franco, Justiça Global, Terra de Direitos	Research report

Source / translation	Year	Institutional authorship or sponsorship	Document type
Más que palabras: Buscando consensos para caracterizar el discurso de odio More than words: Seeking consensus to characterise hate speech *https://adc.org.ar/wp-content/ uploads/2020/06/ADC-Informe-Más-que-palabras-06-2020.pdf*	2020	Asociación por los Derechos Civiles	Research report
MonitorA: relatório sobre violência política online em páginas e perfis de candidatas(os) nas eleições municipais de 2020 MonitorA: Report on online political violence in female (and male) candidates' pages and profiles in the 2020 municipal elections *https://azmina.com.br/wp-content/ uploads/2021/03/5P_Relatorio_ MonitorA-ENG.pdf*	2021	Revista AzMina and InternetLab	Research report
Outras vozes: Gênero, raça, classe e sexualidade nas eleições de 2018 Other voices: Gender, race, class and sexuality in the 2018 elections *http://www.internetlab.org.br/ wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ OutrasVozes_2018.pdf*	2019	InternetLab	Research report

Source / translation	Year	Institutional authorship or sponsorship	Document type
Violência contra LGBT+s nos contextos eleitoral e pós-eleitoral Violence against LGBT+s in electoral and post-electoral contexts *http://violencialgbt.com.br/dados/190321_relatorio_LGBT_V1.pdf*	2019	InternetLab	Research report
Visibilidade sapatão nas redes: Entre violência e solidariedade Dyke visibility online: From violence to solidarity *https://codingrights.org/docs/visibilidade_sapatao.pdf*	2020	Coding Rights	Research report