



# ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Edited by  
Sonia Corrêa



**G&PAL**

Género & Política en  
América Latina

# ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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Graphic project **Agência FW2** / <http://www.fw2.digital>

ISBN **978-65-87854-15-1**

Published by **Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW)**, a project based at the **Brazilian AIDS Interdisciplinary Association (ABIA)**.

Presidente Vargas Avenue, 446 / 13th floor

Rio de Janeiro/RJ - 20.071-907 - Brazil

**Telephone** +55 21 2223-1040

**Website** <http://www.sxpolitics.org>

Cataloging in Publication (CIP) - (Brazilian Book Chamber)

**Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação (CIP)**  
(Câmara Brasileira do Livro, SP, Brasil)

Anti-gender politics in Latin America in the pandemic context [livro eletrônico] / edited by Sonia Corrêa. -- 1. ed. -- Rio de Janeiro : Associação Brasileira Interdisciplinas de Aids - ABIA, 2022.  
PDF.

Vários autores.  
ISBN 978-65-87854-15-1

1. America Latina - Civilização 2. Ciências sociais 3. Ciências políticas 4. Identidade de gênero 5. Políticas públicas I. Corrêa, Sonia.

22-137066

CDD-320.98

**Índices para catálogo sistemático:**

1. América Latina : Ciência política 320.98

Aline Grazielle Benitez - Bibliotecária - CRB-1/3129



SEXUALITY  
POLICY  
WATCH



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Gênero & Política en  
América Latina

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## FOREWORD

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We are pleased to present another publication of the Gender & Politics in Latin America (GPAL) project, conducted by the Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW), dedicated to anti-gender politics in Latin America. The studies compiled here offer an update on the anti-gender politics scene since 2019, when we published an analysis of the previous period, whose reading we recommend<sup>1</sup>. This new stage of research included seven countries – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Uruguay – in addition to the Organization of American States (OAS). This update aims to examine the confluence of the anti-gender and anti-abortion offensives that took place in the region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These studies, like previous ones, contemplate the analysis of political dynamics in the broad sense that in the last three years, in the selected countries, there were highly disputed electoral processes, strong shifts to the right, and social insurgencies. In other words, repeating an argument from the panorama elaborated by Fernando Serrano for the publication of the summaries of the studies in Portuguese, published in 2021, “anti-gender politics is politics by other means”.

In this second cycle, it has been crucial to take into account, albeit briefly, the devastating effects of the pandemic not only in health terms but also on the economic and social conditions of the countries analyzed. Although these impacts have been seen throughout the world, in the case of Latin America the pandemic tremendously aggravated the patterns of regional inequality that were already the most accentuated in the world. This high level of socioeconomic inequity has very deep historical roots and was aggravated by the persistent penetration of economic rationalization and neoliberal policies since the 1970s. This structural tendency has not only deepened inequalities but also eroded social protection policies, including public health policies, and its effects were extreme in the pandemic.

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1 The results are available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL>

This prologue examines the most significant common and differential features of the studies by organizing them into three sections. The first is a review of the contexts of the pandemic and government responses. The second section deals with the political scenarios in which the pandemic unfolded. The third directly addresses the anti-abortion and anti-gender forces in the context of the pandemic crisis that in all countries were strongly enmeshed in complex political dynamics.

## THE PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

Latin America was one of the epicenters of COVID-19. In the seven countries analyzed, the pandemic evolved in a very similar way: two large waves in the periods March-July 2020 and January-June 2021. Another significant aspect is that in all the countries analyzed there was high vaccination uptake, even where there were strong movements against them. In addition, in the countries where social actors and some governments were for a long time propagating speeches of praise and defense of the “family”, there was a clear resurgence of domestic and sexual violence, dramatic proof that the family environment is not a safe space. In almost all these countries the economic impacts of COVID-19 were aggravated by the measures of austerity and fiscal adjustment adopted before or during the pandemic.

## STATE RESPONSES

Regarding state responses to the pandemic, they can be organized into three pairs and then Brazil by itself. The first is Argentina and Costa Rica, where the quality of the state response started off well but lost strength over time. In both cases, the responses were initially well-designed and efficient but could not be sustained as the pandemic persisted. In Costa Rica, the difficulty in adopting policies to mitigate the economic crisis over the long term was the determining factor, while in Argentina the loss of quality was due to a combination of economic and political factors.

In contrast, the responses to the health crisis in Ecuador and Colombia, especially in terms of their economic effects, were generally poor. In the first case, the ineffectiveness of the response was very acute at the beginning: Guayaquil had the first COVID-19 catastrophe in the region; in April 2020 dozens of unburied corpses could be seen in the streets there. In the Colombian case, the legacy of privatization – which pervades the health system – hindered the health response that was followed by a deep economic crisis caused by the pandemic that was not duly mitigated. To a large extent, it can be said that this was the cause of the social unrest of April-May 2021. In both contexts, there was militarization or state coercion in the implementation of the measures to contain the movement of people, whose violence, in the case of Colombia, was another factor that triggered the wave of protests.

There are also similarities between the state responses in Chile and Uruguay, two countries governed by traditional conservative parties. These governments adopted rational and well-designed health responses while faithful to their neoliberal logic, doing everything possible not to shut down the economy. This was the case even in Uruguay, where the *Cabildo Abierto*, a far-right party potentially averse to restrictive measures to contain COVID-19, chose to be part of the governing coalition, possibly as a result of the majority power of the political alliance. Furthermore, unlike in Colombia, the robust public health system inherited from the governments of the *Frente Amplio* was crucial to the successful health response. In Chile, in turn, the response was also compromised, in some respects, by the privatization of the health system.

Brazil, governed by the extreme right, is an exception in relation to those patterns. In the midst of the pandemic, the dismantling of the management capacity of the Ministry of Health would culminate in the terrible scenes of lack of oxygen in the city of Manaus at the end of 2020 during the first wave of COVID-19. When Omicron arrived in Brazil, in December 2021, a blackout of official COVID-19 data occurred. It was only due to the integrity of the Unified Health System (SUS) and its decentralized structure that the Brazilian health catastrophe has not been more devastating. In addition, at the initiative of the federal Congress, which challenged the ultra-neoliberal orthodoxy of the Bolsonaro

government, the country adopted a robust program to mitigate the economic crisis. However, this has not been able to stop the growth of poverty and hunger in the country. It also had the unfortunate effect that much of the population benefiting from the program thought the executive was responsible for it.

## POLITICAL CONTEXTS

In three of the countries studied, the pandemic broke out after significant electoral transitions, that entailed radical changes in their political-ideological direction. Brazil and Uruguay elected right-wing governments just before the outbreak of COVID-19. In both elections, as the studies published in 2020 show, anti-gender campaigns played a very significant, if not crucial, role, especially in the Brazilian case<sup>2</sup>.

In Uruguay, after fifteen years of the *Frente Amplia*, a new government was elected in 2019, a coalition of the National Party, which represents traditional conservatism, and a recently created far-right party, the *Cabildo Abierto*. The government came into office just as the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the country. In Brazil, where the electoral results of 2018 meant a radical turn to the extreme right, COVID-19 broke out when the Bolsonaro government had barely finished its first tumultuous year, making the pandemic the main (and catastrophic) stage of his peculiar method of ruling. When the first cases were identified, Bolsonaro responded with great intensity, using the peculiar logic of promoting chaos as a method of governance. The federal government responded to the crisis with grotesque denialism, defended keeping the economy open at all costs, and was deliberately negligent. Subsequently, the pandemic crisis and the political crisis were intertwined. On this disastrous path, since the beginning of 2021, we have been witnessing a complex dynamic in which the deteriorated Brazilian political system began to support the government in exchange for favors.

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<sup>2</sup> The summarized versions of the case studies are available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

In Argentina, there was also a transition in 2019, but in the opposite direction, with the return of the left to power. When the pandemic started at the beginning of 2020, the government of Alberto Fernández had just begun, and he enjoyed popularity throughout the year partly due to appropriate responses to the crisis. At the end of 2020, after the frustrated attempt of 2018, the abortion law was finally reformed with strong support from the executive<sup>3</sup>.

However, the economic effects of the crisis and other factors altered this positive trajectory. Just as this update was being completed, in November 2021, the government was defeated in the mid-term legislative elections by center-right forces. In this situation, the extreme right gained momentum. Obviously, the mobilizations in reaction to the right to abortion and of a denialist nature that have emerged since 2020 have contributed to this new development.

Recalling the studies published in 2020, in Colombia and Costa Rica, the referendum of the 2016 Peace Agreement and the 2018 elections, respectively, were political moments in which anti-gender offensives had a strong impact<sup>4</sup>. In the first case, the defeat of the referendum contributed to the victory of the so-called Uribista right (associated with former president Álvaro Uribe) in the 2018 presidential elections. In Costa Rica, meanwhile, the neoconservative religious right was defeated by the PAC, a centrist party that was already in power.

In Colombia, at the end of 2019, there were also massive protests, although smaller than in Chile and Ecuador, against an educational reform. The response by the state was very violent and there was an upsurge in state and paramilitary violence against urban populations and social leaders. Once the pandemic hit, the government responded poorly

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3 To learn more about this background, see the summarized version of the previous study available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

4 Summary versions of the two studies are available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

to the crisis, especially in terms of its economic effects. At the beginning of 2021, the call for a general strike had a wide popular response. The state response was even more violent, which amplified the insurgency and paralyzed the country from April to June. During that crisis there were brutal human rights violations.

In Costa Rica, although neoconservative religious forces have lost ground since the 2018 elections, the PAC won the presidency but lost seats in the national legislature. In 2019, the government committed to a fiscal reform the response to which was the longest strike in the country in decades. The adverse economic conditions resulting from the pandemic created a favorable environment for negationist upheavals and favored the growth of mainstream conservatism, which could return to power in the 2022 elections.

In Chile and Ecuador, the pandemic was immediately preceded by massive social eruptions that repudiated persistent patterns of inequality, poverty, and lack of social protection. Both countries also experienced complex and intense presidential elections in the midst of the pandemic. In Chile, the vigorous 2019 insurgency's major demand was the reform of the constitution inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship. The response of the Piñera government was brutal, the country was paralyzed for two months, and the political system was unable to handle the crisis. The credibility of both countries' governments was almost non-existent when the health crisis broke out in March 2020.

In Ecuador, at the second peak of the pandemic, in 2021, presidential elections were held in a context of episodes of violence, a lot of misinformation, and suspicions of fraud. Two leftist candidates, the indigenous leader Yaku Pérez and the candidate of former president Rafael Correa, clashed fiercely to reach the second round, an unprecedented situation in Latin America. Arauz, the "Correista" candidate, won the contest, but in the second round he was defeated by Guillermo Lasso, a banker from the old right. That result also ended a series of leftist governments. However, since the elections, political instability has persisted in Ecuador.

In Chile, the pandemic crisis coincided with the intense political dynamics that followed the uprising of 2019, paving the way for the plebiscite that approved the constitutional reform (May 2021). In July a constitutional convention was convened with gender parity and the broad participation of indigenous peoples. Conventional partisanship lost ground and conservatism was defeated. However, in the presidential elections in November, José Antonio Kast, an extreme right-wing candidate with strong ties to anti-gender and anti-abortion forces (and known as the Chilean Bolsonaro) had the most votes in the first round, followed by Gabriel Boric, the candidate of the new Chilean left. This was followed by a tense campaign for the second round in which Boric emerged victorious. The elections portend a return to regimes governed by progressive forces in a context in which rightward turns have prevailed since the early 2010s.

Finally, when looking at the environment of the OAS, where anti-gender offensives have been gaining strength since 2013, the impacts of both regional political dynamics and the contested US situation are evident. This has been reflected in the position of the secretary-general, increasingly aligned with continental conservative and right-wing forces, and also in critical positions adopted in relation to the inter-American system by some countries in which the right had come to power, as well as the appointments of well-known figures in the anti-gender and anti-abortion field, an iconic example being Alejandro Ordoñez, current Colombian ambassador to the OAS<sup>5</sup>.

The political dynamics of the system were not as affected by the pandemic as the national contexts were. In fact, with the imposition of remote work, the convening of virtual meetings favored, in some aspects, the participation of civil society. However, it is even more significant that the growing conservatism and rightward turns in regional politics have not had a more substantive impact on the 2021 elections to elect three new commissioners of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and four new judges of the Inter-American Court. This is a positive sign that the autonomy of the regional human rights system is largely intact despite systematic attacks in recent years.

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<sup>5</sup> Alejandro Ordoñez was analyzed in detail in the previous study, see note 4.

## ANTI-GENDER AND ANTI-ABORTION FORCES ON THE MOVE

The most salient conclusion of the studies is that anti-gender politics have not lost strength in the pandemic context. Although this dynamic is unique in Latin America, its expressions from 2020 to 2022 have been affected by obvious connections with the United States and Europe – as previous studies have demonstrated, international alliances that have long promoted anti-gender and anti-abortion politics both religious and secular, in the Americas and Europe, are numerous and dense. Some are very old, as is the case with those who use the channels of the Catholic Church and ultra-Catholicism. Other more recent ones have been forged in the heat of the recrudescence observed in the last decade, as is the case of the web of connections between libertarian and neoliberal currents. All of these connections have become much more visible since 2019.

This has happened, above all, in Brazil, which, since the election of Bolsonaro, has become a central node of these currents, especially the connections with characters and groups of the US right. However, this is also the case regarding European state actors, as with Bolsonaro's rare trip to Russia and Hungary in early 2022<sup>6</sup>. It is also very striking that during 2021 not only were leaders of VOX Spain in the region seeking the accession of regional forces to the Madrid Charter<sup>7</sup>, but also important figures of the German extreme right, whose connections are most evident in Brazil and Chile, made an appearance.

No less important, since 2020, when the International Campaign for the Rights of Women for Reason of Sex was launched, as has been the case in Spain and the UK, anti-gender feminist movements have gained visibility and impact, a fairly new development on the regional scene. Although they define themselves as progressives, these feminist voices inhabit the same ecology as anti-gender conservative activism; their agendas have clearly been amplified by their turn to the right.

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6 Read Sonia Corrêa's interview about this trip, available at: <https://apublica.org/2022/02/as-aliancas-de-bolsonaro-putin-e-orban-contra-o-aborto-e-pela-familia-tradicional/> (in Portuguese)

7 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-10-18/vox-teje-una-alianza-anticomunista-en-america-latina.html>

While the conservative anti-gender field has multiple goals, feminist currents exclusively attack the rights of trans people, especially gender identity in childhood. It is not an exaggeration to say that they challenge the right of non-binary people to exist. They are better defined as anti-transgender or trans-exclusive currents. In this region, they are very active in Mexico, which has not been studied in this round of investigations. In this publication, the mobilizations of anti-gender feminism are addressed in the cases of Colombia, Chile and, above all, Brazil.

Against the background of earlier studies, another significant novelty of the 2019-2021 period was the arrival of anti-abortion and anti-gender forces to executive power in Brazil and Uruguay. As we have long known, these ideological agendas have been present in the regional state apparatuses, be it in the old tradition of infiltrating conservative Catholic values in state institutions or as an effect of the evangelical politicization of recent decades that had a significant impact in the legislature. Now we are facing electoral political reconfigurations that result from the systematic promotion of these agendas, leading to power for political forces for whom these guidelines are concrete ideological priorities.

The results of these processes in Brazil and Uruguay, however, are somewhat different. In the first case, the election of Bolsonaro visibly resulted in the conversion of the anti-gender and anti-abortion positions into macro governmental policies. Nowadays, Brazil is one of a small group of countries in which anti-gender ideology has become state policy, such as Hungary, Poland, Russia and, in the region, Guatemala. In the case of Uruguay, on the other hand, the *Cabildo Abierto*, which during the 2019 campaign gave priority to anti-abortion and anti-gender ideology, is part of a coalition mostly of the traditional right that, although it shares some of these values, has not made them a priority. However, these discourses continue circulating, especially in their articulation with Marxism, as a strategy to attack opposition forces.

Looking at this series of studies, a strong common feature is noted in this new phase of anti-gender politics: the forces that mobilize them have made the pandemic

a platform to expand their scope of action. On the one hand, they kept addressing the issues specific to their political agenda. On the other, with greater or lesser intensity, they metamorphosed into movements rejecting the measures to contain the pandemic, that is, deniers, contemptuous of the science, against vaccines, and supporting ineffective treatments for COVID-19. Another salient and novel characteristic of these mobilizations is the use of the catchword “freedom”, which was not seen in previous studies. This recourse to “freedom”, among other things, reveals the robust link between anti-gender agendas and neoliberal ideology.

Likewise, attacks on reproductive health services and, especially, the right to abortion are still a common trend. In the case of Brazil, these attacks are carried out through grotesque state measures, while, in other countries, public campaigns predominated. In Colombia, in response to the demand made to the Constitutional Court by the Just Cause Movement to eliminate the crime of abortion from the criminal code, there were vigils at the doors of the clinics and the Constitutional Court, and the recruitment of young people for online training courses by pro-life agents increased.

In Costa Rica, what had been a strong anti-gender offensive, after the approval of same-sex marriage by the Constitutional Court, was turned by conservative forces against therapeutic abortion. In Uruguay, there are insidious legislative strategies and institutional measures to restrict access to abortion. In Ecuador, the years 2019-2021 were marked by a fierce struggle for the right to abortion in the case of rape, which was finally recognized by a decision of the Constitutional Court in April 2021. Above all, in the area of attacks on and barriers to the right to abortion, the promotion of conscientious objection has spread everywhere, the most striking case of which is Argentina, where there has been a campaign of great intensity following the legalization of abortion at the end of 2020. The barriers caused by objection and conscience are also a serious problem in Chile, where the legislation was reformed in 2017.

More specifically in the field of offensives directed at “gender ideology”, the most affected field continues to be that of education, where, as previous studies show, these crusades started in the years 2012 and 2013. Having as its target especially basic education and most visible in Uruguay and Brazil, their most striking tactics are the efforts to legitimize the guardianship of fathers and mothers over the education of their children and to stigmatize the “school as a dangerous place”. Nor is it trivial that the agenda of the rights of fathers and mothers in the education of their children has also entered the agenda of OAS debates in association with the religious freedom agenda.

In the case of Uruguay, a bill was presented to modify pedagogical practices, allowing mothers and fathers to select not only the curriculum and the readings, but also the teachers, in addition to expanding religious education in public schools. The bill still has not been voted on. In Brazil, the situation of public and private basic education is a real catastrophe. To the systematic speeches of the different ministers of education against “gender”, new bills against “gender ideology” have been added to the hundreds of similar proposals made since 2014 whose contents are much more drastic, since they advocate the criminalization of the “propagation of gender ideology”, or in other words, the “promotion of pornography in schools”. Though several of the laws passed in recent years have been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, these proposals continue to proliferate.

Direct attacks on school teachers of basic education also continued to multiply. In this area, the most striking episode was the conversion of the hotline for complaints of human rights violations managed by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights into an ideological patrol apparatus against gender, Marxism, and the criticism of racism. In addition, anti-gender offensives in education have put forward proposals not only for new modalities of public education, military civic schools, and homeschooling, but also for the elimination of ethical standards in relation to gender, race, and other inequalities in the standards for academic material.

Since 2020, in Brazil, projects to ban inclusive language have proliferated. This can also be seen in Chile, where, in 2021, two pastor congressmen from the *Renovador* National Party presented a bill against inclusive language. However, the most striking similarity between the two countries can be seen in the attack on gender in higher education, that is, against the production of gender knowledge.

In Brazil, these attacks took shape in 2017, when an effigy of Judith Butler was burned as a witch in a protest in São Paulo, and there were the first attacks on feminist teachers. Since 2019, criticizing “gender ideology” has become habitual in the speeches of ministers of education. Since 2021, the government has been committed to consolidating a conservative knowledge production platform. In Chile, in turn, in July 2021, just before the presidential elections, two right-wing congressmen from José Antonio Kast’s party asked the Ministry of Treasury to collect information on “resources allocated annually to finance the courses, centers, and study programs that refer to gender studies, ideology and gender, sexual diversity, and feminism”. It is not absurd to suppose that this line of attack will proliferate in the coming years because it is intertwined with the rejection of the plasticity of gender and non-binary identities.

On the other hand, this conservative linguistic agenda can be understood in connection with a new line of attack launched in the OAS, during the General Assembly of 2021, against an understanding of “intersectionality” that has been totally perverted. This development is linked to ongoing dynamics in the United States and especially in France where “intersectionality” has become the same “Trojan horse” as before was used to argue about the “fallacies and dangers of gender”.

If education is the field in which there have been attacks on gender for the longest time, the offensive against trans rights is the terrain on which the crusade has achieved its greatest scope and visibility since 2017. This escalation is related to the greater mobilization of anti-gender feminisms in 2018, but there are many other forces at play. For example, in Uruguay, a referendum was proposed against the new gender identity law. In Brazil, there is a clear convergence between transgender feminists and anti-gender state actors.

Last but not least, the Colombian case study criticizes the transphobic effects of the *Pico y Género* policy adopted in Bogotá to limit the movement of people early in the pandemic. This policy was not designed by anti-gender actors and the definition of the rules of limitation of circulation established clear parameters regarding gender identity, but the resulting harmful effects it had on transgender people sharply illuminate the potential for normative violence inscribed in gender binarism rooted in institutional logic and common sense. In the research project in which we have been involved since 2017, it is very clear that anti-gender hydras, with their multiple heads, prompt these deep layers of perception of sexual difference as “natural” to mobilize political energies, extend their power, and colonize states, and it is evident that this will continue to happen.

## CONCLUSION

The studies that we are now publishing are a new portrait, situated in time, of the anti-gender and anti-abortion scene in Latin America. Due to the speed with which regional and global politics develop, there would certainly be much to update on the analyzed contexts since the texts have been finalized. It’s worth remembering that we started this series of studies in the midst of a pandemic context and its results are being published when a new “war of choice” is reshaping the global geopolitical landscape, with unequivocal effects on regional political and economic dynamics.

The origins and motivations of the war in Ukraine are long-standing and very complex and do not fit into schematic and simplistic readings. As numerous authors have analyzed, all the great powers are implicated, which, however, is not to say the importance of Russia’s unilateral aggression can be forgotten. It is very difficult to predict the reconfiguration that it will produce. From a regional perspective, however, it is not trivial that this tragic new geopolitical scenario unfolded when the Chilean elections, with the victory of Gabriel Boric, not only meant the first defeat of right-wing forces in Latin America but also indicated a generational renewal and new ways of thinking and acting in left politics. On the other hand, as Pablo Stefanoni has recently written, this new geopolitical disorder is also starkly illuminating the “confusionism” and the castellation of the ways of interpreting the world of those same leftists.

In this changing and paradoxical scenario, from the point of view of our field of investigation and action, it is very significant that Vladimir Putin, a key figure in this new global confusion, is an icon of toxic masculinity installed in state power. On the other hand, along with his mentor Alexander Dugin, a leading anti-gender ideologue, Putin is connected to key European players in the same field - Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Mateo Salvini - and, not coincidentally, he received a visit from Jair Bolsonaro when the drums of war were already beating.

The war in Ukraine brightly illuminates the political and geopolitical centrality of gender and sexuality. If there were still doubts, they can't be maintained in the face of the affirmation of the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, a staunch ally of Putin, that the war is justified to contain "the globalist imposition of homosexuality." Perhaps that will cause an important part of the regional left - accused virulently by the right, over the last decade, of being mentors and promoters of "gender ideology" - to recognize that centrality, as well as the breadth and depth of the effects of sociocultural mobilizations and government policies motivated by these ideological positions in social life and institutional spheres. and to interrogate the relevance of the accusations of "divisive identitarianism" that are brandished today against the voices and movements that systematically point towards that centrality. It is also our expectation that the studies that comprise this new publication will contribute to that more incisive vision.

Good reading!

Sonia Corrêa and Magaly Pazello

Since the Spanish version of this e-book was released in March 2022, significant changes have occurred in the Latin American national political scenarios and the global landscape, such as, for example, the war in Ukraine that had just begun. While its prospects were not clear at that time, as noted in the Prologue, its anti-gender imprints were blatant.

Since then, the conflict has escalated, leaving a trail of dispossession, destruction, and death: 7.8 million refugees fled from Ukraine to Europe, the largest displacement crisis since World War II.<sup>1</sup> The UN estimates a death toll of 14,400 lives, of which 3,400 are civilians, many of them journalists and relief workers. Against this backdrop, Putin has repeatedly threatened to resort to nuclear weapons; meanwhile, the military-industrial complex keeps profiting as Western powers continue supplying Ukraine with “means of resistance”.

As in all wars, the impacts on women, girls, and queer people have been and continue to be severe. Putin’s anti-gender rhetoric has not relented, as illustrated by the speech he gave to justify the annexation of Ukrainian territories in late September.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, well-known figures of the European ultra-right have been using the Russian threat to argue that when tanks are at the borders, “gender” is inconsequential.<sup>3</sup>

As was also mentioned in the Prologue, the war immediately impacted a global economy that was barely starting to recover from COVID-19. Since then, it has had devastating effects on global food distribution, as well as inflation, the dollar’s exchange value, and US and European interest rates. As this postscript was being written, these

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1 See <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/ukraine-humanitarian-crisis/>

2 See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/30/russia-ukraine-war-putins-annexation-speech-what-did-he-say>

3 See <https://www.vozpopuli.com/altavoz/cultura/tanques-putin-teoria-genero.html>

overlapping crises were being discussed at the G20 Meeting in Bali.<sup>4</sup> In this shadowy scenario, an additional crisis is emerging: a new cycle of growing debt of less developed countries, in which, for the first time, China plays a central role. The geopolitical chessboard keeps shifting, and the directions it may take are not easy to predict.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the rightward political turn of the last decade continued its course. In the first half of the year, the Hungarian electoral process confirmed Victor Orbán's grip on power and, even though Macron was re-elected, French politics continued to shift to the right. The electoral results later in the year were yet more worrying. The extreme right entered the new governing coalition in Sweden, an outcome that, as suggested by Gina Gustavsson in *The Guardian*, seems to reveal the hidden illiberalism of Swedish society.<sup>5</sup> Yet more striking was the imperious Italian neo-fascist leader Georgia Meloni's rise to power, which cannot be detached from her involvement in anti-abortion and anti-gender politics during the last decade. Numerous analyses have been published that wishfully forecast a moderation of the first Italian female prime minister. Other observers such as Saviani, however, insightfully remind us that neo-fascist parties and leaders have gone to lengths, in recent decades, to detoxify and soften their image. Given that Meloni is a case in point, her political objectives should not be glossed over or minimized.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, the electoral cycle that swept through the Americas since early 2022 has not been so auspicious for the ultra-right, even if its results are far from unequivocal. It began with a Costa Rican presidential election that, as predicted, resulted in a turn to the right, but neither the ultra-religious right that almost gained power in 2018 nor, as projected, the old conservative party. The winner was an ultra-neoliberal newcomer who

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4 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/15/business/economy/world-leaders-meet-as-global-economy-faces-multiple-threats.html>

5 Here <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/15/far-right-sweden-intolerance-liberalism-election-results>

6 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/sep/24/giorgia-meloni-is-a-danger-to-italy-and-the-rest-of-europe-far-right>

is not, however, immune to the influences of the extreme right.<sup>7</sup> The Colombian elections that followed, however, led to the victory of the first left-wing president in the country's history: Gustavo Petro. Moreover, Francia Márquez, the new vice-president, is a leader of the black women's movement, and many feminists were elected to Congress.

Then came the cold watershed of the rejection (*rechazo*) of the new Chilean Constitution. This result was surprising because, in November 2020, 80 per cent of voters had supported the reform and, in 2021, the presidential elections were won by Gabriel Boric after a contentious electoral campaign against rival Jose Antonio Kast. Furthermore, women comprised 50 per cent of the Constitutional Convention and gender equality is a guiding principle of the draft reform. The factors that resulted in the *rechazo* are multilayered. One of them is that the vote for the approval was compulsory: many more people voted in 2022 than in the 2020 referendum. Yet more significantly, the ultra-right digital misinformation campaign against the reform was very effective.<sup>8</sup> Finally, as Carrasco observed, the results reveal that in Chilean society a strong desire for equality and transformation co-exists with deep strongholds of conservatism.<sup>9</sup>

In October, as we prepared for the release of the English translation, in Brazil, Bolsonaro, the Latino icon of ultra-right leaders, was defeated, in a fierce and murky campaign and election, by ex-president Lula. The incumbent resorted to all means possible, legal and illegal, to remain in power, such as avalanches of digital fake news, voter coercion, and vote suppression. Had these strategies been successful, Brazil would have plunged into a blatant neo-fascist regime whose effects and ramifications would undoubtedly have crossed national borders.

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7 See <https://www.infobae.com/en/2022/04/04/who-is-rodrigo-chaves-the-controversial-economist-who-will-be-president-of-costa-rica>

8 See (in Portuguese) <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/referendo-no-chile-faltou-um-dialogo-mais-amplo-sobre-nova-constituicao-leia-a-analise,f4a435d08413af473e81ec0327d52052cqq1bbhb.html>

9 For the article, see <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2022/09/15/why-we-failed-to-approve-the-new-chilean-constitution/>. The seven countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, and Peru.

Lula's victory is, therefore, to be celebrated as a democratic victory and also because it was assured by the votes of those earning less than 500 USD/month, 60 per cent of women and black voters, and the large majority of the LGBTTI\* and indigenous populations. Even so, in the reflections developed by myself and Juan Elman for Open Democracy, we underline that Bolsonaro's defeat should not be interpreted as the demise of ultra-right politics. Furthermore, as the conditions that favored his rapid ascent remain present across the region, we cannot lose sight of his trajectory and legacy when assessing the political tendencies of Latin America in the coming years, even if left-leaning forces are once again in power in seven countries.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, a breath of fresh air has also come from north of the Rio Grande. This is not irrelevant given that, in June 2022, the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* darkened the prospects of further expanding abortion rights in Latin America. The outcomes of the US midterm elections did not fulfil the predictions of an ultra-conservative watershed. The victories of Democrats mean control over the Senate and various governorships, hundreds of LGBTT+ officeholders, and the containment of further erosions of abortion rights. These victories were made possible by younger voters, especially, as shown by Françoise Girard, by young women and other people who gestate demanding their sexual and reproductive rights and well-being.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, the political dynamics of 2022 - and within it, the undercurrents emanating from anti-gender politics - have been far from smooth. Even so, recent electoral processes across the Americas appear to have kept at bay the expanding de-democratizing trends of the last decade. On the other hand, the roads ahead are not smooth because the state of the world at large remains shaky and uncertain. Even so, we reach the end of 2022 with wider spaces to breathe and re-imagine futures.

*Sonia Corrêa*

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10 See <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/brazil-election-bolsonaro-far-right-movement-latin-america/>

11 See <https://mailchi.mp/0f5d55f57e22/the-us-midterms-youth-and-abortion?e=2b9dcb303d>

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, the primary elections yielded some unexpected results for the government and the opposition in Argentina. The center-left coalition of Kirchnerism suffered a major defeat at the national level from "*Juntos por el Cambio*" (Together for Change), a right and center-right political grouping. The results have shaken the balance of power, generating an important internal dispute within Kirchnerism between Alberto Fernández, current president, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, vice-president and the most prominent figure of the coalition. The dispute was resolved in favor of Kirchner with the appointment of a new cabinet of ministers loyal to the vice president. The primaries also showed an important advance of other right-wing parties and candidates, with the prominence of the conservative anarcho-capitalist Javier Milei in the city of Buenos Aires.

The signals given in the primaries were confirmed in the elections of November 14, when the government was defeated in 18 of the 24 districts of the country and lost the majority in the Senate and many seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In addition, Javier Milei was the candidate with the third-highest number of votes, campaigning on a political platform focused on the fight against communism and socialism, and he became the first candidate of the ultra-right to occupy a seat since the restoration of democracy in 1983.

It is quite clear that since the first study was published in 2020 the political, social, and economic situation has changed substantially in Argentina. To begin with, the presidency of Mauricio Macri (2014-2019) deepened the economic inequalities that he had promised to curb, generating a major financial crisis at the national level which would cost him presidential reelection. In 2019, the presidency was occupied by Alberto Fernández, linked to the center-left "Kirchnerist Peronism", and he promised economic revival, expansion of the welfare state, respect for diversity, and legalization of abortion. These presidential elections will be analyzed below.

However, the emergence and spread of COVID-19 worldwide greatly affected President Fernández's recovery plans. The isolation measures and suspension of activities to prevent the spread of the virus implemented by the government were well received during the first weeks, but the maintenance of such measures over time generated a situation of generalized social fatigue and the deepening of the economic crisis and social inequality, which had a negative impact on the image of the national government. "Anti-quarantine" marches began to multiply all over the country, and although their slogans varied and were mostly linked to the demand to resume economic activities, there were groups that demonstrated against the use of masks and vaccines and identified with conservative and reactionary sectors of society.

Anti-gender groups such as "Doctors for the Truth" launched an important campaign of disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories against the measures of isolation and social distancing ordered by the national and provincial governments. In these milieus, reactionary and conservative voices began to proliferate, particularly in social networks such as those of Javier Milei, Eduardo Prestofelippo "El Presto", and Agustín Laje, who together with other political figures such as Gómez Centurión, José Luis Espert, and Cynthia Hotton began to build a sort of "Anti-Progressive Unified Front", which includes not only sectors traditionally linked to the Catholic church and various evangelical churches, but also libertarians, neo-reactionaries, anarcho-capitalists, and militarists, among others (Stefanoni, 2021).

On the other hand, in terms of legislation and public policies, President Fernández fulfilled his campaign promises regarding the recognition and expansion of the rights of women and sexual minorities. In relation to women's reproductive rights, he was the main promoter of Law 27,610 on the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (IVE), decriminalizing abortion and guaranteeing access to this practice for women and other pregnant persons, while considering it a matter of public health (a subject that will be elaborated in greater detail in the following sections). Regarding sexual minorities, Law 27,636 was enacted, establishing that the national public sector must reserve at least 1% of its positions for transvestites, transsexuals, and transgender persons and that the private sector will

receive tax incentives to hire trans persons. Also, through presidential decree 479/21, the executive branch implemented a third "non-binary" option for identity documents for those who do not identify as "male" or "female". All these regulations took place during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, showing an important commitment on the part of President Fernández to feminists and sexual diversity supporters.

[...] progressive, feminist and leftist sectors raised alarm after the legislative result, not only because of the loss of majorities of the ruling party [...], but also because of the inclusion in the cabinet of ministers [...] who hindered access to abortion in the province of Tucumán.

However, as we have seen, these advances in the recognition and protection of rights did not seem to be enough to convince the citizenry to give continuity to Fernández's work, and in the mid-term legislative elections, the ruling party suffered a major defeat at the hands of the conservative opposition. Progressive, feminist, and leftist sectors sounded alarms after the legislative result, not only because of the loss of majorities of the ruling party and the possible consequences but also because of the inclusion of certain characters in the cabinet of ministers who answer to Cristina Kirchner, such as Juan Manzur, the cabinet leader, who hindered the access to abortion in the province of Tucumán.

These political, social, and economic changes were strongly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The following pages will address in greater depth how anti-gender policies and actors interacted in the context of the pandemic.

## ■ PANDEMIC OVERVIEW

In Argentina, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported on March 3, 2020<sup>1</sup>. On March 7, the Ministry of Health confirmed the first death in the country and in Latin America, a 64-year-old man with pre-existing medical conditions who had travelled to Paris<sup>2</sup>. As of November 2021, 5,288,191 cases of infected persons and 115,924 deaths had been confirmed<sup>3</sup>.

On December 29, 2020, the national vaccination campaign against COVID-19 began with the application of Sputnik V, as Argentina became the first country in the Americas to use the Russian vaccine. The campaign was launched simultaneously throughout the country and had as a priority the voluntary vaccination of health personnel in its first stage<sup>4</sup>. The pace of vaccination accelerated significantly from July onward due to the large number of vaccines received in a sustained manner from May 2021, reaching almost 85 million doses by the end of October<sup>5</sup>.

By the beginning of November, more than 58% of the population had received the complete vaccination schedule (two vaccines) which has dramatically reduced the number of infections and deaths associated with COVID-19. However, Argentina has been strongly affected by the pandemic, as records show that it has had a high rate of infections and deaths, reaching its peak in June 2021 and declining sharply since then. Figures 1 and 2 show the evolution of new cases and deaths, peaking at the end of May and falling significantly since then.

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1 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-51728654>

2 <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/a-un-ano-de-la-primera-muerte-por-covid-argentina-acumula-52-880-fallecidos/20000013-4482090>

3 Organización Mundial de la Salud Argentina. Digital version with real-time data available at: <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/ar>

4 <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20201229-argentina-comienza-campa%C3%B1a-de-vacunaci%C3%B3n-contra-el-covid-19-con-la-sputnik-v>

5 <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202110/572784-vacunas-cansino-argentina-mas-de-85-millones-de-dosis.html>

FIGURE 1



Data extracted from [www.google.com.ar](http://www.google.com.ar), (accessed on November 4th, 2021)

FIGURE 2



Data extracted from [www.google.com.ar](http://www.google.com.ar), (accessed on November 4th, 2021)

It is important to note that none of the Argentine cities saw their health systems collapse despite the high rate of infection and deaths. As of May 20, 2021, the mortality rate caused by COVID-19 was 2,521 deaths per million inhabitants. Comparatively, the figures for other South American countries were as follows: Peru (5,945), Brazil (2,785), Colombia (2,450), Chile (1,940), Bolivia (1,579), Paraguay (2,237) and Uruguay (1,736).

However, the pandemic severely affected Argentina, where more than 90% of the population lives in urban areas. A significant proportion of the urban population is concentrated in shanty towns with high population density and poor housing conditions, and it is these people who have been disproportionately affected by the virus. According to Berniel and Lombardi (2021), "when the pandemic arrived, Argentina was in a critical economic situation with little manoeuvring room after two years of an annual drop in GDP per capita of more than 3%, an inflation rate that reached almost 54% in 2019, and with more than 1 in 3 Argentinians below the poverty line." The confinement and "strict quarantine" measures led to an increase in domestic and gender-based violence, with an increase of at least 18% over the previous year.<sup>6</sup>

## ECONOMIC EFFECTS

The pandemic has had a profound socioeconomic impact on Argentina, which had already been going through a complicated economic crisis unleashed in May 2018 with a sustained increase in inflation, poverty, and unemployment. As Verónica Ocvirk (2020) observes,

*The irruption of the coronavirus swept away everything (...) and shook the structures of a country like Argentina that had a seasonal advantage, but also the hindrance of a productive framework in recession added to the explosive combination of informal work, precarious housing, and lack of access to drinking water.*

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6 <https://www.aa.com.tr/es/mundo/durante-la-cuarentena-en-argentina-aumentaron-en-18-las-llamadas-por-violencia-deg%C3%A9nero/2032532>

The pandemic caused a sharp drop in tax collection, a large contraction in economic activity (as a result of mandatory quarantines), an increase in unemployment (according to the latest available report, almost 155,000 fewer formal jobs in the private sector)<sup>7</sup>, a collapse in industrial production and construction, and an increase in the issuance of currency, causing higher inflation (Gozza & Fontana, 2020). Business groups stated that small and medium-sized companies were especially hard hit (companies that generate 75% of the country's employment). According to a survey conducted by the Argentine Confederation of Medium-Sized Companies (CAME), more than 41,000 SMEs went out of business in 2020, double the number of those that closed down during the 2001-2002 crisis<sup>8</sup>. All this has alarmingly worsened the socioeconomic crisis, increasing the number of poor and indigent people in the country<sup>9</sup>.

However, the support faded over time. [...] By July there was talk of “the longest quarantine in the world” and the wear and tear were already evident [...].

## STATE RESPONSES

The national and provincial governments reacted early to the potential COVID-19 health crisis with movement restrictions and mandatory isolation measures (quarantines). As journalist Verónica Ocvirk (2020) pointed out at the beginning of the pandemic,

*Argentina began to intervene relatively quickly: unlike most European countries, which decided to suspend classes during a period of exponential growth – Italy waited*

7 Report: “Situación y Evolución del trabajo registrado. Mayo 2021 con datos a febrero 2020”, Subsecretaría de Planificación, Estudios y Estadísticas del Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social de Argentina. [http://www.trabajo.gob.ar/downloads/estadisticas/trabajoregistrado/trabajoregistrado\\_2102\\_informe.pdf](http://www.trabajo.gob.ar/downloads/estadisticas/trabajoregistrado/trabajoregistrado_2102_informe.pdf)

8 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56597781>

9 <https://www.infobae.com/economia/2021/03/31/en-el-ano-de-la-pandemia-y-la-cuarentena-la-pobreza-llego-al-42-yafecta-a-194-millones-de-personas/>

*33 days, Spain 38 days, and France 48 days from "case zero" - the government of Alberto Fernández ordered the closure of schools only 13 days after the first case was confirmed and when it had already decreed a health emergency, suspended flights to affected areas (and ordered mandatory isolation for people entering from those places), and authorized the closure of public places. The application of the lockdown was gradual, but forceful and without wavering.*

The early quarantine measures (called "Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation" ordered at the national level by decree 297/2020 of March 20, 2020) enjoyed significant political and social approval during the first months. In this sense, according to a survey carried out by the Catholic University of Argentina, the levels of acceptance of this measure were around 98% for the month of May<sup>10</sup> for the inhabitants of Greater Buenos Aires. At that time, the quarantine was almost total and the images of health systems that had collapsed or were on the verge of collapse in developed countries (first Italy and Spain, then the United Kingdom and the United States) generated significant public support, which, however, faded over time. By June (one month later), another survey revealed that support had dropped to 76%. By July, there was talk of "the world's longest quarantine" and the erosion of support was already evident<sup>11</sup>. When a new quarantine was ordered for April 2021 due to a sharp spike in infections and deaths linked to COVID-19, only 42% of the population said they would "respect" the government's decision and abide by the quarantine<sup>12</sup>.

Regarding quarantine management, the national Ministry of Health established a scheme divided into five phases, ranging from "strict isolation" to "new normality". The implementation of each phase depends on the speed of contagion and affects the movement of people. The following scheme was presented:

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10 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/268373-apoyo-casi-total-a-la-cuarentena-en-el-amba>

11 <https://www.elindependiente.com/politica/2020/09/02/hartazgo-en-argentina-por-la-cuarentena-mas-larga-del-mundo/>

12 <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/coronavirus/encuesta-restricciones-solo-42-por-ciento-respetaria-vuelta-a-fase-1-cuarentena.phtml>

	1. Aislamiento estricto	2. Aislamiento administrativo	3. Segmentación geográfica	4. Reapertura progresiva	5. Nueva normalidad
Autorizados	Solo servicios esenciales	Nuevas autorizaciones	Excepciones provinciales	Excepciones provinciales	Con hábitos de higiene y cuidado sostenido
Prohibiciones	Todo el resto	Prohibiciones nacionales	Prohibiciones nacionales	Prohibiciones nacionales	
Movilidad de la población	Hasta el 10%	Hasta el 25%	Hasta el 50%	Hasta el 75%	Más del 75%
Tiempo de duplicación de los casos	Menos de 5 días	5 a 15 días	15 a 25 días	Más de 25 días	
Geográfico	Homogéneo	Excepciones nacionales	Segmentación por criterio epidemiológico	Restricciones locales	Homogéneo

The first three phases involve measures of isolation and movement restrictions, while the fourth phase allows movement with "social distancing" to prevent overcrowding and possible outbreaks. The transition to the last two phases took place in some sectors of the country and for limited periods of time (for example, in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, only in November did they move to phase 4).

On the other hand, the national government launched a series of economic measures to alleviate the effects of the crisis, including<sup>13</sup>:

1. Emergency family income (a subsidy of 10,000 Argentinean pesos for families in economically vulnerable conditions).
2. Suspension or elimination of taxes and fees.
3. Granting of soft loans and payment by the national government of 50% of employees' salaries to benefit small and medium-sized companies.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/economia/medidas-economicas-COVID19>

4. Freezing of rents and suspension of evictions and service cuts due to non-payment.
5. Increase in the minimum wage.

Furthermore, various provincial and municipal governments launched measures to alleviate the economic effects of the pandemic. However, all these measures have been unable to neutralize the effects of the economic and social crisis. The economy contracted by almost 10 per cent in 2020, marking the third consecutive year of recession. In addition, the pandemic "has accelerated an exodus of foreign investment, which has decreased the value of the Argentine peso, increasing the costs of imports such as food and fertilizer and keeping the inflation rate above 40 per cent. More than four out of ten Argentines are mired in poverty"<sup>14</sup>.

## PRE-PANDEMIC POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

The political climate generated by the Argentine presidential campaign held in 2019 had a strong impact on the pre-pandemic economic and social discussions. At that time the incumbent President Mauricio Macri was seeking reelection with the political coalition "Together for Change" and was opposed by Alberto Fernández and Cristina Kirchner of the "Front for All", who intended to retake power after the defeat suffered in 2015. The government of Mauricio Macri was unable to achieve what he had proposed in his previous presidential campaign, and while there was a large cut in public spending and an increase in social inequality, inflation remained very high and in the absence of international investments, the Macri government took on significant public debt facilitated by the International Monetary Fund. In this context, the population's dissatisfaction with Macri's administration was evident.

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14 <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2021/04/21/espanol/argentina-crisis.html>

While the economic crisis and the increase in poverty and social inequality were the main topics of the presidential debates, the discussion on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion was very much in the spotlight.

The contest was between two political coalitions that were presented as having conflicting views. The presidential ticket Mauricio Macri-Miguel Ángel Pichetto would be the choice of center-right and right-wing groups and of professional middle-class sectors that saw Kirchnerism as the culprit for the country's serious economic problems. During the presidential campaign, then-President Macri argued that all the unpopular decisions that had been taken (such as incurring foreign debt and reducing state aid) would finally bring the anticipated results (reduction of inflation, foreign investments, reduction of poverty and insecurity) during a second term. On the other hand, the "Front for All" was a center-left coalition and alleged that Mauricio Macri's policies would deepen social and economic problems, arguing that the return of Kirchnerism would bring the desired prosperity and stability, thus appealing to the lower and middle strata of the population.

Although the main contest would be between *Juntos por el Cambio* (Together for Change) (Macri) and *Frente para Todos* (Fernández), the electoral contest was conducted in two rounds. The first round of primary elections (called PASO), was held on August 11, 2019, and a total of ten political parties competed. This first election measures public support in order to determine who can run in the general elections<sup>15</sup>. The second round of general elections was held with the participation of six parties. In addition to *Frente para Todos* (which obtained 48.24% of the votes) and *Juntos por el Cambio* (40.28% of the votes), there were *Consenso Federal* (centrist, with ideas of Christian democracy and social market economy, 6.14% of the votes); *Frente de Izquierda y de Trabajadores* (Left

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15 In this regard, only political parties that obtain a minimum of 1.5% of votes are eligible for the next round. In the primary elections, four political parties did not achieve the minimum. These were *Movimiento al Socialismo* (leftist and linked to Trotskyism) with 0.7%; *Frente Patriota* (extreme right wing and linked to neo-Nazi and ultra-nationalist groups) with 0.23%; *Movimiento de Acción Vecinal* (center right wing) with 0.14%; and *Partido Autonomista* (right wing) with 0.13%.

and Workers' Front) (left-wing, 2.16% of the votes); *Frente NOS* (right-wing conservative, nationalist and "pro-life", which obtained 1.71% of the votes); and *Unite por la Libertad y la Dignidad* (right-wing liberal, with 1.47% of the votes).

Although the economic crisis and the increase in poverty and social inequality were the main topics of the presidential debates, the discussion on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion was very much in the spotlight. The candidates of the coalitions *Frente para Todos*, *Frente de Izquierda y de Trabajadores*, and *Movimiento al Socialismo* were in favor of it. The candidates of *Consenso Federal* and *Unite* stated that they were opposed to it but that it would be the national Congress that would be responsible for deciding it, while the candidates of the other political coalitions were against the legalization<sup>16</sup>. The NOS Front most strongly opposed legalizing abortion, presenting itself as the "pro-life" alternative, denouncing "gender ideology", the feminist movement, and progressivism, while defending the values of the "traditional family"<sup>17</sup>. However, due to the low number of votes obtained, the party disbanded after the national elections<sup>18</sup>.

## ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

### THE LEGALIZATION OF ABORTION

The election of Alberto Fernández as president meant an important victory for the feminist movement in favor of the legalization of abortion known as the "Green Tide". President Fernández had been declaring the need to decriminalize abortion for more than 20 years, considering it a public health issue<sup>19</sup>. On November 17, 2020, he announced on social networks that he had sent to Congress for its consideration a bill for the legalization of abortion.

16 <https://www.telesur.tv.net/telesuragenda/postura-candidatos-presidenciales-argentina-aborto-20191022-0017.html>

17 <https://diariopublicable.com/2019/10/08/frente-nos-el-partido-celeste-que-debuto-en-la-paso/>

18 <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2019/11/09/cynthia-hotton-el-frente-nos-ya-caduco/>

19 [https://www.clarin.com/politica/alberto-fernandez-aborto-decision-politica-legalizarlo-\\_0\\_pcgHVOSLS.html](https://www.clarin.com/politica/alberto-fernandez-aborto-decision-politica-legalizarlo-_0_pcgHVOSLS.html)

This second time, the bill had better prospects, not only because of the express support of the president (it should be remembered that former President Macri had enabled the debate, but personally opposed legalization), but also because it was expected to have the necessary majorities in both chambers. The Chamber of Deputies approved the bill on December 10 with 131 votes in favor, 117 against, and 6 abstentions, after more than 20 hours of debate. On December 29 it was the turn of the Senate, which approved the bill with 38 votes in favor, 29 against, and 1 abstention, after 12 hours of debate. It was a "transversal" vote, in the sense that there were positive votes from different political blocks and negative votes from members of the Frente para Todos.

The new law 27,610 called "Ley de Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo" (Law on the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy) (hereinafter IVE) allows abortion in all cases up to the fourteenth week of pregnancy and in cases of rape or risk to life or health with no time limit. It also establishes that it applies to not only women but also "persons with other gender identities with gestational capacity". Finally, together with this law, the "one thousand days" bill was approved, aimed at reinforcing the IVE by establishing a system of integral health care during pregnancy and early childhood at a national level (a system that was previously implemented in the province of San Juan).

From the president's announcement to promote the IVE bill until its approval, there was an important resistance from conservative religious anti-gender and anti-abortion sectors which carried out different opposition strategies:

## **I. ACTIONS OF INTIMIDATION OF LEGISLATORS**

The first of these were actions of direct intimidation against legislators who expressed their support for the bill. Various deputies were the target of demonstrations or intimidating actions by these groups prior to the vote on the law. Thus, for example, Congresswoman Laura Russo for the province of Buenos Aires suffered an attack at her

home in the city of Escobar<sup>20</sup>. The same happened with Congressman Facundo Suárez Lastra (in the city of Tandil) and Congresswoman Carolina Gaillard (Concordia)<sup>21</sup>. Given the seriousness of the situation and in order to guarantee the freedom and security of all those who had voted for the law, the Chamber of Deputies itself created a commission of lawyers specialized in criminal law to investigate the possible criminal activities of these groups<sup>22</sup>.

[...] there are whole hospitals that lack health professionals willing to perform abortions, and where they push misinformation and instil fear in patients.

## II. DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Another line of attacks concerns systematic disinformation. The use of social networks for the dissemination of false news and disinformation to the population has been one of the main strategies used by these groups. Although most of the fake news had already been spread before, in December 2020, posters appeared in the city of Buenos Aires with texts that read "Legal Abortion - how to solve Down's Syndrome", "Legal Abortion - reduce poverty by killing the poor", and "Legal Abortion - so no one will find out and you can keep being raped", signed by a "Campaign for the Winning of Rights". The posters used the same typography and green colour historically used by the Campaign for Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion, and were copied on "anti-rights" accounts in order to spread the disinformation.

20 <http://www.primera plana.com.ar/aborto-escracharon-la-casa-de-la-diputada-laura-russo-esposa-del-intendente-de-escobar/>

21 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/308991-escrache-antiderechos-a-la-diputada-carolina-gaillard>

22 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/308997-aborto-legal-diputados-busca-poner-un-limite-a-los-escraches>



### III. ANTI-ABORTION DEMONSTRATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER THE LEGAL REFORM

There were also massive demonstrations against the law all over the country, with a large turnout in the cities of Buenos Aires, Cordoba, Rosario, and Mendoza. The most important one, organized by civil society organizations and with strong support from the Catholic church and various evangelical churches, took place on Saturday, December 26, with the slogan "the human right to life"<sup>23</sup>.

Although the IVE law was enacted on January 14, 2021, these groups continue their crusade, having launched a nationwide litigation campaign requesting the declaration of the unconstitutionality of the law. In this campaign, as of November 1, at least thirty-six legal actions of this kind have been filed, with several rulings by the courts tending to declare the unconstitutionality of the law and the suspension of its application, such as in the provinces of Chaco<sup>24</sup>, Salta<sup>25</sup>, San Juan<sup>26</sup>, Cordoba<sup>27</sup>, and Buenos Aires<sup>28</sup>.

23 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/308746-antiderechos-en-las-calles>

24 <https://www.dw.com/es/argentina-jueza-suspende-la-ley-de-aborto-en-chaco/a-56377778>

25 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/347185-aborto-un-juez-antiderechos-de-salta-impidio-el-acceso-de-un>

26 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/339264-san-juan-la-justicia-suspendio-una-ive-por-pedido-de-la-expa>

27 See interview: "Intentos a obstaculización del acceso a la IVE en Córdoba por vía judicial y las resistencias feministas" <https://sociales.unc.edu.ar/sites/default/files/INTENTOS%20DE%20OBSTACULIZACION%20C3%93N%20IVE.pdf>

28 <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2021/06/08/mar-del-plata-un-juez-federal-ordeno-suspender-la-ley-del-aborto/>

More worrisome is the reaction of doctors, nurses, and other health professionals who quickly declared themselves "conscientious objectors" (something the law expressly permits). In traditionally conservative rural areas and provinces, where the Catholic and Evangelical churches have considerable influence, the law faces widespread opposition. Thus, for example, there are entire hospitals lacking health professionals willing to perform abortions where they promote misinformation and instil fear in patients. According to Daniel Politi (2021),

*Maria Laura Lerma, a psychologist in Quebrada de Humahuaca, a remote mountain valley in Jujuy, said doctors often try to scare pregnant women into not having abortions. Health workers, she said, "tell young girls that their fetus is going to turn into a goblin. It's one of several popular beliefs that is in the collective imagination". Lerma belongs to an abortion rights coalition of health care providers. Recently, Lerma said, a woman in her 20s came to see her and said she was terrified at the prospect of having an abortion because a gynaecologist had told her it would cause cancer.*

This makes it clear that anti-abortion forces are doing everything they can to obstruct access to rights guaranteed by law and underscores that the legal discussion on the question of access to abortion in Argentina is far from over.

## **DENIALISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

Although the conservative religious anti-gender and anti-abortion sectors were very active during the period of discussion of the abortion law, it is important to highlight that their actions were not limited to this discussion, but that these sectors have been strongly present denouncing and attacking first the pandemic response measures dictated by the national and provincial governments of quarantine and social distancing and then the deployment of vaccines against the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic provoked an important mobilization in the streets and social networks of those anti-quarantine and anti-vaccine movement forces. It is important to note that these demonstrations are not limited to

Argentina, but are part of a global movement that is mainly against compliance with social isolation measures for the prevention of contagion and other health policies that have been established by local and national authorities to reduce or prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their respective jurisdictions.

The pandemic is thus presented as an opportunity for certain groups to obtain supporters and resources through the dissemination of theories and false news, appealing to the fear and insecurity of the citizenry.

This is a very heterogeneous group whose activism is done online through forums, social networks, and other virtual platforms and in the organization of marches and protests in public. The reasons for opposing vaccination and social distancing measures are varied and include economic reasons (linked to the negative economic impact caused by these measures), political reasons (linked to government interference in people's freedom), and pseudoscientific reasons (linked to the dissemination of false information and the dissemination of a wide range of conspiracy theories). Globally, this movement<sup>29</sup> is part of an extreme right-wing current, and many of its members actively adhere to ideas put forward by neo-Nazi, libertarian, anarcho-capitalist and religious fundamentalist groups.

In Argentina, there have been numerous "anti-quarantine" marches in different parts of the country. During these marches, demonstrators displayed different banners and slogans: denying the existence of a pandemic, vindicating leaders of the last military dictatorship, blaming cellular towers with 5G technology for the spread of the virus, questioning the origin and effectiveness of vaccines, and denouncing the implementation of a new world order<sup>30</sup>. In addition to the Argentinean flags, sky blue scarves, symbolizing opposition to the legalization of abortion, very quickly flooded these protests.

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29 <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2020/05/02/protestas-higienicas-teorias-conspirativas-y-persecuciones-laextrema-derecha-saca-provecho-de-la-pandemia/>

30 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/270781-coronavirus-los-anticuarentena-fueron-al-obelisco>

Self-described "pro-life" and anti-gender groups, generally ultra-Catholic and evangelical fundamentalists, were present at these marches, but were also very active in the digital arena. For example, the Argentine conservative religious collective "Con Mis Hijos no te Metas" (Don't Mess with My Children) has claimed that the "anti-quarantine" and pro-freedom marches are part of the "sky blue wave - anti-abortion movement". It has also been very active in disseminating false news and in opposing and boycotting social distancing measures<sup>31</sup>. The "anti-quarantine" movement, of which anti-gender and anti-abortion groups are part, has had an important influence in both the public and virtual space, generating and disseminating false news and conspiracy theories.

The marches, demonstrations, and anti-quarantine and anti-vaccine digital activism have made some reactionary figures even more visible, and they have proliferated their videos praising the marches and criticizing quarantine on platforms such as YouTube. Eduardo Prestofilippo, better known as "El Presto", used this social network to do so, acquiring a large number of subscribers in a short time (he currently has about 340,000). He represents the youngest and most reactionary wing of the Argentine political field, leading an intimidating group of young ultra-libertarian and anarcho-capitalist militants who attack, discredit, harass, coerce, and threaten with death those who think differently than the liberal ideology represented by Gómez Centurión, Espert, Ricardo López Murphy, and Javier Milei.

Agustín Laje has also actively used the YouTube platform (with more than one million subscribers) to question the quarantine (which he calls "infectatorship") and reproduce false news and conspiracy theories in relation to COVID-19, the effectiveness of vaccines, and the governmental measures taken to mitigate its effects. Finally, one cannot fail to mention that many influencers and YouTubers such as Lilian Lemoine also joined the anti-quarantine crusade.

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31 In this regard, a series of videos and reports related to the movement and the "anti-quarantine" marches can be seen on its official web page <https://www.facebook.com/ConMisHijosNoTeMetasArgentinaOK>

According to Micheletto (2021), all these groups "are sewn together by the same ideological thread. They are not only fervent propagators of anti-vaccine and anti-quarantine myths, they are also anti-abortion, anti-Semitic, 'anti-communist', and linked to extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi groups". Among them stands out "Doctors for the Truth", who "are against vaccination and quarantine, but also against the use of masks, because 'it suffocates and brings germs' and is 'one more way of silencing our voice'". They maintain that the pandemic is a global conspiracy that is driven by different interests, including Bill Gates, 5G, and the "world dictatorships" that seek to "subjugate the population". They call people to rise up "against medical tyranny", to "wake up", and to wage "a war for truth".

As the economist Alfredo Zaiat points out, "the quarantine has become a source of political contention where right-wing forces (political and media) gained ground by appealing to society from the emotions (anxiety, freedom), minimizing to the point of hiding the rationality of the data of the pandemic" (Zaiat, 2020). This space has been particularly fertile for the propagation of disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories.

As was already warned in a July 2020 report of the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, the globalization of COVID-19 generated a large number of conspiracy theories and disinformation that quickly spread from social networks and the Internet, and consequently "extreme right-wing groups and individuals have sought to benefit from the pandemic, using some of these conspiracy theories in their attempt to radicalize, recruit, and inspire attacks"<sup>32</sup>. The pandemic thus presents itself as an opportunity for certain groups to gain adherents and resources through the dissemination of theories and fake news, appealing to the fear and insecurity of the citizenry and eventually positioning themselves better politically in the public space. These groups promise to explain the causes, point out the culprits, and provide a solution in a world full of doubts and uncertainties.

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32 The full report is available at [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted\\_trends\\_alert\\_extreme\\_right-wing\\_terrorism.pdf](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted_trends_alert_extreme_right-wing_terrorism.pdf)

## FINAL WORDS

In an article on the "anti-progressive youth", published by elDiarioAR in June 2021, the authors stated that:

*[...] 2020 was also the year in which these youth, labelled by the media as "libertarian" or "right-wing", began to be recognized as political actors [...]. Candidates José Luis Espert and Gómez Centurión hired anti-progressive influencers as campaign advisors and in some cases included them in the slates, as in the case of Lemoine with Espert and the YouTuber El Presto with the Libertarian Party in Córdoba. [In this context, social networks occupy a central place in this movement]. On the one hand, they are the forum that brings many young people closer to an anti-progressive discourse, whether in its liberal, reactionary, conservative, or nationalist aspects. That approach can be through some video or tweet from an influencer, or through interactions between users of the same ecosystem. In addition, the patterns of this interaction, marked by the will to provoke and often harass progressives, are constitutive of the group's identity<sup>33</sup>.*

The authors conclude their analysis by recognizing that the significant growth experienced by this "anti-progressive youth" constitutes "one of the most resounding achievements of the conservative advance, in which these young people play a central role". Although the arrival of Alberto Fernández could have been considered an important breakthrough for progressive groups, especially those linked to the sexual and reproductive rights of women and sexual diversity, the strong economic crisis worsened by the emergence of COVID-19 and the unpopular measures taken by the national government to contain the advance of the virus augur a very complex scenario of difficult governance.

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33 [https://www.eldiarioar.com/la-reaccion-conservadora/enemigo-ideologia-genero-juventud\\_132\\_8030547.html](https://www.eldiarioar.com/la-reaccion-conservadora/enemigo-ideologia-genero-juventud_132_8030547.html)

The mid-term elections referred to in the introduction reflect not only the dissatisfaction of the citizenry with the Fernández administration but also a marked turn to the right-wing alternatives that have emerged. Of these, Javier Milei's political party "La Libertad Avanza" seems to be the most radical and reactionary alternative since the democratic restoration of 1983, with great support from young people and the sympathy of middle sectors tired of the traditional bipartisanship. The US's experience with Trump and the Brazilian experience with Bolsonaro show that it is possible for people with ultra-conservative political banners and ultra-liberal economic agendas to come to power. Although Argentina was presented as a "progressive" example by Fernández, this may change very soon, demonstrating that advances in legislative and public policy matters of sexual and reproductive rights are not completed with the mere publication of laws in the official gazette, but constitute a constant struggle that leftist sectors and movements that organize around human rights, gender, sexuality, and reproductive autonomy must sustain over time.

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# ANTI-GENDER POLITICS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BRAZIL: DEBRIS OF THE BOLSONARO ERA

Sonia Corrêa  
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## INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the state of anti-gender politics in Brazil in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its starting point is the study on the anti-gender crusades that have emerged since the mid-2000s, contributing, in 2018, to the election of extreme right-wing candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro (Correa & Kalil, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. This turn to the right was preceded by a process of incitement of deep layers of socio-cultural and political conservatism dating back to the mid-2000s. In this incitement, the scarecrow of "gender ideology" portrayed as the new face of Marxism (or "PTism") played a crucial role. Additionally, the results of the 2018 election were also determined by the spread of misinformation, or digital populism, as defined by Cesarino (2019). Bolsonaro, despite his statist political leanings, allied himself with ultra-neoliberal sectors and thereby gained the support of a significant portion of the economic elite. No less important, "Brazilian rightism" was and remains connected to international political networks, whether they are related to anti-gender offensives or associated with the broader and more complex field of forces of the so-called new right.

Bolsonaro has many similarities to other right-wing populist leaders such as Trump (US), Orbán (Hungary), Erdogan (Turkey), and Modi (India), but his political profile is unique. He is a military man, expelled from the army for insurgency<sup>2</sup>, and his and his family's ties to militia networks are well-known<sup>3</sup>. Between November 2019, when he left the Social Liberal Party (PSL) that he was affiliated with when elected, and December 2021,

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1 <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/Ebook-Brasil%2020200204.pdf>

2 <https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/reveja/o-artigo-em-veja-e-a-prisao-de-bolsonaro-nos-anos-1980/>

3 See: <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-04-24/a-ligacao-do-cla-bolsonaro-com-paramilitares-e-milicianos-se-estreitou-com-a-eleicao-de-flavio.html>. And also: <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/projeto-bula/reportagem/dez-fatos-que-ligam-a-familia-bolsonaro-a-milicianos/>

he governed without belonging to any political party<sup>4</sup>. Above all, as political scientist Marcos Nobre argues (2019), the production of chaos is his governing method. Since 2019, Bolsonaro has created a state of permanent disorder to test institutions, keep his political base in a state of war, and thereby achieve the democratic corrosion that is his main goal.

Anti-gender crusades have been and remain an inherent component of this dynamic of de-democratization. Fassin (2021) called post-2019 Brazilian conditions an "intersectional laboratory" where ultra-neoliberalism, neoconservatism, anti-gender ideology, and racism merge in a dynamic that does not hide neofascist characteristics. In this scenario, while attacks on gender continue to proliferate in society, anti-gender ideology has penetrated the state apparatus and is being systematically translated into government policies (ABIA-SPW *et al*, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. As per Fernando Serrano's (2021) analysis, the Brazilian case forcefully illustrates how anti-gender politics are, in fact, "politics" by other means<sup>6</sup>.

When the first cases of COVID were identified, in March 2020, the "Bolsonarist way" of governing was in full swing. The pandemic would become a new battlefield on which the government systematically used a broad denialist arsenal while continuing to foment anti-democratic provocations. The management of the health crisis was both determined by this ideological turmoil and compromised by serious conflicts between the executive and other powers, between the federal spheres, the presidency, the governors, and mayors. It would also be undermined by the turnover and inefficiency that ensued in the Ministry of Health.

In the following pages, we first provide a concise overview of the evolution of the pandemic and a more detailed analysis of what happened in the spheres of health crisis management and broader political dynamics. Next, we offer a brief survey of how, in Brazil, anti-gender ideology and related agendas have been integrated into the state apparatus

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4 This anomaly is explained by the fragmentation and lack of ideological cohesion of the Brazilian party system.

5 <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/10/E-book-SOGI-21102021.pdf>

6 <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-ES-08092021.pdf>

and also how, even in a catastrophic pandemic situation, attacks on gender and the right to abortion coincided with denialist protests that included the propagation of conspiracy theories against vaccines, used as new fuel to advance anti-democratic agendas.

## THE PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Brazil on February 26, 2020, by the Ministry of Health<sup>7</sup> in a 61-year-old patient who had arrived from Italy. The declaration of community transmission<sup>8</sup> in the country came soon after, in March, when the first death from the disease was also recorded. From then on, the numbers only increased, driven by the negationist and tumultuous management of the health crisis.

The rate of infections and deaths remained high due to denialism and institutional mismanagement and would increase sharply from December 2020 onwards.

In the first five months of the pandemic, half of the Brazilian municipalities registered at least one case of COVID-19, most of them in the northern region (Amazon). The rate of infections and deaths remained high due to denialism and institutional mismanagement and would increase sharply from December 2020 onwards. It was then that in the northern city of Manaus the hecatomb of overcrowding in hospitals accompanied by a lack of oxygen occurred. In May 2021, at the peak of the second wave of the pandemic largely associated with the Gamma variant (which appeared in the Amazon), 448,208 people had already died in Brazil, a number only surpassed, at that time, by the United States (and followed by India, Mexico, and the United Kingdom). In August, the number of deaths reached

7 <https://www.unasus.gov.br/noticia/coronavirus-brasil-confirma-primeiro-caso-da-doenca>

8 Community transmission is the occurrence of cases unrelated to a confirmed case or in a defined area. That is, it is where it is not possible to trace the origin of the infection, indicating that the virus circulates among people, regardless of whether or not they have travelled abroad. Available at: <https://coronavirus.ceara.gov.br/o-que-e-transmissao-comunitaria/>

600,000 before beginning to plateau. By December, the daily death toll had dropped to 80 per day on average, and, according to Conass (National Council of Health Secretaries), Brazil had accumulated 22,191,949 cases and 616,878 deaths caused by COVID-19<sup>9</sup>.

However, when this tally was already finalized, in mid-December, the Omicron variant triggered a new outbreak of COVID-19 in Brazil. Although less lethal, the infection numbers quickly became stratospheric, and the functioning of the health services was again affected, not least because of the large number of infected professionals.

## THE VACCINATION TRAJECTORY

In January 2021, after long procrastination by the federal government, ANVISA (National Health Surveillance Agency) finally approved the emergency use of two vaccines. One of them was developed by Fiocruz in partnership with Oxford University and the AstraZeneca laboratory, and the other, CoronaVac, was developed by the Instituto Butantã in partnership with the Chinese laboratory Sinovac, after direct negotiation by the government of the state of São Paulo<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the initial delays and the many obstacles created by Bolsonaro, as of March, the vaccination advanced very quickly. Data from the Press Consortium show that in December 2021, around 65.41% of the Brazilian population was completely vaccinated, a percentage that reached almost 100% in São Paulo and other smaller cities<sup>11</sup>. That is, despite political obstacles and anti-vaccine campaigns, vaccination in Brazil can be considered a success. This can be explained by a combination of factors: the universal coverage and pervasiveness of the public health system, very few local managers adhering to the antivaccine ideology, and the low level of vaccine hesitancy in the country.

9 <https://www.conass.org.br/painelconasscovid19/>

10 Prior to the approval of the vaccines, the federal government created the National Operationalization Plan for Covid-19 Vaccination, which was the subject of controversy because experts cited in the plan came forward to say that, in fact, they had not been consulted in its preparation. Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/saude/apos-receber-criticas-saude-amplia-grupo-prioritario-para-vacina-contra-covid/>

11 [https://especiais.g1.globo.com/bemestar/vacina/2021/mapa-brasil-vacina-covid/?\\_ga=2.10670836.1531140486.1639340347-6dc7d2fb-34a3-c792-d56f-d1f66342a531](https://especiais.g1.globo.com/bemestar/vacina/2021/mapa-brasil-vacina-covid/?_ga=2.10670836.1531140486.1639340347-6dc7d2fb-34a3-c792-d56f-d1f66342a531)

## DIFFERENTIATED VULNERABILITY

Research conducted by Fiocruz<sup>12</sup> shows that the regional differences in hospital mortality from COVID-19 are consistent with regional inequalities that preceded the pandemic. This same pattern had already been recorded in the HIV-AIDS and Zika epidemics but was dramatically highlighted and aggravated by the current pandemic.

To evaluate the differential impact of the pandemic, it is also necessary to consider local inequalities. A study by IPEA (Institute for Applied Economic Research)<sup>13</sup> shows that coronavirus infection has killed more in the periphery than in upscale neighborhoods in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This is illustrated by the tragedy of the first female victim of COVID-19 in the state of Rio de Janeiro, a 63-year-old domestic worker who lived in a city outside the capital and was exposed to the virus by her employer whom she cared for and who had been infected on a trip to Italy. It is also essential to account for racial and gender discrepancies as does the study by the Solidarity Research Network that analyzed the lethality of COVID-19 in the different sectors of the labor market, revealing that in all professional occupations, being black or a woman means a higher risk of infection and death<sup>14</sup>.

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12 To learn more, see: Ranzani, Otavio T. et al. "Characterisation of the first 250000 hospital admissions for COVID-19 in Brazil: a retrospective analysis of nationwide data". *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 2021. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30560-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30560-9/fulltext) Accessed: 27 Jan 2021.

13 To learn more, see: Ranzani, Otavio T. et al. "Characterisation of the first 250000 hospital admissions for COVID-19 in Brazil: a retrospective analysis of nationwide data". *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 2021. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30560-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30560-9/fulltext) Accessed: 27 Jan 2021.

14 <https://redepesquisasolidaria.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/boletimpps-34-20set2021-1.pdf>

## GENDER VIOLENCE

In Brazil as in the rest of the world, the perception prevails that gender violence, including sexual violence, has increased due to the pandemic. It is, however, difficult to demonstrate this quantitatively because one of the impacts of the crisis was the clear reduction in the reports of these occurrences.

The Yearbook 2021 of the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety informs that, even with fewer reports, the numbers are of great magnitude<sup>15</sup>. In 2020, 230,160 women reported gender violence, 630 cases per day. There were also 3,913 homicides of women, of which 1,350 were registered as femicides (stable in relation to 2019). The magazine *Gênero&Número* published a study on violence in the city of Rio de Janeiro<sup>16</sup> that identified 44,447 cases of domestic violence in the city (250 per day) and 65 femicides, with an increase in homicides between September and December 2020 when the confinement rules were temporarily relaxed.

The rates of sexual violence also continue to climb even though the volume of reports has decreased. In 2020, 60,926 reports of sexual violence in Brazil were analyzed by the Forum, with 16,047 cases of rape of adult women and 44,879 of vulnerable people, 87% girls and 13% boys<sup>17</sup>.

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15 <https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/6-a-violencia-contra-meninas-e-mulheres-no-ano-pandemico.pdf>

16 <https://www.generonumero.media/violencia-mulher-rj/>

17 <https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/7-os-registros-de-violencia-sexual-durante-a-pandemia-de-covid-19.pdf>

## REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND MATERNAL DEATH IN THE PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, reproductive health policies were directly attacked, especially legal abortion services. As for maternal death, in Brazil, where the numbers have long remained very high when considering that more than 90% of births are in hospitals (between 50 and 60 per 100,000 live births), despite the maternalist ideology of the Bolsonaro government, the impact of COVID-19 was also catastrophic. In May 2020, Brazil recorded the world's highest absolute number of maternal deaths in the context of the health crisis (114 women killed)<sup>18</sup>.

A year and a half later, a technical paper published by SPW<sup>19</sup> reported that in the state capital of Roraima in the far north, 50% of pregnant women infected with COVID-19 had died and that this percentage was also high in other capitals. It also notes that the maternal death rate in Rio de Janeiro was 201.7/100,000, rising to 223/100,000 for black women. In Recife, the rate was 148.4/100,000 live births in general and 185/100,000 live births for black women (85% of the registered deaths). These numbers coincide with those of countries where most births take place outside of hospitals. Above all, as is well-known, the incidence of maternal death is a robust indicator of inequality in gender, race, and social status.

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18 Takemoto, M. L. S., Menezes, M. de O., Andreucci, C. B., Nakamura-Pereira, M., Amorim, M. M.R., Katz, L. y Knobe, R. (2020). The tragedy of COVID-19 in Brazil: 124 maternal deaths and counting. *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*. <https://obgyn.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ijgo.13300>

19 <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/11/Artigo-RUP-Sandra-Valongueiro-final.pdf>

## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

As in the rest of the world, the economic and social effects of COVID-19 were massive in Brazil. They aggravated conditions worsened by a decade of recession (2011-2020), during which the cumulative GDP increase was 2.7% (annual average of only 0.26%.)<sup>20</sup>. The crisis resulting from the pandemic destroyed entire sectors of the economy, especially the more fragile informal sectors (the services sector, for example). It also completely destroyed the gains that had been made in the 2000s, when the income of the poorest increased by 69% and inequality, although still high, was reduced<sup>21</sup>.

Even before Covid, the persistent economic crisis had been aggravated by the austerity measures adopted by the Temer government that established a minimum ceiling for public spending until 2026. These rules were not only maintained by the Bolsonaro government but were applied in a selective and politically-biased manner<sup>22</sup>. The ensuing scenario is one of devastation. In 2021, the number of people living in extreme poverty reached 17 million (there were 9 million in 2010) and unemployment affected 14 million people, among whom a substantial percentage are women who until then were employed in the informal labor market, as in the case of domestic workers.

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20 As Diniz Alves shows, when compared to countries with equivalent income levels, Brazil's growth has in fact been declining since the 1980s. This trend was not offset by the substantial growth levels recorded between 2005 and 2011. Available at <https://www.ecodebate.com.br/2018/11/07/a-trajetoria-submergente-da-nacao-brasileira-em-10-figuras-artigo-de-jose-eustaquio-diniz-alves/>

21 Revista Veja (2011, maio 3). Brasil alcança em 2010 o nível mais baixo de desigualdade de renda. <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/brasil-atingiu-em-2010-menor-patamar-historico-de-desigualdade-de-renda/>

22 The Constitutional Amendment of Public Spending, known as the PEC of Death. Available at: [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/constituicao/emendas/emc/emc95.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/emendas/emc/emc95.htm)

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The Gini index increased by almost 2 points from 2010. As has also happened elsewhere, a small number of Brazilian billionaires have become richer, and some of them are, paradoxically, owners of private healthcare companies. Even more scandalously, since the pandemic struck, the luxury goods market has increased its profits dramatically<sup>23</sup>. In contrast, at the base of the pyramid, the levels of hunger and food insecurity have grown exponentially. According to research by the Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security, in 2020, 19 million Brazilians will have gone hungry, twice as many as in 2009<sup>24</sup>. Pandemic hunger affects mostly black and brown women of low education and heads of families<sup>25</sup>. The iconic image of Brazil in 2021 has been the line of women and children, mostly black, waiting at the supermarkets' trash cans to get bone donations.

No less importantly, draconian fiscal constraints have affected the proper functioning of the Unified Health System, which has undermined, at least partially, the ability to respond to the pandemic. The Bolsonaro government's selective fiscal tightening has drastically impacted the funding of public universities and research institutions whose budgets have declined 29% since 2019<sup>26</sup>, thus affecting the institutional capacity to measure the health and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.

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23 O Globo (2021, October 31). Elite ignora a crise e turbina mercado de luxo. <https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/vCEqXs>

24 [http://olheparaafome.com.br/VIGISAN\\_Inseguranca\\_alimentar.pdf](http://olheparaafome.com.br/VIGISAN_Inseguranca_alimentar.pdf)

25 <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2021-04/pesquisa-revela-que-19-milhoes-passaram-fome-no-brasil-no-fim-de-2020>

26 Available at: <https://jornal.usp.br/ciencias/orcamento-2021-compromete-o-futuro-da-ciencia-brasileira/>. The scarcity of resources for research can be dramatically illustrated by the almost total cutoff of resources to carry out the 2020 Census (postponed to 2022), which were only restored after a decisive intervention by the Supreme Court.

## MITIGATING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Despite its radically neoliberal ideology, the Bolsonaro government has implemented a broad and generous emergency support policy that, however, was not designed by the executive, but by the national Congress. The original mitigation proposal presented by the government, in April 2020, was to guarantee a monthly transfer of 200 reais (\$40) to beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família Program, informal workers, and micro-entrepreneurs affected by the crisis. However, during the deliberations on the Provisional Measure presented to Congress, this amount was increased to 600 reais (\$120), ensuring 1,200 reais (\$240) for female heads of household (between June and August 2020). This change was made without the knowledge of the Ministry of Economy. Afterwards, the benefit was reduced to 300 reais (\$60), and the program was extended until September 2021. These amounts are higher than those of the Bolsa Família and have been received by a much larger portion of the population (more than 126 million people)<sup>27</sup>.

Although designed by Congress, the program had an immediate effect on Bolsonaro's popularity, which increased from 29% in December 2019 to 40% in September 2020<sup>28</sup>. This effect led the government to adopt heterodox fiscal measures to finance Brazil Aid, approved in November 2021, which will maintain the transfer policy (400 reais or \$80) until the end of 2022, with an openly electoral objective. At the end of 2021, when his popularity was plummeting, Bolsonaro issued a provisional measure to renegotiate the debts of FIES, the government's student loan program<sup>29</sup>. Other measures of this type will certainly be adopted by the end of 2022.

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27 [https://www.gov.br/acl\\_users/credentials\\_cookie\\_auth/require\\_login?came\\_from=https%3A//www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/financas-impostos-e-gestao-publica/600-dias/arquivos-de-600-dias/cidadania-auxilio-emergencial-chega-a-60-da-populacao-brasileira](https://www.gov.br/acl_users/credentials_cookie_auth/require_login?came_from=https%3A//www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/financas-impostos-e-gestao-publica/600-dias/arquivos-de-600-dias/cidadania-auxilio-emergencial-chega-a-60-da-populacao-brasileira)

28 Revista Piauí: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/popularidade-de-bolsonaro-cresceu-11-pontos-percentuais-no-periodo-do-auxilio-emergencial/>

29 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/educacao/2021/12/bolsonaro-edita-mp-para-perdoar-ate-92-das-dividas-de-estudantes-com-o-fies.shtml>

## THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE: NEO-DARWINISM AS A METHOD

On March 24, Bolsonaro announced that COVID-19 would be just a "little flu" and that the government's priority would be to preserve the health of the economy<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, he said, mayors and governors should not impose lockdowns, but rather prioritize the "return to normalcy". According to Varella, Zeine, and Moretto (2020), this first speech foreshadowed the management of the pandemic and shaped the response of Bolsonaro's base to the health crisis.

From then on, the presidential narrative would become more grotesque every day. In March 2021, when the number of deaths was skyrocketing, he declared, "Enough of this nonsense. How long are you going to cry?". As soon as the epidemic began, Bolsonaro's sons propagated the Trumpist thesis that the "virus was invented by the Chinese". As this slogan complicated the commercial relationship between Brazil and China, the discourse was abandoned but returned later in conspiracies about the risks of "communist vaccines" bought by the government of São Paulo. When the vaccination started, he made a morbid joke saying that "if you take the vaccine, you will become an alligator". In October 2021, just before travelling to the G20, he stated that those who had taken the vaccine were at risk of contracting HIV-AIDS<sup>31</sup>.

The inaugural "little flu" speech also launched a pitched battle between Bolsonaro and the then-health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, and state and municipal managers who proposed lockdown measures, social isolation, and the wearing of masks. Mandetta left office in April 2020, and since then Brazil has had three more health ministers. Nelson Teich was in office for one month. He was replaced by Eduardo Pazuello, an active-duty general aligned with Bolsonaro who left the ministry in March 2021. He was followed by Marcelo Queiroga, also subservient to the president.

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30 <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/03/24/leia-o-pronunciamento-do-presidente-jair-bolsonaro-na-integra.htm>

31 A lawsuit was started by the Supreme Court against the president because of this statement.

The abuses of the federal management of the pandemic were the object of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission of COVID-19 (CPI-COVID) that was convened in the federal Senate between April and September 2021 to investigate allegations of corruption in the purchase of vaccines, the crisis in Manaus (AM), and many other extremely serious incidents which are compiled in a report of more than a thousand pages. There is ample evidence of procrastination and corruption in the purchase of vaccines, the deliberate neglect of vulnerable populations, especially indigenous peoples, and the distribution of treatments based on chloroquine and ivermectin, drugs whose use has been rejected as ineffective and dangerous. In Brazil, however, Bolsonaro and his supporters, including the Federal Council of Medicine, have obsessively embraced the so-called early treatment for COVID-19. The therapy was even mentioned in Bolsonaro's speech at the opening of the UN General Assembly in 2021. More seriously, these medications were advertised and distributed by the Ministry of Health and the private service network until September 2021, when they were finally banned on the recommendation of the CPI-COVID<sup>32</sup>. In addition, the CPI confirmed the existence of a parallel cabinet for the management of the pandemic, formed by professionals who directly advised the president without the involvement of the Ministry of Health and ANVISA. This office was another major promoter of early treatment<sup>33</sup>.

In June 2020, physician Arnaldo Litchenstein, director of the Hospital das Clínicas at USP, said in no uncertain terms that the federal government's response to the COVID-19 crisis was a eugenic policy

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32 The promotion of these drugs aimed to disrupt preventive measures and "open up the economy", but it was also a source of profit for the laboratories that produced them. Available at: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,quem-sao-os-empresarios-que-ganham-com-a-cloroquina-no-brasil,70003360677>

33 <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-06-13/quebra-de-sigilo-do-gabinete-da-sombra-deve-detalhar-como-bolsonaro-respaldou-suas-teses-negacionistas-na-pandemia.html>

Thus, the federal government's handling of the pandemic was not only incompetent or negligent. A study conducted by the Center for Research and Studies in Health Law of the Faculty of Public Health of the University of São Paulo, in partnership with the NGO Conectas, analyzed the norms, provisional measures, decrees, bills, and ordinances, and found that the federal government deliberately fostered the spread of the virus. It did this by betting on herd immunity, disseminating false information about the "natural defense" of the Brazilian people, causing the population to be exposed by failing to comply with social distancing measures, trivializing deaths by COVID-19, and attacking governors and mayors who adopted protective measures as well as the press outlets that defended public health measures. The report prepared by the NGO Article 19 (2021), in turn, compiled evidence showing that the policy of denial and misinformation may have caused 430,000 deaths by COVID-19 in Brazil, highlighting the role of the federal executive, Bolsonaro.

In the book *A Bailarina da Morte*, Schwarcz and Starling (2020) revisit the Spanish flu crisis in Brazil showing how also in 1917-1918 state and non-state actors denied the risks of the pandemic and made statements such as "the Brazilian climate is warm and, therefore, would not be favorable to the spread of the virus" or even "since God is Brazilian the population will be saved". The crucial difference, however, is that the Bolsonaro government converted denialism into state policy, a deliberate choice of health recklessness in the name of preserving the economy and "individual freedom". In June 2020, physician Arnaldo Litchenstein, director of the Hospital das Clínicas at USP, said in no uncertain terms that the federal government's response to the COVID-19 crisis was a eugenic policy<sup>34</sup>. Considered in some circles as excessive, this interpretation was, in fact, prescient.

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34 <https://outraspalavras.net/outrasaude/a-eugenia-bolsonarista/>

## **POLITICS IN THE PANDEMIC: HEALTH CRISIS AS THEATER OF "PERMANENT WAR"**

Since assuming the presidency in January 2019, the politics of the Bolsonaro government have been implemented as a "permanent war," as a redemptive mission to "purify" Brazil (Grotz, 2019; Nobre, 2019). This state of war is fueled by grotesque speeches by the president and other public authorities (Corrêa, 2019)<sup>35</sup> and by the daily recourse to executive decrees aimed at bypassing legislative processes that, more often than not, violate constitutional principles (Machado, 2019)<sup>36</sup>. In the same context, there is an unprecedented presence of military personnel in civilian government positions. In March 2020, in addition to the vice president, there were six military ministers, and another 6,000 uniformed men occupied positions in the federal administration.

Bolsonaro was elected as an anti-establishment candidate ("against everything that is there"), and, as soon as he was in power, he began to govern in opposition to state institutions (Brum, 2019). The Supreme Court is the main target of this bellicosity, as from very early on it ruled to contain the autocratic tendencies of the president and his ministers. Another component of the "permanent war" is the incessant agitation of the Bolsonarist social base on social media and also in the streets, including calls for military intervention. These skirmishes, however, also extend to his own allies. Since 2019, he and his sons have been at loggerheads with some military ministers and also with parliamentarians from the PSL, the party for which he had been elected, but from which he quickly withdrew. The project was to create "his own party," an endeavor that was unsuccessful because the number of members required by law was not achieved<sup>37</sup>.

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35 <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/balburdia-e-perversidade-genero-e-sexualidade-no-vortice-da-politica/9376>

36 <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/o-governo-inconstitucional/>

37 [https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/07/15/interna\\_politica,1167014/novo-partido-de-bolsonaro-nao-decola-saiba-por-que.shtml](https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/07/15/interna_politica,1167014/novo-partido-de-bolsonaro-nao-decola-saiba-por-que.shtml)

In the troubled political dynamic of the first year of government, in November 2019, former-President Lula was released from prison by a decision of the Supreme Court. Later, the court went further, annulling the process that had led to his imprisonment because it considered that Sergio Moro, the judge responsible for the conviction, lacked the necessary impartiality for such a trial<sup>38</sup>. Lula's return to public life, with full political rights, caused a state of high alert for Bolsonaro and his supporters and added fuel to Bolsonaro's fury against the Supreme Court.

When the pandemic broke out in 2020, the Bolsonaroist clamor for the return of the military and closure of Congress and the Supreme Court was in full swing. The base of supporters of the government had called for vigils in front of barracks of the Armed Forces on March 31, the date of the military coup of 1964. The slogan was "constitutional military intervention now", a slogan inspired by an incorrect interpretation of Article 142 of the Federal Constitution by a jurist linked to Opus Dei<sup>39</sup>. Other demonstrations followed, such as on May 24 and 31, when Bolsonaro flew over the demonstrations in Brasilia in a helicopter<sup>40</sup>.

In April 2020, a Supreme Court decision reaffirmed the power of governors and mayors to determine restrictive measures during the pandemic and the Bolsonaroist battalions, in addition to inciting a coup, began to target the court with zeal<sup>41</sup>. While the infections and deaths were skyrocketing, a "phalanx" self-named "The 300 of Brazil"

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38 This decision was based, fundamentally, on data collected by the journalistic investigation led by The Intercept Brazil, known as VazaJato, which had access to confidential information from prosecutors and judges in the Lava Jato anti-corruption investigation that has convicted dozens of businessmen and political figures, including Lula. See [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaza\\_Jato](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaza_Jato)

39 The jurist is Ives Gandra Martins, intellectual leader of the Brazilian ultra-Catholic movement, who has published extensive theses against abortion rights and related issues, LBTT+ rights, and "gender ideology", and is organically linked to international networks. His daughter Angela Gandra is the current national secretary of the family whose actions will be analyzed below. To understand the illegitimacy of Gandra's thesis on Article 142, see <https://www.conjur.com.br/2020-mai-21/senso-incomum-ives-gandra-errado-artigo-142-nao-permite-intervencao-militar>.

40 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/05/bolsonaro-usa-helicoptero-para-sobrevoar-manifestacao-na-esplanada-contra-stf-e-congresso.shtml> and <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/05/24/bolsonaro-rebate-stf-usa-helicoptero-da-presidencia-para-sobrevoar-ato-de-apoio-e-participa-de-aglomeracao-em-meio-a-pandemia.ghtml>

41 <https://portal.stf.jus.br/noticias/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=441075&ori=1>

settled in the Square of the Three Powers clamoring for "military intervention" and the closing of the national Congress and the Supreme Court. Some of its leaders, including well-known anti-abortion activist Sara Winter, appeared with guns in press reports. In early May, Bolsonaro, accompanied by a group of businessmen, walked across the Esplanade to present demands to open up the economy to the Supreme Court. At the end of the month, Brazil's 300 launched fireworks at the Supreme Court building.

Concomitantly, Bolsonarist digital brigades made threats and charges against individual judges. This intensification of attacks on the Supreme Court and its ministers led to the opening of a criminal case conducted by the court itself. The action was criticized for being based on the National Security Law (LSN) inherited from the military dictatorship. On one hand, the investigation led to the indictment and imprisonment of some Bolsonarist activists<sup>42</sup>, and on the other hand, it inspired the repeal of the LSN and the approval of a new law on crimes against the rule of law.

Despite these harsh decisions, the state of "permanent war" did not cool down, not even when the second peak of the pandemic assumed scalar contours in early 2021. Bolsonaro continued denying the severity of the epidemic and attacking governors and mayors who did not align themselves with the neo-Darwinian denialism of the federal government. His attacks were mostly directed against the governor of São Paulo, a potential presidential candidate in 2022 who had jumped the gun on a deal with China for vaccine production. However, several other opposition governments, in particular PT (Workers' Party) administrations, were also targeted.

Vaccination would begin in February 2021 when new measures to restrict mobility and lockdown were already being adopted by states and municipalities to contain the new wave of COVID-19 that would result in 132,000 deaths between March and April. In the context of the worsening health crisis, Bolsonaro summarily fired the minister of defense, General Fernando Pujol, because he refused to issue a statement against governors and

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42 <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/a-prisao-de-sara-winter/10775>

mayors who were not "allowing the opening of the economy." According to a reconstruction made by journalist Consuelo Dieguez in an article for Piauí Magazine:

*"On March 30, there was a tense meeting in the morning of the three military commanders with General Braga Netto, already then appointed the new minister of defense replacing General Azevedo e Silva. According to three sources heard by Piauí – two military and one civilian – Admiral Ilques Barbosa Junior was the most upset. He punched the table and argued in an inflamed tone with Braga Netto. The two almost reached the point of physical violence. The admiral was upset with Braga Netto's support for Bolsonaro's attempts to involve the armed forces in his personal political project. On the afternoon of the same day, the three commanders communicated their willingness to resign, accompanying Minister Fernando Azevedo e Silva"<sup>43</sup>.*

As soon as this complicated military crisis was over, the Bolsonarist grassroots unleashed a vigorous campaign of suspicion about electoral fraud in the 2022 elections. This agitation echoed the US electoral climate but also reactivated the specter of "electronic ballot box insecurity" that has plagued Brazilian politics since the 2014 elections, whose results were contested<sup>44</sup>. This specter would be resurrected by Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections. After the elections, the issue lost visibility in the public sphere, but the government's base in the Federal Chamber did not lose sight of it, reintroducing a 2015 constitutional amendment proposal (PEC135/2015) that proposed the adoption of printed ballots. The amendment was approved in December 2019 by the Constitution and Justice Commission.

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43 <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/na-encruzilhada/>

44 The results of the 2014 election in which Dilma Roussef was reelected were contested by her opponent Aécio Neves of the PSDB. Then, in 2015, Congress passed a law calling for a printed ballot to complement the electronic record. The law was vetoed by Dilma Roussef due to the costs it entailed, but the veto was overturned by Congress. The law was later ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

In the first half of 2021, as COVID-19 deaths reached stratospheric levels (500,000 deaths by June) Bolsonaro's popularity began to fall. In April, the first evidence of corruption in the purchase of vaccines emerged and, as a result, the COVID-19 CPI was convened in the Federal Senate. When the accusations and evidence collected by the commission became more visible, the agitation of the Bolsonaro supporters about the "insecurity of the ballot boxes" intensified. The mobilization in the streets and in the digital world intensified as pressure for the final approval of PEC 135/2015-2019. Starting in July, rallies, motorcades, and "cattle drives" were called throughout the country in preparation for a demonstration for the "printed ballot" scheduled for September 7 (Independence Day).

September 7 was unequivocally a spectacle of insurgency and authoritarianism that, to a greater or lesser degree, risked institutional rupture.

In early August, however, the Special Commission that examined the text of PEC 135 recommended that it not be approved. On the 10th, while a military parade, without further justification, took place on the Esplanade<sup>45</sup>, the amendment was shelved by the full House (229 votes against and 218 votes in favor)<sup>46</sup>. This defeat forced a change in the agenda for the September 7th demonstration, which was called "support for the government and defense of the family". The Bolsonarist furor, however, was not appeased: a truckers' strike was announced and the most aggressive sectors intensified their attacks on Congress, the Supreme Court, and the press. In the midst of the uproar, Bolsonaro declared that: "...never another opportunity for the Brazilian people has been so important or will be [so] important... I believe that the time has come, for us, on the 7th, to become truly independent."

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45 <https://g1.globo.com/df/distrito-federal/noticia/2021/08/10/tanques-e-outros-blindados-da-marinha-saem-em-comboio-para-desfile-na-esplanada-dos-ministerios-em-brasilia.ghtml>

46 Congresso em Foco <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/area/congresso-nacional/ao-vivo-camara-rejeita-pec-do-voto-impresso>

On the eve of September 7th, preventive measures, including arrest warrants, were issued by the Supreme Court minister responsible for criminal investigations into the threat to democracy<sup>47</sup>. The measures further incited the fury of the Bolsonarist grassroots, and at the September 7 march in São Paulo, Bolsonaro made strong and direct threats against the minister, adding to the tensions between the branches of the government. This high-intensity moment was followed by appeasement and mediation efforts involving former-President Michel Temer<sup>48</sup>.

Political analysts differ as to whether or not an autogolpe was at play in the events of September 7. Marcos Nobre<sup>49</sup>, for example, interpreted the scene as a "coup rehearsal". Rogério Arantes<sup>50</sup> read the rioting as a tense prologue to the 2022 elections in which, according to opinion polls already available at the time, Lula appeared to be favored. Despite these differences in interpretation, September 7 was unequivocally a spectacle of insurgency and authoritarianism that, to a greater or lesser degree, risked institutional rupture.

## **INSTITUTIONAL BIPOLAR DISORDER: BETWEEN INERTIA AND RESISTANCE**

In the context of the pandemic, both the judiciary and the legislature contained the "permanent war" incited by Bolsonaro by firmly altering the direction of some of his policies. In other words, the checks and balances somehow worked. In the judiciary, the Supreme Court responded firmly to antidemocratic threats when they reached critical levels and, above all, ensured that the response to the pandemic was not a complete

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47 <https://www.jota.info/justica/suspeitos-de-ameacas-stf-presos-06092021>

48 <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/na-companhia-de-temer-bolsonaro-fala-por-telefone-com-alexandre-de-moraes/>

49 <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-58485310>

50 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/09/o-que-foi-o-7-de-setembro-bolsonarista-cientistas-politicos-apontam-intencoes-do-ato-e-suas-consequencias.shtml>

breakdown<sup>51</sup>. However, the checks and balances have not always worked as well as one would expect from really solid democratic structures. For example, the positions and actions of individual judges have not been free of ambiguities and spurious accommodating actions. An example of this was the appointment of General Pujol, former defense minister, as technical director of the Superior Electoral Court, a strategy to shield the 2022 electoral process correctly considered inadequate by several critical analysts of the judiciary<sup>52</sup>. Above all, since 2019, when its new chief was appointed, the attorney general's office has been completely subservient to the executive<sup>53</sup>.

In the federal legislature, relevant initiatives, such as those already mentioned, have been debated and passed. However, in general, congressional performance has not been exemplary. There are 146 requests for impeachment stalled in Congress, of which, according to a survey conducted by Agência Pública, half are justified by the disastrous conduct in the response to the pandemic (75 complaints)<sup>54</sup>. This inertia is explained, in part, by the influence and aggressiveness of Bolsonarist congressmen elected in 2018, most of whom are affiliated to the PSL but have remained loyal to the presidential agenda. It is also the effect of disorientation and lack of cohesion in the opposition on the left, which has generally remained fixated on electoral calculations for 2022 (Nobre, 2020).

However, the systematic shelving of impeachment requests was, above all, the work of the cronyist forces - popularly known as *Centrão* - that, since the early days of redemocratization, have largely controlled the congressional dynamics<sup>55</sup>. In the midst of

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51 The Federal Audit Court has also been rigorous in monitoring federal spending and allegations of corruption, particularly in the context of the pandemic. An investigation leaked in December by Folha de São Paulo identified, for example, misuse of funds intended for COVID control in the armed forces to purchase high-cost food products. See <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2021/12/defesa-gasta-verba-da-covid-para-comprar-file-mignon-e-picanha-diz-tcu.shtml>

52 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/luisfranciscocarvalho/2022/01/razoes-de-estado.shtml>

53 Augusto Aras is the attorney general, appointed in 2019. For a critical assessment of his performance see Conrado Hubner's article in Folha de São Paulo <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/conrado-hubner-mendes/2021/01/aras-e-a-antessala-de-bolsonaro-no-tribunal-penal-internacional.shtml>

54 <https://apublica.org/impeachment-bolsonaro/>

55 Since the early days of Brazilian democratization, it has ensured, as far as it is concerned, the stability of any and all governments, regardless of their political orientation.

the 2020 catastrophe, while people mourned their dead and the repudiation of Bolsonaro grew, the *Centrão* leaders designed strategies to expand their bargaining power. In February 2021, Arthur Lira, one of these leaders, was elected president of the House. Lira centralized the management of the legislative agenda, guaranteed key Bolsonaroist congressional posts, and opened channels of dialogue with the executive<sup>56</sup>.

In April, when the COVID-19 CPI was installed, Bolsonaro, "president without a party", found himself even more dependent on these "political professionals". Within two months, key *Centrão* figures were occupying relevant ministerial posts. In August, it was Lira who ensured the PEC's defeat of the printed vote and, a month later, with the curtain closed on the autocratic spectacle of September 7, the "anti-system president" yielded, once and for all, to the web of forces that have always operated in the undergrounds of that same system. A few weeks later, Bolsonaro announced his affiliation to the Liberal Party (PL), which forms the hard core of cronyism in Congress, to run for reelection in 2022. Thus, he returned to the bench in which he militated as a parliamentarian for three decades and the pact very quickly guaranteed the approval of a constitutional reform that made the spending ceiling more flexible in order to make the political strategy for 2022<sup>57</sup>.

This surrender does not mean, however, "domestication". Since September, Bolsonaro and his Ministry of Health have been engaged in obstructing the vaccination of adolescents and children and the adoption of vaccination passports. When in the early days of 2022 the Ministry of Health finally announced the vaccination of children, Bolsonaro made several statements against vaccination and ANVISA, prompting the agency's president, retired admiral Antonio Barra Torres, to publish a letter refuting the accusations and asking for a retraction. The episode was read as yet another crisis between the president and the military around him. In the context of this study, it is especially relevant to consider that,

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56 For example, the extreme right-wing deputies Bia Kicis and Carla Zambelli were elected chairs of the Constitution, Justice, and Citizenship and Environment Commissions. Zambelli, a climate crisis denier who has facilitated the passage of bills that potentially increase the destruction of the Amazon and threaten indigenous peoples, represented Congress at COP 26 in Glasgow.

57 <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/839381-camara-aprova-em-2o-turno-mudancas-na-pec-dos-precatorios/>

in the 2022 electoral scenario, the pact between Bolsonaro and Centrão greatly increases in Congress the risk of accelerating the processing of anti-gender bills and restriction of abortion rights, among other regressive proposals of the right-wing agenda.

## THE COVID-19 CPI: LIGHT IN THE SHADOWS?

In the Brazilian congressional scene dominated by cronyism and the growth of the extreme right, the work carried out by the COVID-19 CPI deserves to be highlighted because it was, in many ways, exceptional. It is not possible here to detail the massive volume of evidence compiled nor to analyze the commission's shortcomings, but it is important to give some basic information about its composition, dynamics, and results<sup>58</sup>.

The CPI was convened in the Senate because the conditions were not adequate in the House. The work was led by a group of senators across the political spectrum, a multiparty coalition in opposition to Bolsonaro, a fact hitherto rare in the post-2018 political circumstances. More significantly, even if what motivated the formation of the commission was corruption in the purchase of vaccines, as the work progressed, the necropolitics implicit in Brazil's management of the pandemic inevitably gained the priority of scrutiny. The commission became a stage on which the extent and depth of the effects of this catastrophic management were eviscerated.

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58 G1 has published a good series of articles that offer a panoramic view on the CPI work. <https://g1.globo.com/politica/cpi-da-covid/>. There is also a systematic organization of all that happened during the CPI, divided into three crucial moments, being the last one the final report: <https://especiais.g1.globo.com/politica/cpi-da-covid/2021/cpi-covid-relatorio-final-bolsonaro-outros-investigados/>

The CPI showed that Dr. Litchenstein was right that a eugenic policy of response to COVID-19<sup>59</sup> was being implemented in Brazil. The initial text of the Final Report even used the term "genocide" to designate the differentiated impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples. However, this provoked a heated debate within the commission and society, leading to the compromise replacing the term with "crime against humanity" (in the case of indigenous people) and "epidemic followed by death" (in the case of the population as a whole). This evidence will be taken to the International Criminal Court, in addition to six other lawsuits incriminating the Bolsonaro government that it has already received<sup>60</sup>. The report also accuses Bolsonaro and other officials of 22 other common crimes<sup>61</sup>.

The dubious state of national politics offers no guarantee that these crimes will be judicially investigated and punished. Still, it is not trivial that the Washington Post headline of October 22, 2021<sup>62</sup> was, "If Bolsonaro is potentially guilty of pandemic crimes, is Trump, too?".

## ANTI-GENDER IDEOLOGY AS STATE POLICY

In his inauguration speech, Bolsonaro categorically declared that he was going to fight "gender ideology."<sup>63</sup> This warlike determination has transformed Brazil into one of the countries in the world where this repudiation is firmly established in the state apparatus<sup>64</sup>. Immediately, figures who share this vision began to occupy key positions in

59 <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2021/09/16/prevent-senior-entenda-as-acusacoes-contr-a-empresa-envolvendo-pesquisa-sobre-cloroquina.ghtml>

60 <https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2021/12/09/senadores-vao-a-haia-entregar-relatorio-final-da-cpi-da-pandemia-ao-tribunal-penal-internacional>

61 <https://g1.globo.com/politica/cpi-da-covid/noticia/2021/10/20/cpi-da-covid-crimes-atribuidos-lista.ghtml>

62 If Bolsonaro is potentially guilty of pandemic crimes, is Trump, too? <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/10/22/bolsonaro-covid-crimes-trump/>

63 The language used in the speech was the following: "we will unite people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight against gender ideology, and preserve our values". Bolsonaro concluded by saying that "Brazil will go back to being a country free of ideological ties".

64 The other countries are Hungary, Poland, and Russia. There are other contexts where this "colonization" is also underway such as neighboring Paraguay and Uruguay and other Central European countries, but not with such consistency.

the government: Damares Alves (Baptist pastor) as minister of the newly created Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights (MMFDH), Angela Gandra (ultra-Catholic lawyer) in the National Secretary of the Family of the MMFDH, Ernesto Araújo in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ricardo Velez (ultra-conservative philosopher) in the Ministry of Education, and André Mendonça (Presbyterian pastor) as attorney general of the union. Education had two ministers, Abraham Weintraub (ultraconservative professor) and Milton Ribeiro (Presbyterian pastor), who were even more strident in their attacks on "gender". In the Ministry of Health, the first minister Luis Henrique Mandetta was not vocal on the issue, but physician Rafael Câmara, known for racist and anti-feminist positions, was appointed as national secretary of basic assistance, and in 2020, minister Eduardo Pazuello would take very aggressive measures against reproductive health<sup>65</sup>.

In the judiciary, Augusto Aras, the new attorney general, upon taking office committed himself to the demands of the National Association of Evangelical Jurists (Anajure)<sup>66</sup>. Then, the retirement of two ministers allowed Bolsonaro to make two appointments to the Supreme Court. The first was Kassio Nunes, who is not a religious professional, but when he was interviewed by the Senate, he declared himself against abortion and took other positions aligned with Bolsonaro. In 2021, André Mendonça, who, since April 2020 had been minister of justice, was nominated as a "terribly evangelical" candidate to occupy a seat on the court. In December, after a long delay, his nomination was confirmed<sup>67</sup>.

The conservative wave of 2018 also elected a new batch of right-wing and far-right congressmen, including many women, to reinforce the ranks that, since the 2000s, have been working against abortion, gender, and related issues. In 2021, with Arthur

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65 In addition to those cited, one must also account for the strong influence of Olavo de Carvalho, known as the "guru" of the Bolsonaro family and other public officials. Carvalho is an icon of the new global right and close to Steve Bannon. Since 2019, many other officials aligned with these positions occupy other positions in the federal administration.

66 Both Damares Alves and André Mendonça have ties to Anajure, which, since its foundation, has partnered with the well-known ultraconservative global network Alliance Defending Freedom.

67 This confirmation was facilitated by the pact between Bolsonaro and the Centrão but also relates to the fear of all parties, including the PT, of displeasing evangelical voters. See, for example: <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/area/congresso-nacional/pt-faz-segredo-em-votacao-de-andre-mendonca-para-o-stf/>

Lira presiding over the House, two congresswomen from this group, Bia Kicis and Carla Zambeli (both from the PSL), were elected chairs of the Constitution and Justice and Environment Committees, respectively.

With all these characters acting on the state stage, speeches on these topics have become more common. Analyzing the first months of the "misgovernment," Corrêa (2019) noted that although Bolsonaro and "guru" Olavo de Carvalho were the main sources of grotesque speech, other authorities contributed to it. Damares Alves declared in her inauguration speech that boys "should wear the color blue and girls should wear pink." Ernesto Araújo described reproductive rights as "a cake that hides a blade: a decoy to smuggle in the crime of abortion." Abraham Weintraub threatened to cut off resources from three public universities because they were promoting "cacophony", accentuating the sexual connotation of the Portuguese term "balbúrdia"<sup>68</sup>.

Discourse is not public policy, but it creates a hostile atmosphere and fuels violence related to gender, sexuality, and reproductive autonomy. This rhetorical fury that has not cooled since 2019 would become the object of derision in conversations, in the press, and in social media memes. This dismissal, while important, largely obfuscates how behind the scenes the anti-gender and anti-abortion agendas have been systematically transformed into firm state policy guidelines.

## **MINISTRY OF WOMEN, FAMILY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS (MMFDH): THE IRRADIATION NODE**

A report submitted by Brazilian civil society to the United Nations Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Human Rights in 2021 shows how the Bolsonaro government has been working to abolish the concept of gender and assumptions of reproductive autonomy from the state's vocabulary because it sees this agenda as

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68 <https://sxpolitics.org/es/ruina-y-perversidad-genero-y-sexualidad-en-el-vortex-de-la-politica>

a "threat to sexual difference, reproduction, and the family"<sup>69</sup>. This ideology operates throughout the federal apparatus, but the MMFDH is the intellectual core that elaborates guidelines to achieve this goal, and it was in the pandemic context that these courses of action began to be implemented.

To enable these conservative policies, the foundations of the MMFDH are being reconfigured<sup>70</sup>. This turn was made explicit by the minister in a speech about LGBT+ rights: "We don't do promotion, we do protection" when referring to the LGBT+ agenda in her ministry. In other words, the current Brazilian human rights policy is protective, focused on vulnerability and victimization. It recognizes violence against women (not gendered) and LGBTTT+ people but delegitimizes people's free decisions about their lives and their bodies. This view, which contradicts the governmental slogan of "defending freedom," represents a serious contortion of human rights as defined in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>71</sup>.

## THE POLITICS OF THE "FAMILY"

The priority of the MMFDH is the strengthening and protection of "the family", and this policy has been implemented in partnership with other ministries and local bodies through municipal policies for strengthening and monitoring families, including with the support of religious organizations; training of human resources, especially guardianship counsellors who work in the regions; investment in social science research on the family and the risks of its supposed destruction; and the creation of a Family Observatory.

69 <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/ofensivas-antigenero-no-brasil-politicas-de-estado-legislacao-mobilizacao-social/12156>

70 The National Human Rights Program, created in 1995, began to be implemented by three national secretariats (Human Rights, Policy for Women, and Racial Equality), which would be merged in 2015. In 2019, the name of the ministry changed and its structure today comprises the Secretariat for Global Protection (Human Rights), the National Secretariat for Women's Policy, the National Secretariat for Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality, the Secretariat for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, and the new National Secretariat for the Family.

71 For more details see the report provided in note 7 and the article by de Vito and Prado (2019), available at: <https://sxpolitics.org/es/derechos-humanos-genero-y-sexualidad-una-ministra-que-no-juega-con-el-cargo/4375>

At the beginning of 2021, in a public conversation with Congresswoman Bia Kicis, the minister spoke out against academic research on gender and sexuality to justify the promotion of the production of conservative knowledge on family and related topics with resources from the Ministry of Education<sup>72</sup>. As for the "implementation and monitoring" structures outlined by the policy, it is not absurd to suppose that, in a context in which social and institutional authoritarianism is deliberately fostered, they could become "family police".

These guidelines are being implemented in a focused way on Marajó Island through the "Abrace Marajó" program. The program began in 2019 with action by the MMFDH in response to the high incidence of rape of girls. According to a story in *Pública*, this action ideologized the crisis but did not address the domestic violence that is the main cause of the rapes<sup>73</sup>. By the end of 2021, the MMFDH was raising funds internationally to finance this "pilot," including with the United Arab Emirates<sup>74</sup>.

On December 30, 2021, a resolution was published establishing the national strategy for strengthening family ties, which includes 40 inter-ministerial actions<sup>75</sup>. A few weeks earlier, in the headline of an article published by the *Folha de São Paulo*, the national secretary for the family suggested that the MMFDH is already, in fact, a 'ministry of the family'<sup>76</sup>. In the article she claims that investing in the family shrinks the state and reduces public spending, fully confirming Kalil's (2020) thesis that Damares Alves and

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72 The call for proposals launched in early 2021 was criticized by the Fluminense Network of Research Centers on Gender, Sexuality, and Feminisms in the Social Sciences (<http://www.clam.org.br/campanhas-direitos/conteudo.asp?cod=12930> ) and by the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Psychology ([https://www.anpepp.org.br/download/download?ID\\_DOWNLOAD=345](https://www.anpepp.org.br/download/download?ID_DOWNLOAD=345) ). The program funds researchers in several universities, public and private.

73 <https://apublica.org/2019/09/investigamos-a-violencia-sexual-no-marajo-e-nao-e-nada-do-que-a-ministra-damares-diz/>

74 This effort included setting up a stand on the island at EXPO 2020 in Dubai that was the subject of an article in *O Globo* available at <https://g1.globo.com/pa/para/noticia/2021/12/10/arquipelago-do-marajo-no-para-e-tema-de-exposicao-em-dubai-nos-emirados-arabes.ghtml> . According to the *Brasil 247* website, just before that, an Emirati investment fund had bought the second largest Petrobras refinery, see <https://www.brasil247.com/brasil/petrobras-entrega-segunda-maior-refinaria-do-brasil-a-fundo-dos-emirados-arabes>

75 The resolution is available at <https://www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/resolucao-n-1-de-30-de-dezembro-de-2021-371529589>

76 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/opiniaio/2021/12/um-ministerio-da-familia-da-utopia-a-realidade.shtml>

Paulo Guedes, the economy minister, are the two faces of ultra-neoliberalism. Moraes (2021) responded to the article by noting that the "family" idealized by the extreme right is a closed unit, organized around the authority of productive adults<sup>77</sup>. This "ideal" contradicts the heterogeneity of Brazilian families and disregards intrafamily power inequalities and the precariousness of the labor market participation of family members, especially women. The author names this ideological directive "familyism 2.0", adding that it makes use of the language of human rights to cement the "moral unity between family and state".

## **LANGUAGE SANITIZATION AND "GENDER IDEOLOGY" AS A POLICE CATEGORY**

In 2020, the MMFDH began merging two existing hotlines, Dial 100 and Dial 180, into a single number (Dial DH). In the process, the definitions that frame and organize reports of human rights violations were substantially changed. In the new "Manual for a Taxonomy of Human Rights" that now guides the work of the National Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, "gender," homophobia, and transphobia were abolished.

This purge also defined the spurious notion of "gender ideology" as a category of "motivation for institutional violation." The "protection of adolescents and children as vulnerable" frames this change and complements the "family" protection strategy. The taxonomic change was followed by training of state agents in the use of the new classification categories<sup>78</sup>. In the first training (April 2021), "gender ideology" as institutional violence in education and health was the central theme and since then hundreds of professionals working in the field of childhood and adolescence have been trained.

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77 <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/um-ministerio-para-uma-familia-distopia-e-familismo-2-0/12369>

78 Coordinated by the National Forum on Institutional Violence against Children and Adolescents hosted by the National Secretariat for the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

More seriously, very soon after, the category “gender ideology” was used as a justification for state coercion.

These changes compromise the comparison of the data collected by the hotlines, before and after 2020, and may entail discontinuity of local actions to confront homophobic and transphobic violence. More seriously, very soon after, the category "gender ideology" was used as a justification for state coercion. In November 2021, a teacher and a professor were the subjects of a police report and investigation after being denounced as propagators of "ideologies". In Salvador (BA) a philosophy teacher was called to testify by the police<sup>79</sup> as was the principal of a school in Resende (RJ) called to explain the alleged "exposure of students to communist concepts" and "gender ideology".

The press coverage of the Resende case stated that the police had been deployed by the MMFDH after a complaint was made through Dial 100<sup>80</sup>. In an interview with Pública, Marco Aurélio Prado, a professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, observed that attacks on teachers who talk about gender in school have been happening for a long time, but criminalization via Dial 100 is flagrant state arbitrariness<sup>81</sup>. The episodes were widely repudiated on social networks and in the press, including in an editorial in O Globo<sup>82</sup>. They do, however, confirm the harmful potential of surveillance and policing inherent in the policies of the strengthening and defense of the "family".

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79 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2021/11/professora-da-bahia-recebe-intimacao-policia-apos-queixa-de-aluna-sobre-conteudo-esquerdista.shtml>

80 <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/educacao/exposicao-conceitos-comunistas-ideologia-de-genero-escola-municipal-do-rj-recebe-intimacao-da-policia-apos-denuncia-encaminhada-pelo-ministerio-de-damare-25301561>

81 <https://apublica.org/2021/12/ideologia-de-genero-no-disque-100-pode-criminalizar-professores-diz-pesquisador/>

82 <https://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/opiniao/post/damare-promove-ataque-politica-de-direitos-humanos-consolidada.html>

## ANTI-GENDER OFFENSIVES IN EDUCATION POLICIES

Since 2013, gender and "ideology" in education have been a primary target of right-wing forces. The attack on the National Education Plan 2014-2024 has spawned more than 100 bills to amend state and municipal education plans and 23 federal legislative proposals (until the end of 2020). Eleven of these laws have been judicially challenged and the Supreme Court has already issued several decisions defining them as unconstitutional, but anti-gender forces have continued to present new bills with the same content.

As of 2019, this offensive has found extreme expression in the speeches of the ministers of education and has developed in new directions. The first of these, already mentioned, is the collaboration between the MMFDH and the Ministry of Education to create an infrastructure for the production of conservative knowledge about "family." The second is implemented through the Education and Family Program developed by the basic education secretariat of the Ministry of Education<sup>83</sup>. The third is the promotion of new education modalities: homeschooling and civic-military schools. The fourth aims at "sanitizing" the contents of textbooks.

The Family and School Program promotes the role of the family in school development and daily life, supports the formation of school councils focusing on decisions about curriculum content, and has created an application so that parents can have access to the financial and pedagogical conditions of the schools and monitor them<sup>84</sup>.

Proposals for homeschooling that involve leaving teaching to the families themselves have been flourishing since the mid-2010s. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled on an appeal on this matter, ambiguously deciding that home education is constitutional<sup>85</sup>, which

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83 [http://pddeinterativo.mec.gov.br/images/pdf/portaria\\_n\\_571\\_0208202.pdf](http://pddeinterativo.mec.gov.br/images/pdf/portaria_n_571_0208202.pdf)

84 <http://pddeinterativo.mec.gov.br/programas-lista/16-programas/47-programa-educacao-e-familia>

85 <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/instituto-politeia/stf-constitucionalidade-ensino-domiciliar-homeschooling/>

stimulated legislative proposals to legitimize this education modality in the states and in the federal House. Since 2019, homeschooling has been a government priority, as it complements the “family policy” by ensuring the responsibility of fathers and mothers for the education of children and adolescents. Immediately, the government tried to implement homeschooling by Provisional Measure, but as this did not work, two bills on the matter were presented<sup>86</sup>. In early 2021, at the height of the pandemic, Representative Bia Kicis, when she took over the presidency of the Citizenship, Constitution, and Justice Commission (CCJC), accelerated its passage. The law has not yet been voted on, but the issue should be back on the agenda in 2022. At the same time, state and municipal laws have been approved, contested, and vetoed<sup>87</sup>.

The militarization of public schools has an even longer history, going back to the late 1990s. By 2018, there were already 120 militarized schools run by state governments<sup>88</sup>. In 2019, the Ministry of Education launched the National Program for the Implementation of Civic-Military Schools (ECM)<sup>89</sup>, and since then, 643 municipalities and 16 states have joined the program<sup>90</sup>. Rodrigues' (2021) master's thesis on the ECMs concludes that their ideology combines religious neoconservatism, neoliberalism, and Brazilian military doctrine<sup>91</sup>. Since 2020, there have been press reports of censorship of professors of the ECMs<sup>92</sup>. There is no systematic research on the effects of the disciplinary policies of these

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86 PL 2.401/2019 was drafted as a collaboration of Damares Alves and Abraham Weintraub. Then, the front in favor of homeschooling was created and congresspeople Bia Kicis, Chris Tonietto, and Caroline de Toni presented PL 3.262/2019, which aims to remove homeschooling from the 1940 Penal Code.

87 Examples are the Federal District's law challenged by its Teachers Union and Brazil's National Catholic Education Association (Anec) and the Rio Grande do Sul state law vetoed in July 2021 by the state governor.

88 See this study prepared by the Federal District's Teachers Union <https://www.sinprodf.org.br/a-militarizacao-das-escolas-publicas-uma-analise-a-partir-das-pesquisas-da-area-de-educacao-no-brasil/>

89 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/educacao/2020/11/apos-consulta-popular-parana-aprova-modelo-civico-militar-em-mais-de-8-das-escolas.shtml>

90 The general guidelines of this new policy are outlined in the Manual for Civil Military Schools. See <https://educacao.sorocaba.sp.gov.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/respostapedidoecimfinal.pdf>

91 Rodrigues, G. (2021, August). “Buraco de Minhoca”: sobre a militarização de escolas públicas Thesis presented to the Postgraduate Department of Education of the Universidade Federal Fluminense.

92 <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-10-24/professores-relatam-censura-em-colegios-militares.html>

schools on gender and sexuality. However, in an article in the magazine *Gênero&Número*, a military teacher explains and justifies the rigid rules of dress and bodily conduct that, as an interviewed psychologist observes, inevitably reinforce stereotypes<sup>93</sup>.

The National Textbook Program is the new prime target of anti-gender attacks and of clamoring for "ideological neutrality". The calls for tender through which publishers qualify to be contracted by the Ministry of Education include ethical parameters. One of them required that textbooks not convey "stereotypes and prejudices regarding social and economic conditions, regional origin, racial and ethnic identity, gender sexual orientation, age, language, and ability". The 2021 edict eliminated these requirements, requiring only that they promote "the image of Brazilians, men and women", which disregards Supreme Court decisions regarding gender discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia<sup>94</sup>.

## FOREIGN POLICY: NEOCONSERVATISM AND THE FAR RIGHT

Since 2019, Brazilian diplomacy has adopted anti-gender positions and positions against abortion rights in the international arena<sup>95</sup>. There have been dozens of statements defending the "right to life from the moment of conception" (which is not a constitutional definition) and several official comments, made at the end of negotiations, clarifying that Brazil "understands gender as biological sex"<sup>96</sup>. These positions, incorporated into foreign policy guidelines, were sent to all Brazilian embassies in June 2019<sup>97</sup>. When ABGLT requested access to them through the Access to Information Law<sup>98</sup>, the Foreign Affairs

93 <https://www.generonumero.media/cabelo-maquagem-e-ate-cor-do-esmalte-modelo-militar-nas-escolas-impoe-controle-dos-corpos-de-estudantes-civis/>

94 This exclusion has been challenged in court by education experts, academics, and public school teacher groups, to no avail.

95 Nevertheless, in some cases, Brazilian diplomacy has shown ambiguities regarding LGBTt+ rights. This is explained by the custodial and victimizing framing of the "new human rights policy" but also implies a pinkwashing strategy.

96 The development of these positions is detailed in the report provided in note 7.

97 <https://noticias.uol.com.br/reportagens-especiais/novo-dicionario-do-itamaraty/#end-cardartigo>

98 [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_ato2011-2014/2011/lei/l12527.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2011-2014/2011/lei/l12527.htm)

Ministry refused the request, claiming that they would be kept secret until 2024, which led to a lawsuit before the Supreme Court to obtain the requisite transparency<sup>99</sup>.

Brazil is also today a point of confluence of international right-wing networks.

Until early 2021, the Bolsonaro government was aligned with Trump's foreign policy regarding these issues, especially in the case of the so-called Geneva Consensus that repudiates reproductive health and abortion and was signed by thirty-two countries in October 2020<sup>100</sup>. With the defeat of Trump, Biden withdrew from the Consensus and Brazil became its leader<sup>101</sup>. In April 2021, due to the COVID CPI, Ernesto Araújo was relieved of his ministerial post due to the delay in vaccine purchases.

This change softened the diplomatic style and language but did not change the policy guidelines that, since then, have been guided by the MMFDH, where Angela Gandra is the minister<sup>102</sup>. In September, she visited Portugal, Spain, and Ukraine<sup>103</sup> and, in October, together with Minister Damares, participated in Guatemala's accession ceremony to the Geneva Consensus. Then, both went to Geneva for a series of diplomatic contacts and to participate in a panel coordinated by the ILO on work-family reconciliation<sup>104</sup>. At the one-year celebration of the Geneva Consensus at the Brazilian embassy, the accession of Russia to the initiative was announced. In January 2022, Gandra was in Colombia to attend

99 <https://www.conjur.com.br/2019-out-29/gilmar-intima-chanceler-prestar-esclarecimentos-uso-termo>

100 <https://agenciapatriciagalvao.org.br/mulheres-de-olho/politica/a-patria-e-paria-e-antifeminista-por-sonia-correa-e-gustavo-huppes/>

101 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-18/el-metodo-bolsonaro-un-asalto-a-la-democracia-a-camara-lenta.html>

102 Also in Hungary, the foreign policy regarding gender, sexuality, abortion, and family is led by the minister of family, Katlin Novak.

103 <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/jamil-chade/2021/09/29/diplomacia-paralela-do-brasil-mira-extrema-direita-opus-e-negacionistas.html>

104 Meetings with countries of the Portuguese Language Community, the Hungarian chancellor, the WHO, and the UNHCR. The recording of the panel is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvxRGipOYjo&feature=youtu.be>

a session at the Arete Academy, a youth program of the Alliance Defending Freedom<sup>105</sup>. On her Instagram account, she posted a photo with José Antonio Kast (considered the Chilean Bolsonaro) on a quick visit to Colombia. Back in Brazil, he met with the ambassador of Ecuador.

Brazil is also today a point of confluence of international right-wing networks. In December 2018, the president's son Eduardo Bolsonaro organized the Conservative Summit of Latin America. In October 2019, a meeting of the CPAC, an American right-wing organization<sup>106</sup>, took place in São Paulo. This activity cooled off in the first year of the pandemic only to return with renewed vigor in the second half of 2021. In July, Bolsonaro received the vice president of the AfD, a German extreme right-wing party<sup>107</sup> whose husband has connections with Jose Manuel Kast<sup>108</sup>. In September, two antivaccine activists who are under surveillance by the German state had an unofficial meeting with the president<sup>109</sup>.

On the eve of the September 7 events, CPAC met again in Brazil with the participation of dozens of government officials<sup>110</sup>. In October, the Financial Times reported that a company owned by Bolsonaroist congressman Luis Felipe de Orleans e Bragança was raising funds for a digital platform created by Donald Trump<sup>111</sup>. During the G20 in Rome, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced Bolsonaro's visit to Russia, which is scheduled for early 2022, and in December, Santiago Ascabal, leader of the Spanish VOX, was received

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105 A more detailed description of the Arete Academy can be found in Mirta Moragas' analysis of the OAS, which is part of this series of studies on the impacts of COVID-19.

106 [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/10/13/politica/1570994671\\_481129.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/10/13/politica/1570994671_481129.html)

107 <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2021/07/fora-da-agenda-bolsonaro-recebeu-vice-lider-da-ultradireita-da-alemanha.shtml>

108 <https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/empresario-casado-com-deputada-da-extrema-direita-alema-conexao-entrebolsonaro-kast-25306640>

109 <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/bolsonaro-recebe-negacionistas-alem%C3%A3es-em-bras%C3%ADlia/a-59286630>

110 <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,conferencia-conservadora-vira-previa-de-bolsonaristas-para-ato-do-7-de-setembro,70003828307>

111 <https://archive.md/axyYf>

at the Palácio do Planalto<sup>112</sup>. This intense movement should be read as a prelude to the election year of 2022.

## HEALTH AND SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AS TARGETS

In addition to persistent diatribes from the authorities, the government's aversion to sexual and reproductive health and rights agendas has also been expressed in measures adopted by the Ministry of Health. At once, in 2019, the Department of HIV, Viral Hepatitis and TB and the Technical Area of Women's Health was downgraded in the body's new organizational chart<sup>113</sup>. In June, the ministry published an order abolishing the use of the term obstetric violence because "there was no consensus" regarding its definition<sup>114</sup> and, at the end of the year, the MMFDH announced a program to promote sexual abstinence in partnership with the Health Ministry.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 the offensive would become more aggressive. In June 2020, Minister General Pazuello fired the coordinator of women's health and the coordinator of men's health for signing a memo that reiterated WHO recommendations to protect sexual and reproductive health programs. The justification was that the memo "promoted abortion."<sup>115</sup> In August, a pregnant 11-year-old girl was prevented from terminating her pregnancy by pressure from religious groups and authorities in the city where she lived who had been mobilized by the MMFDH. Taken to the state of Pernambuco to undergo the procedure, she had her treatment protocol publicized on social networks by Sara Winter and other anti-abortion activists, and in Recife there were new protests to prevent the abortion<sup>116</sup>.

112 <https://brasil.elpais.com/internacional/2021-12-11/com-visita-ao-brasil-direita-espanhola-leva-sua-batalha-para-a-america-latina.html>

113 <https://sxpolitics.org/es/politica-sanitaria-de-la-tranquilidad-al-cataclismo/4386>

114 A critical statement by the National Council for Human Rights on the order is available at <https://www.in.gov.br/web/dou/-/recomendacao-n-5-de-9-de-maio-de-2019-149878165>

115 <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/ministro-da-saude-exonera-autores-de-nota-sobre-acesso-aborto-legal-durante-pandemia-1-24464481>

116 <https://lamalafe.lat/el-caso-de-la-nina-de-espirito-santo/>

Then, the Ministry of Health issued two ordinances adding requirements for performing legal abortion viewed by experts as rules that turn abortion facilities into police stations<sup>117</sup>. In 2021, the target became Nuavidas, a telemedicine abortion service for the Municipal Hospital of Uberlândia facilitating access to the procedure during the pandemic<sup>118</sup>. The national human rights defender and a federal prosecutor from Minas Gerais recommended that the Ministry of Health, Anvisa, and the Federal Council of Medicine (CFM) suspend the telemedicine service, claiming that the prescription of misoprostol (pharmacological abortifacient) is reckless outside the hospital environment. The complaint was filed with the Office of the Federal Prosecutor for Citizenship Rights, which issued an opinion in favor of maintaining the telemedicine service.

## BATTLES IN THE LEGISLATIVE ARENA: A SYNOPSIS

Since 2019, the federal and local legislatures have also been on the scene of regressive propositions regarding gender, sexuality, and abortion rights. As Corrêa and Kalil (2020) note, these clashes go back a long time and foreshadowed the rightward turn of 2018. However, in the last three years, the number of propositions has grown; the bills are more aggressive and target new issues. Of the 31 bills seeking to ban "gender" and "ideologization" in education that have been presented to the federal House since 2014, half (15) have entered the process after 2019. Unlike previous bills proposing civil penalties, a significant portion of these bills criminalize the propagation of "gender ideology," sometimes defined as "promotion of pornography." As already mentioned, bills with the same content continue to be presented in local legislatures, even when their unconstitutionality has been established.

In addition, homeschooling has become a government priority. This strategy is linked to "family policy" and its goal is to ensure educational authority over children and

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117 A statement of repudiation by civil society organizations is available at: [https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/Nota-de-Rep%C3%BAdio-a-Nova-Portaria-do-MS\\_rev-com-145-assinaturas.pdf](https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/Nota-de-Rep%C3%BAdio-a-Nova-Portaria-do-MS_rev-com-145-assinaturas.pdf)

118 <https://oglobo.globo.com/celina/primeiro-servico-de-aborto-legal-via-telemedicina-do-pais-ja-ajudou-15-mulheres-interromper-gravidez-com-seguranca-entenda-como-funciona-24972542>

adolescents. The government tried to implement homeschooling through a provisional measure, but as this did not work, two bills were presented<sup>119</sup>. In early 2021, Representative Bia Kicis took over the presidency of the CCJC and accelerated the process. The bill has not yet been voted on, but it should be back on the agenda in 2022. Simultaneously, state and municipal laws have been approved, contested, and vetoed<sup>120</sup>.

The same intensification is seen in the case of proposals to restrict the right to abortion. An investigation by Agência Pública reports that by 2018, 50 propositions threatening sexual and reproductive rights, especially the right to abortion, were moving through the House. As of 2019, another 29 bills have been introduced, of which 21 intend to guarantee the agendas of the "right to life beginning at conception" and the "right to citizenship of the unborn child" and increase penalties for the termination of pregnancy<sup>121</sup>. Some of these bills are at an advanced stage of approval, as is the case of the Statute of the Unborn Child.

However, there is also "news". Since 2019, several proposals have been submitted to the federal Congress and to state and municipal legislatures, some of them criminal legislation, to restrict the access of children and adolescents to gender incongruence treatments. One of them asks for the suspension of the Federal Medicine Council's resolution that regulates these health services, and another bans these treatments for people under 21, claiming that they are the result of "gender ideological activism" that "propagates terrorism" and promotes "child abuse"<sup>122</sup>. Also since 2021, there has been a proliferation of legislative proposals and executive decrees banning inclusive and gender-

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119 See note 87

120 see note 88

121 A large number of the recent projects were presented by Representative Chris Tonietto (PSL, Rio de Janeiro) who has organic links with the Spanish NGO Hazte Oír and its digital arm CitizenGo. See <https://apublica.org/2021/07/mesmo-com-crise-na-saude-pauta-antiaborto-avanca-de-maneira-acelerada-no-congresso/>

122 In 2021 two Law Proposals (PL) were presented in the House of Representatives: PL 4520 by author Dr. Jaziel (PL) and PL 2594 by author Pastor Gil (PL)

neutral language, both in the House and in local legislatures<sup>123</sup>. These propositions seem to have been inspired by a law presented in the French National Assembly that has not yet been passed but inspired the minister of education to ban inclusive language by decree.

## **PANDEMIC DENIALISM, ATTACKS ON GENDER, AND ABORTION RIGHTS: BLURRED BOUNDARIES, PERMANENT UNREST**

In some of the countries studied in this issue, especially Argentina and Costa Rica, the confluence between anti-gender crusades and pandemic denialism has translated into mobilizations by actors who instigate these agendas, attacking the measures of governments acting to contain the pandemic. These are advocacy movements dedicated to pressuring rulers and vying for political power.

In Brazil, anti-gender and anti-abortion denialism and ideology are stances shared by part of society – the estimated 15%-20% of the Bolsonarist base – and the state apparatus (especially federal) and propagated with great intensity throughout the realm. In other words, state actors and structures are also engines of disinformation and agitation. Such overlap is one of the symptoms of the neo-fascism exuding from Brazilian political dynamics since 2019.

Although the boundaries between state and society are blurred, it is interesting to examine, specifically, some forms of mobilization of society itself. One of them is, for example, the propagation of conspiracy theories that, in the context of the pandemic, have incited panic using the specter of communism (the "hidden face of gender ideology").

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123 In the Chamber of Deputies, at least 3 PLs have been presented on the subject: PL 2650/2021; PL 3679/2021, and PL 173/2021.

As previously mentioned, at the beginning of the pandemic, public figures defined SARS-COV-2 as a Chinese and communist virus ('communavirus'). The discourse cooled because of Brazil-China trade, but the ghost did not disappear, taking on new contours when vaccine purchases began. Throughout 2020, Bolsonaro repeatedly stated that he would not support the production of the Chinese vaccine negotiated by the government of São Paulo, already then nicknamed "Comunavac". In 2021, once immunization had begun, the specter of the "communist virus" would return. In April, praising the quality of the American vaccines, the economy minister reiterated the thesis that the Chinese had invented the virus<sup>124</sup>. In August, at a preparatory event for September 7 in Rio de Janeiro, the main banner read "It's not a pandemic. It is communism."

As Kalil et al (2021) note, vaccines were already the main target of conspiracy theories. The focus is on Chinese technology, but the conspiracy thesis contaminates other vaccines. The study organizes these discourses into four strands. The first one incites panic of "surveillance, authoritarianism, and communism" by spreading the thesis that the vaccine inserts a subcutaneous microchip in people so they can be controlled by cellular antennas produced by Huawei (communism), or Microsoft (globalism). A second strand instils fear by claiming that vaccines cause diseases such as autism, cancer, and HIV. The last two categories conjure up phantoms of sexuality and reproduction. One propagates the fantasy that the vaccine alters human DNA, causing genetic mutations that modify gender and sexuality or turn people into chimeras. And the last, mainly used by ultra-Catholic forces, propagates reproduction fantasies: the vaccine is made of fetal tissue, serves as a global sterilization project, and causes infertility.

Another intriguing convergence to be reported took place between denialism and the anti-abortion agenda. Since August 2021, Pública's investigations have identified solid connections between the medical sectors that have been promoting chloroquine and ivermectin as a treatment for COVID-19 and anti-abortion activism since 2020. The

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124 <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2021/04/27/guedes-diz-que-chines-inventou-virus-da-covid-e-que-vacina-do-pais-e-menos-efetiva-que-a-dos-eua.ghtml>

article published by a consortium of Spanish-language outlets<sup>125</sup> shows how the fervent belief of these professionals in ineffective early treatment and anti-abortion positions are part of the same ideological ecology, which is simultaneously in society and in the state apparatus. This Brazilian network is linked to an international web whose main node seems to be the Spanish group Médicos por la Verdad (Doctors for the Truth).

Finally, in the pandemic context, there has also been greater visibility and impact of anti-gender and trans-exclusionist feminist currents. The presence of these currents is not new and had been growing in Brazil since 2015, but it reached a new level in the last three years. This increase cannot be dissociated from the growing political legitimization of the repudiation of gender and was also encouraged by the international campaign for women's rights based on gender, launched in 2020, which has affiliates in Brazil<sup>126</sup>. A study from 2020 reports that many Brazilian "radical feminist" pages that propagate transphobic content and attack gender converge in content with the discourse of the conservative camp but are situated to the left of the political spectrum. Adding further elements to this paradox, anti-gender feminist figures have collaborated with right-wing actors, especially in the context of legislative proposals that prohibit health care therapies for non-binary children and adolescents.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In the Brazilian political landscape, the anti-gender and anti-abortion offensives constitute, without a doubt, a scenario of catastrophe and ruin. However, it is important to point out that they have been responded to by a myriad of forms of resistance by institutions, the press, and society itself.

Regarding the pandemic specifically, the federal government's negationist and chaotic response were largely offset by the actions of governors, mayors, and local health

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125 [https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/ultraderecha-teje-nuevas-alianzas-crecer-america-latina\\_1\\_8494475.html](https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/ultraderecha-teje-nuevas-alianzas-crecer-america-latina_1_8494475.html)

126 <https://www.womensdeclaration.com/en/country-info/brazil/>

system managers committed to an effective health response. However, it also relied on a broad mobilization of society. Since April 2020, it became evident that the Ministry of Health was not only not processing with agility and consistency the data on infections and deaths, but it had also changed the parameters for the disclosure of data on the pandemic with the flagrant intention of restricting access to data, especially mortality figures. To circumvent the problem, in June 2020, a consortium of press organs was created that quickly became the trusted source of data on the state of the pandemic. In addition, much of the print and broadcast media adopted sound editorial policies to criticize the federal management of the crisis and combat systematic misinformation.

Additionally, a growing group of epidemiologists, virologists, and other scientists have created specialized blogs and channels on digital platforms to offer authoritative information on the evolution of the pandemic and developments of vaccines and other responses to COVID-19. Above all, considering the widespread repudiation of vaccines by the authorities and the Bolsonaro base, the population's response to vaccination was widely positive. In December 2021, in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, a group protesting against vaccines at the entrance of a health center was chased away by outraged people, some of whom had lost family members during the pandemic.

Hundreds of initiatives to support the most vulnerable communities have also been deployed to ensure prevention measures, stimulate vaccination, and respond to precariousness and hunger (*favelas*, *quilombos*, indigenous peoples, and people living in extreme poverty were prioritized). Although it is impossible to respond to this scale of crisis without solid and sustained state support, these mobilizations have had a very important impact in terms of solidarity. In some cases, such as in Paraisópolis, one of the largest slums in São Paulo, actions to raise awareness among the population were more effective than in other neighborhoods of the city.

In the specific field of feminisms, LGBTTT+ rights, and anti-racist struggles, there have been ongoing efforts to resist attacks from all sides and to keep alive and expand the agendas in the debates in the public sphere and in society. A lot of energy has been

dedicated to mapping and better understanding the forces that drive the catastrophe and ruination. To quote a reflection made by journalist Eliane Brum in 2016, the political feeling of the last four years is of participating in an endless obstacle course that produces more exhaustion than horizons. This myriad of efforts, however, has not resulted in massive political responses of repudiation to the misgovernment and the cataclysm it has produced. In other words, there has been nothing comparable to the social revolts that have taken place in Ecuador, Chile, and Colombia since 2019. There are multiple and complex factors that can explain this aphasia, so to speak, which is a subject for another article.

Still, in the arduous course of 2021, the death wave, governmental debacles, and economic devastation have produced a steady decline in Bolsonaro's popularity except among the Bolsonarist base, half of the evangelical population, and a little over 40% of the economic elite. The polls for 2022 project a polarized election between Bolsonaro and Lula in which there will be no third choice, and they fairly consistently place Lula in the lead. However, the volatile Brazilian political landscape of the last five years does not allow for easy predictions except one, perhaps. The forces currently in power, counting on the support of their foreign allies, will do anything possible not to be defeated. In this endeavor the cronyism and clientelism of the *Centrão* should not be underestimated. Thus, as Andrea Dip wrote in an article on New Year's Eve, what lies ahead of us is the challenge of remaining untamable.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article updates the analysis developed in "Anti-gender politics and de-democratization in Latin America: Chile" (2020) that characterized anti-gender politics in Chile up to 2019. That study gave attention to some important actors linked to such movements as that of the far-right conservative presidential candidate in the last election, José Antonio Kast, who won the first electoral round on November 21, 2021, but lost the second round on December 19, 2021, to President-elect Gabriel Boric.

In that short period, between 2019 and 2021, Chile and the world were confronted with unprecedented situations that have generated enormous consequences, and this new report intends, therefore, to consider them. Chile experienced from October 2019 onwards successive demonstrations against the prevailing social, political, and economic system. Never since the return of democracy in the 1990s had there been such massive demonstrations against the neoliberal model, based on the 1980 Constitution and inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship. The so-called "social eruption" has generated profound changes in the life of the country, one of the most important of which is the process of drafting a new Constitution, which we will discuss later. On the other hand, since the beginning of 2020, the world has experienced a pandemic of global scope and enormous social, political, and economic consequences. Throughout the world, COVID-19 has led to deaths, confinements, and social distancing measures on a scale never before seen in modern societies.

## THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN CHILE (2019-2021)

Since the beginning of the social mobilizations of October 2019, Chile has been faced with unprecedented demonstrations that have placed a strain on the whole society while fighting for better living conditions, greater equality, and a state that guarantees rights, bringing together previous mobilizations into a collective movement (Garretón et al., 2020). The serious social crisis experienced by the country since the beginning of these demonstrations led to a great national agreement that allowed laying the foundations for the referendum for a new constitution. Finally, the referendum was held in 2021 and the drafting of a new constitution by an assembly was approved by a wide margin.

The process, led by an indigenous woman, Elisa Loncón, is currently underway. The assembly has already approved a regulation that establishes the importance of a "focus on gender and a feminist perspective", understood

*[...] as a set of diagnostic tools, technical and institutional processes, and strategic measures adopted to eradicate gender violence, marginalization, and exclusion that sustain the historical patterns of domination over women, diversities, and sexual and gender dissidence, in order to ensure the conditions for a real, substantive, and effective democratic structure<sup>1</sup>.*

Meanwhile, on November 21, 2021, the country held new presidential elections, marking the end of the mandate of Sebastián Piñera, one of the least popular presidents since the return to democracy, with 6% approval and 86% disapproval (CEP, 2019). In these presidential elections, for the first time in Chilean post-democratic history, José Antonio Kast - a far-right candidate, from the recently created Republican Party (June 2019), defender of the Pinochet legacy and leader of the anti-gender movements in the country and in Latin America - obtained the most votes in the first round, surpassing with 27% the candidate Gabriel Boric, who obtained 25.8% and belongs to the *Apruebo Dignidad* party (T13, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1166336>

In the Senate elections, 50% of the winners were from the political right (El Mostrador, 2021). In the House of Representatives, *Renovación Nacional*, the party of then-President Piñera, obtained 25 seats, followed by the Independent Democratic Union with 23, the Republican Party with 14 (in total, 62 seats for the conservatives and the extreme right), while the Socialist Party won 13 seats, the Communist Party 12, *Convergencia Social* 9 and Christian Democracy 8 (that is, 42 seats for the center and left parties). This means that although Gabriel Boric won the current presidency, he will have a restricted capacity to pass laws.

The result of the first round should be analyzed as a paradoxical and combined effect of the social eruption, the constitutional process, and the pandemic. These processes have, on the one hand, increased the distrust in politics, reflected for a long time in high levels of electoral abstention (more than 50% in the 2021 elections), and a strong political polarization that, also, has a long history. Kast, with his populist discourse focusing on the "restoration of order", won the support of economic and social groups that oppose the country's current changes which are reflected in the work on the new constitution. What was at stake in the recent elections were two national visions: one transformative, moving towards an expansion of the state as a guarantor of rights, and the other seeking to roll back social rights and move towards a state that is socially conservative and economically liberal (BBC News Mundo, 2021).

Kast proposed in his government program, among other things, to eliminate the National Institute of Human Rights and replace the Ministry for Women with a Ministry for the Family. Kast has a radically anti-abortion position and proposed a legal reform to eliminate the allowances approved in 2017. In the debates, Kast pointed out that he is not homophobic but attacked on several occasions what he calls the gay lobby or dictatorship that acts "permanently" in Congress and in the Executive Branch (T13, 2021). This ambiguous position reproduces the statement of Pope Francis when he declared that if a person is gay and loves God he must be respected; the problem is not homosexuality but the "gay lobby"<sup>2</sup>. For his part, while a candidate, President-elect Gabriel Boric committed

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *Os discursos de Francisco e suas duplicidades*. <https://sxpolitics.org/ptbr/os-discursos-de-franciscoe-suas-duplicidades/11498>

to "Building a Feminist Future", which translates into incorporating a transversal feminist perspective in the government, encouraging economic reactivation with a strong focus on female labor participation, and building a parity democracy.

The results of the presidential runoff held on December 19, 2021, had the highest electoral participation since the implementation of voluntary voting in 2012, with a 55.65% participation rate (surpassing the vote of the plebiscite for a new Constitution in 2020, which had a 50.95% electoral participation rate). With 99.99% of the votes counted, Gabriel Boric's 4,620,671 votes surpassed José Antonio Kast's 3,649,647 votes by almost one million (El Mostrador, 2021).

This is a sign of hope for the Chilean population, since President-elect Boric proposes a pluralistic, inclusive, and rights-guaranteeing model and also highlights the defense of the constitution which is being drafted. His government, which begins on March 11, 2022, has assured better living conditions for the population that has historically been violated by a neoliberal system that promotes inequality and the privatization of life. Thus, with a gender perspective and a feminist, ecological approach, respect for life will be deeply rooted. In his speech, he made it clear, "I will be the president of all Chileans" (Concha, 2021).

## COVID-19 IN CHILE

In Chile, on February 7, 2020, a health alert was decreed due to the concern of the health authorities regarding the worldwide figures for COVID-19 infections. The first domestic case was reported on March 3, 2020 (Arevalos et al., 2020; Secretariat of Communications, 2020), which resulted in the enactment of the governmental plan of action against COVID-19.

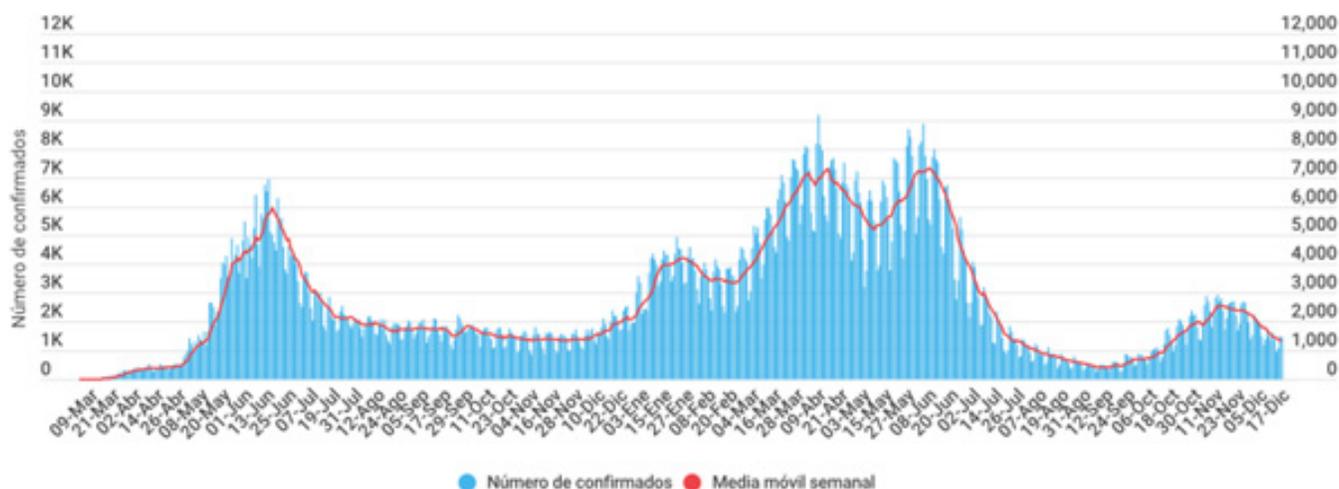
According to official data from the government (Secretariat of Communications, 2021), by April 3, 2020, 333 new cases were reported, and on June 14, 2020, there were 6,938 new cases, for a total of 47,833 cases. From August to December 2020, the pandemic stabilized as the number of cases declined, but from mid-December onwards, infections

gradually increased. On January 22, 2021, 4,956 new cases were recorded; in February there was a small drop, but then there was an increase again, reaching a total of 9,171 new cases on April 21. Between June and July, finally, the number of infections began to decrease, probably due to high vaccination rates (see below). By September 7, 2021, the lowest number of confirmed cases in 2021 was recorded – a total of 273 – and the pandemic had had 1,641,791 cases of which 1,599,267 recovered. By October 31, 2021, there were 2,040,366 total cases, and on December 16 only 1,520 new cases were confirmed, for a total of 1,787,676 cases since the beginning of the pandemic.

A new strain called Ómicron was found which is more transmissible, as it manages to evade the antibodies produced in people previously infected with COVID-19 or vaccinated. As a result, Omicron has a risk of infection between 3 and 8 times that of the Delta variant, but thanks to the great progress in the vaccination campaign and access to booster doses, the country is considered to be the best prepared in the world for this new strain (Government of Chile, 2021). In Chile, as of December 16, 2021, 30 cases had been reported.

### Número de casos confirmados por día

Cantidad de casos confirmados por día junto a la media móvil de casos nuevos.



[Download data](#)

Fuente: Base de datos Ministerio de Ciencia, en base a Reporte Diario Coronavirus Ministerio de Salud.

The first person in the country to die from COVID-19 was on March 19. On June 13, 195 deaths were recorded in one day, which was the highest daily figure during the pandemic. In April 2021, there was a new peak of 132 deaths in a single day. By December 2021, a total of 38,000 deaths from the virus had been recorded (Secretariat of Communications, 2021).

## MOST AFFECTED GROUPS

The groups that are most frequently infected are those under 60, but those with more severe symptoms and higher fatality rates are the elderly, residents of long-term care facilities, and those with comorbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, respiratory and cardiac diseases, and HIV (Benítez et al., 2020).

Vaccination refusal in Chile is uncommon. A survey by Ipsos (March 10, 2021) indicated that only one in ten people say they will not be vaccinated, but it is significant that most of those were women.

Also, there is a strong association between infection rate and poverty, at least in the Santiago region. The richest districts have the lowest infection rates (Vitacura, Las Condes, Providencia) and the poorest districts have the highest rates (La Pintana, Cerro Navia, Lo Espejo). In the districts with higher incomes, mobility was reduced by 45%, while in the districts with lower incomes, it was only 20%. According to Nicolás Ayala of the University of Talca, "the material conditions that we are betting on for the social protection of the state are quite precarious in the sense that neither economic nor labor conditions are such that people can remain at home" (University of Talca, 2020).

## VACCINATION STATUS

According to the COVID-19 Report: Chile (Canals, 2021), as of April 16, 2021, the country ranked third in the world in vaccination levels. By April 2021, Chile already had 40.1% of its population vaccinated, primarily with the SINOVAC vaccine. Ahead of Chile were Israel (61.7%) and the United Kingdom (48.2%). The vaccination plan started in May 2020, reaching agreements and contracts with Pfizer/BioNTech, Sinovac, AstraZeneca-Oxford, Johnson & Johnson, and Covax, which ensured more than 35 million vaccine doses for 2021.

Vaccination refusal in Chile is uncommon. A survey by Ipsos (March 10, 2021) indicated that only one in ten people say they will not be vaccinated, but it is significant that most of those were women. By November 2021, three doses had been administered, with the exception of single-dose vaccines, with a total of 15,281,216 people fully vaccinated and 7,608,473 already with a third dose. With regard to single doses (CanSino and Janssen), a total of 572,656 people had been vaccinated. A total of 90.6% of the population over 18 years of age had been vaccinated. By December 2021, a total of 15,825,064 people will have been vaccinated with two doses and 9,893,395 with the corresponding three doses. It is expected a total of 15,825,064 people with a two-dose vaccination scheme by December 2021, and 9,893,395 with the corresponding three doses. There will be a slight increase in the number of people vaccinated with a single dose, to 573,533 people.

However, despite the scale of the vaccination, in April, when the second round took place, the burden of infected patients caused the complete saturation of the health system, especially its ICUs, which were about 96% full. Seventy-seven per cent of patients had COVID-19 and most of them were under 60-year-old, which can be explained because they were not yet fully vaccinated (Canals, 2021). According to the latest data from the Government of Chile (Secretariat of Communications, 2021), since September 2021 the ICU beds for COVID-19 have been decreasing.

## SOCIOECONOMIC EFFECTS AND IMPACTS ON THE ENJOYMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that impacts human development as it has consequences in areas such as health, income, and educational systems. The Longitudinal Study on Daily Life in the COVID-19 Crisis (Aceituno et al., 2020) shows that 21% of respondents reported having lost their job during the pandemic, a percentage that rises to about 30% in lower-income households (less than or equal to \$640). In contrast, in the wealthiest households (greater than \$2,340) only 15% of individuals lost their jobs during the pandemic.

Thus, 54% of Chilean households have lost assets (spending savings, selling or leasing property, or selling goods), 40% have taken on new debt, 68% have reduced expenses such as food, health, education, and heating, and 55% have stopped paying debts during the pandemic (United Nations Development Program and Ministry of Social Development and Family, 2020).

Before the pandemic, 17% of households declared that their income was insufficient, and after the pandemic, this increased to 49%. Furthermore, 25% of households with reduced income suffer from moderate or severe food insecurity (United Nations Development Program and Ministry of Social Development and Family, 2020).

According to official figures from the National Institute of Statistics (2020), the unemployment rate reached 13.1% during the May-July 2020 quarter, which represented an increase of 5.6% in twelve months. During this period, the male unemployment rate was 13.5%, increasing 6.3% in one year; while the female unemployment rate reached 12.5%, an increase of 4.5%. Women are returning to the labor market in smaller numbers. In addition, young people lost their jobs more often than adults: 43% of those between 15 and 29 years old but only 27% of those aged 30 or older lost their jobs.

It is important to note that the pandemic has had a strong impact on indigenous peoples. According to CIIR (2020): "Indigenous peoples have been completely neglected by the state, and, except for special situations, not only have no specific policies been enacted to address COVID-19 in indigenous peoples, but in many cases, even autonomous initiatives that aimed to have been hindered" (CIIR, 2020).

The pandemic has also shown the inequality of access to internet services and the need to assess the digital divide. It has also worsened the human rights deficits that already had appeared very serious since the Chilean social upheaval of October 2019.

## GENDER IMPACTS

Women have been most affected by the pandemic as the amount of domestic work they perform in relation to care activities has increased (Aceituno et al., 2020). Sixty per cent of women reported doing more than before the crisis, in contrast to men, who increased their activities by 42%. 67% of mothers but only 43% of fathers report assisting their children in educational activities, and 42% of female-headed households have had problems carrying out work/school activities while only 37% of male-headed households have had problems doing so. In addition, the labor sectors with the highest female participation have been the most affected by the pandemic, which has delayed their reintegration into the labor market (United Nations Development Program and Ministry of Social Development and Family, 2020).

The pandemic has negatively affected public policies related to gender and sexuality, particularly in the area of health. For example, since March 2020, basic supplies for voluntary termination of pregnancy have not been distributed in public health facilities (Peña, 2020), as reported by feminist organizations. Likewise, the Second Survey on Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health during COVID-19 reports that 74% of people who sought contraceptives could not access them.

In addition, there was an interruption in the delivery of antiretrovirals for people living with HIV (El Mostrador, 2021). However, according to a key informant, rather than

bad intentions, there was disorder and a lack of clarity about the importance of these drugs in people's lives. No less important, given that in Chile primary care services are in charge of managing pre-hospitalization COVID-19 cases, these facilities were filled with infected people and other care was neglected, which exposed people with comorbidities, such as those with HIV, to the risk of contagion.

## THE CASE OF THE DEFECTIVE PILLS

The problem in access to contraceptives became more acute in November 2020 when it was discovered that defective contraceptive supplies had been delivered to health service users. Before that, in 2019, 27 women had already reported a failure in Anulette CD contraceptive pills and the Miles Corporation indicated that it was not the first time that such problems had occurred with that manufacturer. Last November, the complaint was made by the College of Pharmaceutical Chemists and Biochemists who identified defects in Abbott's Ciclomex 20 CD product. In that case, the strongest criticism has been made to the Institute of Public Health for not guaranteeing quality and safety procedures and stronger action by regulators and supervisors and to the state for not providing a responsible response to support those affected (Paranthos, 2021). According to UNFPA, this situation could have generated more than 18,000 unwanted pregnancies and 8,500 unsafe abortions. The case was prosecuted.

## STATE RESPONSES

Due to the anticipatory concern of the Chilean authorities, a first meeting was held on January 2, 2020, to discuss governmental plans of action against the coronavirus. The government defined as priorities the strengthening of hospital capacity, public-private partnerships to strengthen testing, and traceability and isolation of COVID-19 cases. In July 2020, the government created a strategy called the "step-by-step plan" to address the pandemic, according to territorial health conditions, i.e., each area of the country according to the number of infections (Secretariat of Communications, 2021). However, above all, from the first outbreak of COVID-19, one of the first actions of the state was to enact emergency rules restricting the freedom of movement and assembly of Chileans.

[...] since March 2020, a series of opinion polls, including the IPSOS, show that society's perception of the state's response to the pandemic is, in general, very negative.

Then, as the spread of the virus evolved, measures of social distancing, isolation of cases, early opening of hospitals under construction, optional quarantines, suspension of schools, and economic measures were implemented. This was followed by control of circulation, mandatory quarantines in some municipalities, purchase of supplies, provision of spaces to care for the sick, and mandatory use of masks (Benítez et al., 2020).

As for social protection measures, about \$30 billion was allocated to help more than 15 million Chileans. However, despite the outlays, there has been low coverage of the social support network. According to the survey "Termómetro social octubre 2020 Chile", 87.7% of the people surveyed did not have access to the middle-class voucher, 81.6% could not access the COVID-19 emergency voucher, 66.2% were not granted the emergency family income for vulnerable households, and 30.3% did not have access to the 10% Chilean pension fund withdrawal.

## CHILEAN SOCIETY'S PERCEPTION OF THE MANAGEMENT OF THE PANDEMIC

State management of the crisis has had some achievements that can be mentioned. Among these are the rapid vaccination of almost the entire target population and the low number of young people admitted to the ICU (Canals, 2021). Also, it is worth noting that 79% of Chileans feel a reasonable degree of pride in the vaccination process (Ipsos, measurement, 2021).

However, since March 2020, a series of opinion polls, including IPSOS, show that society's perception of the state's response to the pandemic is, in general, very negative. The aforementioned Social Thermometer survey, for example, shows that the pandemic

exacerbates the already-existing great discontent and reports that 88.9% of the people surveyed believed that a new social eruption like that of October 2019 could happen again. According to the Activa Knowledge for Action survey, 57% of people reported not having received clear information to prevent the coronavirus. The April 2021 Ipsos survey revealed that 16% of respondents did not trust the information on COVID-19 provided by the government.

Regarding the performance of the Ministry of Health, in the same survey, 37.7% considered its management to be very bad. The Plaza Pública survey (CADEM, 2021) also showed that 71% of respondents disapproved of the way in which Sebastián Piñera conducted the response to COVID-19. In addition, 39% believed that infections had increased due to the government's attempt to accelerate the return to normalcy in order to protect the economy. The evaluation of the National Institute of Human Rights revealed that health decisions were made without necessary transparency or citizen participation (INDH, 2020, p. 120). The IPSOS public opinion survey of July 2021 confirmed that a majority of people positively evaluated the mass vaccination process (58%), but only 25% considered positive the management of Sebastián Piñera's government with regard to the coronavirus crisis (p. 25).

## **POLITICS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT**

Until October 2019, Chile was considered one of the most politically and economically stable countries in Latin America. President Sebastián Piñera himself, nine days after the eruption of the social revolt, asserted that Chile was "a true oasis within a convulsed Latin America". However, this image, which had been forged mainly abroad and fostered by disparate national political sectors, would collapse very quickly. It must be said that the demands of the protests had precedents, such as in the student mobilization of 2011 and other less widespread ones that were brutally repressed by the state (Penaglia and Mejías, 2020).

However, the mobilizations of 2019 showed the world that the Chilean citizenry was dissatisfied and very burdened by a political system designed by the military dictatorship to protect it by means of the 1980 Constitution. This document, which has underpinned

the Chilean neoliberal economic model, established that all goods and services must be provided by the private sector, with state intervention restricted to providing the minimum (and hopefully only provisionally). This means that, since 1980, all social benefits have been managed by private parties, generally economic conglomerates. In addition, the model privatized access to water, education, and health. Hence, since the 1990s, cycles of mobilization in Chile have brought forward social demands.

The massive mobilizations of 2019 showed the world that Chile was not a just country and that living this way was not humane, legitimizing a well-known Mexican political slogan: "Until dignity becomes customary"<sup>3</sup> (López, 2017)<sup>4</sup>. As the president of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) emphasized on March 8, 2020, the feminist movement and social organizations have been central protagonists of the Chilean social revolt, "questioning the entire model, the way we live in our society" (Diario U Chile, 2021).

On the other hand, the state's response to the mobilizations was brutal police violence. The National Institute of Human Rights (INDH) refers to the 8,812 detainees that have been heard, but 27,432 people are estimated to have been arrested, of which, according to the national prosecutor's office, "2,500 were imprisoned of whom many are minors". Furthermore, according to the Second Report of the Ophthalmological College, 400 people lost their sight due to the indiscriminate use of pellets by the forces of public order.

Likewise, data compiled by the same INDH in its 2019 report shows a high incidence of crimes of a sexual nature perpetrated by the Carabineros and other police authorities while arresting demonstrators. Thus, of the total of 809 victims represented

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3 "This case changed the way we see life. Today we know that it is not necessary to commit a crime to be disappeared, persecuted, or be in jail. For those of us who continue to fight for justice, freedom, democracy and the sovereignty of Mexico, for our homeland, for life, and for humanity, we remain with you, forever and ever, [...] until dignity becomes a custom." <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2017/02/23/opinion/021a1pol>

4 This famous phrase comes from an act of reparation by the Mexican state that recognized the innocence of three Hñáhnú and Otomí women who had been unjustly prosecuted. A daughter of one of the three women took the floor in this act and alluded in her criticism of the injustice, state repression, insecurity, discrimination, and racism to which they are subjected by the Mexican state

in complaints of sexual violence and other sex crimes, 13 are boys or adolescents and 14 are girls or adolescents, three are sexually diverse, and there are two pregnant women and one migrant. According to the Fondo Alquimia (2020), police violence during the demonstrations was oriented "in a particular way against gender and sexual dissidence" that not only violated the "right to expression and protest" but also "undermined their place in society by attacking their bodies and their dignity as persons" (Arevalos et al., 2020, p. 38). The above was also corroborated by a study conducted in 2020 through interviews with LGBTQ+ people who suffered police violence during demonstrations due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Arensburg-Castelli et al., 2021).

Not less important, even in November 2021, people detained in these mobilizations are still imprisoned and the Organization of Relatives and Friends of Political Prisoners (OFAPP) continues to advocate for the presumption of innocence and the freedom of these political prisoners. In addition, various organizations and political parties have proposed an Amnesty Law which had to be resolved before the beginning of the debate on the new constitution (Mantxo, 2021). Faced with this, President-elect Gabriel Boric made it clear that once he takes office in March 2022, he will address these cases with a pardon. However, this does not ensure the pardon of all, since a case-by-case review must be made in collaboration with the National Institute of Human Rights to determine the seriousness of the accusations, which are backed by the State Security Law. Despite this, there are cases of people prosecuted outside this law, which complicates the outlook (La Tercera, 2021).

In addition, it was decided that the body to draft the constitution would be a convention elected for this purpose with equal gender representation, a rule established for the first time in the world for these processes, and the possibility of the election of independent candidates and those representing social organizations.

## CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

From the beginning of the protests in October 2019, political leaders were effectively powerless in the face of the tenacity of the mobilizations. As a result, a long negotiation on an Agreement for Peace and a New Constitution was required, a process that concluded on November 15, 2019. In that agreement, there was a commitment to call a referendum to approve or reject the adoption of a new fundamental charter and to define the composition of the body in charge of drafting it<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, on November 25, 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, a plebiscite was held in which 78% of the voters (over 50% of eligible voters) approved the adoption of a new Constitution. In addition, it was decided that the body to draft the Constitution would be elected for this purpose with equal gender representation, a rule established for the first time in the world for these processes, and the possibility of the election of independent candidates and those representing social organizations. On May 15 and 16, 2021, elections were held to elect the convention of 155 members for a period of nine months during which a new constitutional text would be drafted and then approved in a second vote.

This process resulted in a large victory for independent candidates. Of the 155 members elected to the assembly, 48 ran on lists independent of the political parties (31%) and, additionally, 40 members represent different collectivities. In addition, there are 17 seats reserved for indigenous peoples. As a result, only 50 constituents are members of political parties. Unlike the bicameral national Congress, the convention is unicameral. In addition, as already mentioned, the convention has gender parity (77 women and 78 men), there are quotas for indigenous peoples (17), and there are several LGBTTIA+ constituents, which translates into a priority for environmental and feminist concerns. The assembly is left-leaning.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this consensus was politically challenged because it was negotiated by the same leaders challenged by the social revolt.

Even though these results are positive, as has been the case in recent elections, there was a high level of abstention and there is significant fragmentation in the assembly, which makes it difficult to reach a consensus for the elaboration of the new constitutional charter. Several right-wing candidates were also elected. For example, the UDI elected 10 affiliated candidates and another 5 are independent, including Marcela Cubillos, a staunch defender of Pinochet<sup>6</sup>. Kast's Republican Party won 4 members, including Teresa Marinovic, who considers homosexuality an anomaly (Kogan, 2021).

In the debates, moreover, Marinovic condemned Machi Francisca Linconao (representative of the indigenous peoples) for expressing herself in the Mapuche language and repeatedly referred to her in a discriminatory and violent way on her Twitter account, which has led to a demand for sanction before the ethics committee of the convention<sup>7</sup>. The president of the convention, Elisa Loncón, has also been threatened by right-wing sectors (Namuncura, 2021). This means that despite the progressive composition of the assembly, the right-wing caucus is creating barriers to potential normative advances, especially after the November election results. Furthermore, since the beginning of the assembly's work, right-wing forces have disseminated speeches and arguments against the constitutional reform and its potential results.

It is important to mention, however, that as of September 2021 Chilean society had a positive outlook on the constitutional reform. An Ipsos survey of March 30, 2021, made before the election, identified positive emotions and hope regarding the new constitution in 52% of the people surveyed, while 45% felt distrust. In a second survey published on September 29, 2021, 57% of the population expressed positive emotions regarding the new constitution, while 37% expressed rejection, indicating that the right-wing campaign against the reform was not working.

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6 Cubillo was Minister of Education in the Piñera government and in 2018 defended students of the Liceo San Francisco de Quito, who refused to read the author Pedro Lemebel, recognized for his long history in the struggle for LGBT recognition and awareness during the dictatorship. (El Dinamo, 2018).

7 On July 20, Marinovic wrote on Twitter: "Constituent Linconao speaking in Mapudungun... she knows how to speak in Spanish, but it doesn't matter: she doesn't miss the opportunity to make a spectacle" (Yáñez, 2021). In reaction, a group of seven Mapuche constituents filed an injunction against her with the ethics committee, which has been joined by others (El Mostrador, 2021).

## ANTI-GENDER OFFENSIVES IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

The pandemic and its management, as well as the effects of the Chilean social eruption, have temporarily overshadowed the anti-gender movement and its actions. According to a key informant we spoke to for the study<sup>8</sup>, in 2021 the ruling right was in a very tenuous situation, as the ground was shifting in essential areas and, as a result, gender issues seemed dormant. However, as will be seen, this does not mean that the offensives reported in the 2019 survey have disappeared. Rather, the current social, political, and economic situation has generated a strong polarization in society (between those who are for change and those who do not want change, a transformation synthesized in a new constitution), which has led, little by little, to the emergence and legitimization of populist and, in some cases, fascist ideas. A key role in this has been played by the political leader of the extreme right, José Antonio Kast, who until recently had little popular support but, as already mentioned, obtained the most votes in the first round of the presidential elections of November 2021. In addition, it is pertinent to briefly revisit the analysis made about Kast in the previous study of 2020 (Barrientos, 2020). That report already emphasized his extreme positions against "gender ideology" and the right to abortion. Likewise, a recent report offered the following description of Kast's political trajectory:

*[A] recent study by the Centro de Investigación e Información Periodística (CIPER), research that is part of the global effort of Transnationals of Faith (coordinated by Columbia Journalism Investigation of the Columbia University School of Journalism, United States), analyzes in detail Kast's role as a spokesman for anti-gender and right-wing forces in Chile, as well as his links with other regional right-wing actors such as Jair Bolsonaro and his family. The report also describes his role in various international networks of religious conservatism, especially the Alliance Defending Freedom, an American Christian network which acts globally".<sup>9</sup>*

8 For this second report, we interviewed six people who, in an informal conversation, gave their views on these issues.

9 Ramírez, P. (2019). El desconocido rol estelar de J.A. Kast en la "guerra santa" contra la OEA. Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER). <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2019/06/25/el-desconocido-rol-estelar-de-j-a-kast-en-la-guerra-santa-contra-la-oea/>

In addition to Kast, there are other anti-gender leaders, also mentioned in the previous study. Among them is Marcela Aranda, director of the Christian Legislative Observatory, who has also recently returned to the fray with her anti-gender offensives. Thus, in November 2020, shortly before the plebiscite for the constitutional reform, she announced that the "orange bus" of the Spanish neoconservative Citizen Go - which had been in Chile in 2017 - would again circulate through the streets of Santiago and Valparaíso to deploy its anti-gender messages.

Aranda's announcement caused a strong repudiation from LGBTTTIA+ organizations. Importantly, the government, through its spokesman Jaime Bellolio, stated that the administration of Sebastián Piñera was against this tour but that it did not have the legal tools to prohibit it. Finally, the bus did not run and nobody came out to defend Marcela Aranda. However, in retrospect, it is perhaps interesting to underline that CIPER's analysis (Ramírez, 2019) notes that one of the objectives of the announcement of the bus tour in 2020 was to create a favorable atmosphere for the launching of Kast's first candidacy for the presidency, which took place two months later.

[...] all over the world, the right to gender identity in childhood is today a main target of anti-gender offensives [...].

Another event that happened in the pandemic times was the lawsuit filed by parliamentarians of Chile Vamos, which is the new name of the UDI, before the Constitutional Court against the defender of children, Patricia Muñoz (Diario Constitucional, 2020). Muñoz has vigorously defended the rights of children and adolescents during the social eruption and the pandemic and has confronted many anti-gender actors. The action against her was filed due to a video in which the Childhood Defense Office called on people to "jump the turnstiles" of the subway. This lawsuit, therefore, accuses the children's defender of "committing a manifest and inexcusable negligence in the exercise of her functions by inexplicably neglecting her legal powers to protect children from violations of their rights". This legal action was unsuccessful and her removal as children's defender was rejected.

In the area of rights related to gender identity, there is an important problem related to the implementation of the Gender Identity Law that came into force in 2019, which seems to be linked to the dynamics of anti-gender policies. The governmental program of support for the law is designed to guarantee this right to trans children since the legal norm requires access to professional support programs. The program includes psychological and biopsychosocial counselling. However, as of November 2021, only two organizations have been accredited to offer these services and in practice, this public policy of support does not yet exist. Also, there have been tensions associated with where this program should be based, whether in primary care, hospitals, or elsewhere. Insofar as, throughout the world, the right to gender identity in childhood is today a main target of anti-gender offensives, it is not unreasonable to assert that this delay is associated with conservative pressures which, according to a key informant interviewed, occur within the state apparatus where there are specialists aligned with these anti-gender positions.

In addition, a new issue has recently become a new target of anti-gender crusades: the use of inclusive language in education. In May 2021, two ministers from the president's party, Renovación Nacional, introduced a bill that sought to ban the use of inclusive language in education. The justification for the proposal was that "this constitutional reform will have a positive impact on national education and will promote the correct, timely, and appropriate use of language within the classroom, preventing ideologies from contaminating the education of children and adolescents through language" (Vera, 2021). This has not been successful as of yet.

Above all, it is important to mention that, in 2021, anti-gender forces mobilized against President Piñera's surprisingly supportive position on same-sex marriage. In 2019, the Senate Constitution Committee initiated a debate on same-sex marriage, also known as egalitarian marriage. In January 2020, with 22 votes in favor, 16 against, and one abstention, the Senate approved legislating on the matter, but due to the crisis and the pandemic the discussion lost momentum. A year and a half later, in June 2021, President Piñera announced that the executive would urgently move the bill forward because "the time has come to guarantee this freedom to all people; the time has come for egalitarian marriage". In December 2021, days before the second round of elections, President Piñera himself finally enacted the equal marriage law.

In response to this action, some members of his own party (Renovación Nacional) expressed their discontent. Francesca Muñoz stated that "Marriage is between a man and a woman. Chileans are fed up with the abuses of the great economic powers. Please, let us prioritize the people who need it so much". Another congressman, Leonidas Romero, took the announcement to be a political betrayal by Piñera: "I regret having to listen to someone who betrayed the Christian world, mainly the Evangelicals who supported him with our vote" (Salgado, 2021). It is worth remembering that this law was proposed by former President Michelle Bachelet in her second government.

However, the most serious event, because of its overtly political connotations and typical of gender attacks, occurred on July 9, 2021. On that date, the right-wing congressmen Cristóbal Urruticoechea (Republican Party, of J.A. Kast) and Harry Jurguensen (National Renewal, government party) issued the official letter No. 76054<sup>10</sup>. in which they requested the Ministry of Finance provide information on "resources allocated annually to finance the courses, centers, and study programs that refer to gender studies, gender ideology, sexual diversity, and feminism, detailing their main characteristics and identifying the officials or teachers who are in charge of them". In response to this request, the Universidad de Chile refused to provide information, issuing a statement in which it emphasizes:

*[...] we reject all forms of censorship, violation of academic freedom, and restrictions on full university autonomy, since if they succeed they would prevent the thought and production of knowledge without restrictions, essential conditions for the generation of knowledge that contributes to sovereignty and emancipation. (Uchile Newspaper, 2021)*

In contrast, the University of Santiago de Chile responded to the request, providing information on courses, programs, thesis titles, resources, and identities of officials, teachers, and students. Subsequently, information about what happened in the institution began to be broadcast in the media, generating repudiation and discomfort, which led to the students starting an indefinite strike from October 29, 2021, demanding the

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10 [https://www.camara.cl/fiscalizacion/oficios\\_fiscalizacion/detalle\\_oficio.aspx?prmIdOficio=176377](https://www.camara.cl/fiscalizacion/oficios_fiscalizacion/detalle_oficio.aspx?prmIdOficio=176377)

resignation of the dean Juan Manuel Zolezzi (Espinoza and Carvajal, 2021; Avendaño, 2021). Immediately, on November 15, the University of Santiago was taken over by its students who remained there until that analysis was completed (El Mostrador, 2021).

This prompted professors to endorse the motion denouncing the dean, the secretary general, Gustavo Robles Labarca, and the vice-dean, Julio Romero, for having made the decisions to provide the information without a critical attitude and without consultation. The professors demanded the resignation of the three implicated and an administrative investigation into the legality of the exposure of the identities of officials, professors, and students, and the elimination on the website of the House of Representatives of the document submitted by the USACH (Redacción Chile, 2021).

Finally, as in other countries in the region and in Europe, in 2020-2021, feminist anti-gender and anti-trans currents (TERF) have also gained greater public visibility. According to a source, in Chile, these groups, however, have not had as much influence as elsewhere. This can be demonstrated, for example, by the trans-inclusive statements of the coordinator on March 8, 2020: "In Chile, we are living a process of popular revolt and women, lesbians, transvestites, and transgender people have been part of it".

## ANTI-ABORTION OFFENSIVES

In Chile, as in other parts of the world, attacks on gender are not unrelated to anti-abortion strategies. Therefore, it is important to mention that four years after the publication in the Official Gazette of the three-cause abortion law in Chile, the number of legal abortion procedures per year is far from what was predicted. According to figures from the Ministry of Health from September 2017 to June 2020, only 1,813 people resorted to the procedure due to any of the three reasons that are allowed for terminating a pregnancy (rape, risk to the woman's life, and fetal malformation incompatible with life), which is 30% of what had been predicted in 2017 (Peña, 2020). There are no updated figures on this matter as of 2021.

[...] one out of every two obstetricians working in public facilities is opposed to terminating a pregnancy in the case of rape, one out of every four in the case of non-viability, and one-fifth in cases of life-threatening danger.

These numbers can be explained, above all, by the numerous obstacles that girls and women have faced in accessing this essential and humanitarian health service. The first of these is that there is a high number of conscientious objector professionals. Thus, for example, according to a report published at the end of November 2020 by *Corporación Humanas*, since the implementation of the regulation, half of the obstetricians in public hospitals have declared themselves conscientious objectors on at least one of the grounds, mainly in the case of pregnancies resulting from rape. Specifically, one out of every two obstetricians working in public hospitals is opposed to terminating a pregnancy in the case of rape, one out of every four in the case of non-viability, and one-fifth in cases of life-threatening danger, according to the document.

However, there is also a great deal of misinformation regarding the law itself on the part of medical personnel, and there is a lack of resources to guarantee access to pharmaceutical abortion, i.e., with pills. A recent opinion article pointed out that it is

*[...] indispensable that the new Human Rights and Gender Department of the Ministry of Health instruct all health care providers to enable telehealth channels to attend IVE cases, guarantee the availability of Misoprostol and Mifepristone, reinforce training for health care professionals, and curb conscientious objection.<sup>11</sup>*

As has already been observed, these limitations have worsened in the context of COVID-19. Recently, however, the proposal to legislate on the decriminalization of abortion consented to by the woman up to 14 weeks of gestation was approved in the House of

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.elmostrador.cl/braga/2020/09/23/a-3-anos-de-la-ley-de-aborto-en-tres-causales-las-mujeres-aun-nopodemos-acceder-a-la-interrupcion-del-embarazo/>

Representatives with 75 votes in favor, 68 against, and 2 abstentions (Gallardo, 2021). In this discussion, parliamentarians opposed to this law have expressed their opinion. One of them was Congresswoman Karin Luck, who stated:

*[...] it is a really sad day [...] it is not about values or religion, it is about the fundamental right declared by the United Nations which is the right to life; in that declaration, it is said that no one can arbitrarily take the life of another and today that is what is being done [...]. What is being committed today is murder.<sup>12</sup>*

Finally, according to the Observatory for the New Constitution, only 4.5% of the constituents' proposals include explicit provisions regarding the right to abortion, one of the most important demands of the feminist movement.

## FINAL WORDS

After the dramatic risks of the 2021 presidential elections, it is healthy to make a brief assessment of what is happening in Chile and try to predict, in a concise manner, what may happen in the coming years, considering both the electoral results and the constitutional process. Although there are issues that could be taken for granted, such as the majority expectation of profound changes in several matters, the recent results of the presidential and legislative elections make it clear that the resistance of powerful conservative groups and of part of society to the changes demanded by the social uprising and projected by the constitutional reform is strong. In particular, if we look at the scenario from the point of view of the advance of anti-gender movements and policies, it is difficult to clearly forecast where the country will be heading in the coming years.

However, despite this uncertain future, there are some things we can point out.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.latercera.com/politica/noticia/reconocimiento-a-los-derechos-e-historico-versus-una-triste-demostracion-las-reacciones-tras-la-aprobacion-de-proyecto-que-despenaliza-el-aborto-hasta-las-14-semanas/BU3NCLHLGZD4REHOCTXHDK736E/>

First, if we think about the role that churches and religious fundamentalism have played in anti-gender movements in the world, we can say that, in Chile, although this role exists, it has not been as great as in other countries. In Chile, the Catholic church is very discredited by sexual abuse cases. It was already mentioned in the previous report that, in 2018, the rejection of the Catholic Church in Chile reached 76% and only 46% of the people surveyed identified themselves as Catholic (CADEM, 2018, cited in Barrientos, 2020). In addition, a large portion of the population is disenchanted with churches in general. The very proactive role of evangelical churches in Chile must certainly be considered. However, although leaders of these evangelical churches have taken action against advances in gender, sexuality, and abortion rights, they have not had the strength and scope that can be seen in other countries in the region.

In other words, the electoral result that has brought to power a young leader committed to feminist and sexual diversity policies does not mean that the anti-gender and anti-abortion offensives will disappear.

Rather, in Chile, anti-gender groups are more rooted in the country's social and economic elites, who in turn are linked to international networks, particularly those that are part of the right-wing and extreme right-wing political class. However, they are also linked to businessmen, especially those linked to resource extraction who are opposed to the structural transformations expected by Chilean society.

For this reason, it is essential to situate the gender-related attacks in structural aspects of the Chilean economy and politics in a broader intersectional perspective that not only emphasizes the role of the churches, but also a larger network that operates to resist not only the transformations in the area addressed in this report but also deeper transformations that affect the entire population of the country and the region.

In addition, these elites are linked to international groups and movements that fight against the progress achieved in the areas covered by this report. CIPER (2021) alluded to

the phenomenon of José Antonio Kast in the region and internationally, characterized by his "strong opposition to the achievements made in civil rights, especially in the LGBTQ world, feminist movements, and minority groups". That CIPER report also mentions the Conservative Summit of the Americas that was convened by Eduardo Bolsonaro (Bolsonaro's son) which brought together various leaders of the extreme right of Latin America and Europe in the Brazilian city of Foz de Iguazu in December 2018 and at which Kast was present. At that summit, these issues were discussed in association with other issues, such as public safety and corruption. That report also refers to the organization called "The Movement" led by Steve Bannon, former Trump advisor, which likewise has contacts in Latin America, especially in Brazil. Last but not least, we must take into account the exchanges between activists and leaders of the extreme right and Spanish anti-gender movements led by VOX from the "Madrid Forum" created in March 2020. This forum aims to counteract the "Sao Paulo Forum"<sup>13</sup>.

In other words, the anti-gender actions and movements in Chile are rooted in the social and economic elites of the country and connected to an international network of the extreme right in which Kast is very active. Therefore, it is hard to believe that the defeated candidate in 2021, with a record of such strong anti-gender and anti-abortion positions, modified his convictions in these matters before the second round and that, eventually, he will behave politically in a different way. In other words, the electoral result that has brought to power a young leader committed to feminist and sexual diversity principles does not mean that the anti-gender and anti-abortion offensives will disappear.

On the other hand, these attacks contrast with the perception and opinion of the Chilean population. According to a recent survey conducted by CADEM (2021), 74% of those interviewed agree with equal marriage while 65% agree with child adoption by homosexuals. This result represents an increase of 13 per cent over the PUC Bicentennial survey (2020), where only 61% agreed with equal marriage.

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13 The Sao Paulo Forum is a meeting of Latin American left-wing political groups founded in 1990. They organize to fight neoliberalism and rising poverty.

Nevertheless, there are challenges ahead. An informant from the feminist movement interviewed in the survey stresses that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the social problems that led to the social eruption of 2019, particularly those affecting migrants and the poorest communities. Therefore, in the current conditions, it is vital to sustain the expanded representation of class and race, and not just gender, in the political spheres reflected, at least partially, in the constitutional assembly. Above all, this activist observes that the Chilean LGBT communities remain disconnected from the realities and demands for human rights in the broader perspective that is currently defining political dynamics in Chile.

According to her, Chile is not a culturally homogeneous country, and therefore it is urgent to review how LGBT rights demands have been articulated from a perspective that excludes the desires and experiences of certain groups. For example, the visions and voices of trans Mapuche youth are not fully included, and it is necessary to broaden the framing of rights to include them (OTD Team, 2021). These challenges will be, in part, addressed in the constitutional convention.

Above all, from now on, gender, sexuality, and abortion policies must be firmly articulated with the guidelines that have emerged from the social eruption of 2019, which shook the whole society, guaranteed constitutional reform, and determined the conditions for the presidential elections of 2021. That was undoubtedly the victorious strategy in the second round.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider that the same mobilizations that have overturned neoliberal policies and that have led to a diverse constitutional convention committed to human rights have also revived fears of chaos and social disorder, generating fear in part of the population. This fueled Kast's populist discourse on risk and security which boosted his electoral popularity on the way to the first round. Kast's victory was unthinkable because until the last moments – before the first round – nobody would have foreseen that a far-right politician, defender of Pinochet, and denier of human rights violations would be in a position to win the Chilean presidential elections.

However, after the second round and Boric's comfortable victory, there is hope that this fear can be overcome and that the human rights agenda, including gender and sexuality issues, will be advanced. However, the governability of the country will not be easy because politics is still very polarized, and, in addition, the negative economic effects resulting from the management of the pandemic are profound. In addition, there is a lack of credibility with respect to the political institutions that remains unchanged.

Therefore, the challenges for the president-elect, the country as a whole, as well as the social movements - Mapuche, feminist, LGBTIQ+, ecologists - and the academics working on the issues addressed in this report, will continue to persist, but with greater ramifications, and will require stronger and more sustainable positions in favor of the structural improvements expected by the citizenry.

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## INTRODUCTION

This text is part of the second stage of the regional study on gender and politics in Latin America, a project under the leadership of the Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW). It aims to provide a general context on the coronavirus crisis in the case of Colombia and to explore some aspects related to the actions of conservative groups and anti-gender agents, as well as relevant aspects of sexual politics in the context of this pandemic.

The first stage of the regional study investigated the emergence of anti-gender actors in Colombia and placed them in a larger historical context, linking them to the old groups and economic funds of Catholic origin against sexual and reproductive rights, self-proclaimed as pro-life. It also showed the updating of the current conservative discourse, as well as the new actors and media and their transnational strategies. We also traced a certain institutionalization of these conservative positions and their evolution in electoral politics, with the evolution of the participation in Congress of conservative agents from evangelical churches and other Christian denominations, including Catholics. The new study aims to update this survey.

This new study was done in the midst of an unusual situation with very bizarre aspects and challenges of data collection due to the restrictions of the pandemic. In addition, in this context of confinement, there were very critical political events, including the resurgence of violence and the strengthening of armed groups related to drug trafficking, resource extraction, illegal mining, and land grabbing in the post-agreement period of the

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1 The Colombian case for this second stage is being developed by a team under the coordination of Franklin Gil Hernández, professor at the School of Gender Studies of the National University of Colombia, with the support of two research assistants, Laura Pérez Arjona and Daniela Rojas Olarte.

peace process, with a government adverse to this process and to the system of justice, truth, and reparations. On the other hand, there was a prolonged and widespread outbreak of strikes which we will speak in this document which revealed the social crisis, extreme inequality, and violence, including state violence, which the pandemic only made more visible.

This article first provides an overview of the pandemic in its epidemiological and social dimensions. Subsequently, it presents some elements of the national political situation in the context of the pandemic, and then, more specifically, it deals with the most significant gender and sexuality issues. Finally, it discusses some actions taken by anti-gender groups in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## OVERVIEW OF THE EPIDEMIC

According to the Colombian Ministry of Health, the first case of COVID-19 was registered on March 6, 2020 (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, 2020). Subsequently, more cases began to occur, particularly in the middle and upper classes who had traveled to Europe at a time when there were no cases of local infection. Since 2020, the pattern of COVID-19 infections and mortality during the course of the pandemic has had three major peaks. The first of these occurred between the months of July and September 2020, the second between December 2020 and February 2021, and the third between March and June 2021. By November 18, 2021, there were 5,038,544 confirmed cases, 4,879,456 recovered cases, 13,933 active cases and 127,912 deaths (National Institute of Health, 2021). During June, the number of daily deaths ranged between 600 and 700, making it the third-ranked country in the world in daily deaths caused by COVID-19. Since mid-September, thanks to advances in vaccination, the mortality rate has dropped considerably and since then has fluctuated between 30 and 40 deaths per day.

The public hospital network already suffered from a great deterioration as a result of the crisis of this privatized model, which collapsed with the pandemic. In the Amazon region, with a majority indigenous population, there was a severe crisis.

## **MOST AFFECTED GROUPS**

The populations most affected by infections have been women and people between 20 and 39 years of age. Men and older adults have experienced the highest mortality, and the poorest people (strata 1, 2, and 3 in the Colombian classification) have been most affected by infections and deaths, in addition to suffering the direst economic consequences (DANE, 2021) (Ordoñez, 2020). Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations have also been affected by infections and deaths within the framework of a centralized and exclusionary health system with a lack of infrastructure for the care of severe cases in the territories where these communities are located.

Among the poorest people, there are informal workers who have to seek their daily sustenance and are highly exposed to contagion. Women had to face serious situations of gender-based violence during the strictest quarantine periods (Ordoñez, 2020) and their unemployment rate increased the most during this crisis. The population deprived of liberty was greatly affected by overcrowded conditions which led to high rates of contagion (González, 2020).

This crisis situation reflects the continuity of the privatized Colombian health care model, which was reinforced with the health care reform contained in Law 100 of 1993. This model has also proven to be ineffective in pandemic care as evidenced by failures in testing, delays in vaccination, and poor care in general. The public hospital network had already deteriorated greatly as a result of the crisis of this privatized model, which collapsed with the pandemic. In the Amazon region, with a majority indigenous population, there was a severe crisis due to the lack of infrastructure for the care of serious cases.

## VACCINATION SITUATION

In the worst moment of the crisis, the Colombian government proposed a vaccination plan for February until the end of 2021 which would vaccinate the entire population in five stages. By the end of May, 9,348,103 doses had been administered out of the 14,741,485 that had been projected up to that point of stage 3; thus, at that time about 18% of the Colombian population had been vaccinated (Ministry of Health, 2021). This slow progress was due to the country having started vaccination much later than other countries in the region. Subsequently, the process accelerated, although it also reached a point of stagnation. As of November 15, 2021, 51,955,048 doses had been administered, with 22,989,636 people having received full vaccination schedules (either one or two doses), representing approximately 45% of the population (Ministry of Health, 2021).

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS

The pandemic exacerbated structural problems; there was a significant increase in poverty. By 2020, poverty at the national level was 42.5% (in 2019 it was 35.7%) and extreme poverty was 15.1% (in 2019 it was 9.6%). In this situation, women stand out as the most affected; thus, when the head of the household is a woman, the poverty rate is 46.7% (compared to 40.1% when it is a man), while the extreme poverty rate is 17.8% (13.5% when it is a man) (DANE, 2021).

State measures taken in response to the pandemic have been questionable because most of them have left the low-income population vulnerable while providing significant aid to businessmen and banks. The national government's first action in response to the pandemic was to decree a strict quarantine as of March 25, 2020. This was initially to last nineteen days but was extended until the end of August. As the situation progressed, it became evident that it was an ill-advised decision since it was a measure designed to prepare the health system in order to ensure a more effective response when the pandemic became more acute; however, this progress was not made and when the first peak occurred, there were no adequate facilities or a sufficiently planned public health response.

The periods of strict quarantine showed the importance of essential jobs, among which care work, especially in the health sector and home care, which are performed mainly by women who became overburdened with these tasks.

Physical presence was restricted to some sectors such as health, food, and medicine, and gradually other sectors such as construction were opened up. Many work activities began to be done from home, and educational activities were moved online at all levels. This happened in a country with insufficient internet coverage, especially in rural areas, and with many homes even in urban areas without internet and without computers. During the pandemic, 7.6 million fixed internet connections and 30.4 million mobile internet connections have been registered. Many people, especially in rural areas, acquired mobile internet services, but in many places there is not enough coverage (Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicaciones, 2021).

This connectivity deficit caused a significant number of children and adolescents from the most vulnerable sectors to drop out of school. Even in middle-income sectors where there were internet and computer at home, there might be three people studying and two working from home, for example, a situation that would become unfeasible.

Long periods of quarantine, although they might have been necessary, needed planning and material and economic support to allow people to do so. Without these support measures, people were left mentally and economically more vulnerable, and people who had no guarantees, such as those who had informal jobs, had to go out on the streets, exposing themselves to contagion, as well as to fines and mistreatment by the police. The shutdown of economic sectors led to the bankruptcy of many small and medium-sized businesses. During the first months of the pandemic, videos with false information circulated on social networks, claiming that members of the government were concealing infection figures (90 Minutos Noticiero, 2020), in addition to spreading dubious information about shortages that caused disorder in supermarkets, as well as hoarding of and profiteering on staple products. This news generated panic, as there was uncertainty about the real health situation in the country, as well as because food became scarce in many homes.

In the midst of this difficult situation, one of the responses of the population was to encourage solidarity campaigns to help families economically in need. Thus, as families were running short of food, it was proposed to put up red flags so that other people would know they were in need and thus be able to help them. More and more red flags appeared in the streets and the solidarity among the people grew.

## EMERGENCY INCOME POLICY AND OTHER ECONOMIC POLICY MEASURES

One of the government's responses to this precariousness was the Solidarity Income initiative, an economic subsidy for the most vulnerable families. However, this was not done properly, nor were these resources distributed with clear criteria, and cases of corruption and clientelism were reported in the distribution of this aid. For example, in the media and social networks, videos and images circulated where random data were accessed on the web page by which people were informed if they were beneficiaries; in this experiment, dead people appeared as beneficiaries, as well as non-existent identification numbers and unreal names (Colombia Informa, 2020).

Economic aid for the lower strata in Colombia has been scarce since; apart from the Solidarity Income, loans have been offered to indebt small and medium-sized companies, while large banks and businessmen have been given aid, such as the case of the airline Avianca, which requested a loan of \$370 million from the government in September of last year, arguing that it was undergoing an economic crisis (DW, 2020). While the government was preparing to grant that loan, it denied the demands of social organizations to provide a basic income to millions of families.

While the pandemic was unfolding and insufficient resources were allocated for health and family assistance, 9.5 billion pesos (about \$2.5 million) was allocated for the purchase of instruments of repression [...] which were used against the civilian population.

In addition to this measure within the framework of the health emergency from 2020 to 2021, the national government has taken other economic measures such as the refund of the Value Added Tax (VAT) and two VAT-free days. All these decisions were strongly criticized and there were also cases of corruption and failures in the delivery of funds since the central strategy provided for payments into bank accounts to which a large sector of the beneficiary population did not have access. The VAT-free day also generated crowds in shopping areas which were clearly harmful in this health emergency.

Although the health emergency declaration envisaged from the beginning a series of measures at the national level, the implementation at the regional, departmental, and municipal levels varied according to the arrangements of the local governments. In some mostly rural and remote regions, it was the communities themselves who directly established control points and restricted travel to their territories in the absence of state institutions performing these activities.

While the pandemic was unfolding and insufficient resources were being allocated for health and family assistance, 9.5 billion pesos (about \$2.5 million) were allocated for the purchase of instruments of repression for the police, the Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD), and the army, including tear gas, marker spheres, and stun grenades which were used against the civilian population in the protests held in September 2020 and during the national strike of 2021 (Contagio Radio, 2020). This government's management of the pandemic has focused not only on turning its back on the Colombian population but also on responding with violence to the massive demonstrations organized by various social sectors in response to the severe crisis.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the declaration of the Temporary Protection Statute for the Venezuelan community signed at the beginning of 2021 by the president of the republic and whose implementation has been ongoing since May 5 of the same year. This point is key given that the large migrant population, especially Venezuelan citizens, was very unprotected in the crisis and it was important to clarify their status in the reception of aid and vaccinations.

In this difficult situation, the people have responded to the crisis. Various solidarity campaigns have been organized to financially help families in need. One of the strategies used, as mentioned before, was to place conspicuous red flags on houses so that others would know that a family was in need. This made it possible to see the high levels of precariousness as more and more red flags appeared in the streets. This visibility was also essential to expanding the networks of solidarity and support.

## **POLITICS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

While there are specific issues arising from the pandemic, many of Colombia's current problems are a continuation of already existing structural deterioration that the pandemic made more visible or pushed to a breaking point.

One of the main critical points has to do with the non-compliance with the implementation of the Havana Peace Accords between the former FARC-EP guerrilla and the Colombian State. This non-compliance is a result of the position of the Duque administration, which is adverse to the peace process. In addition to the lack of implementation of the social measures in the rural territories that are the basis of the agreements – and also the first link in the country's social inequality problems – the expression in loss of human lives continues to be regrettable. We are witnessing an increase in the assassination of ex-combatants and people with territorial, environmental, and social leadership across the country. According to the Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (Indepaz), 310 leaders and 64 signatories of the agreements were murdered in 2020 and so far in 2021, there had been 67 leaders and 25 signatories more (Indepaz, 2021).

Another of the structural problems expressed in the pandemic context concerns police violence against civilians, particularly racialized youth and youth from poor sectors, as well as people with dissident bodily expressions that include both young people from various urban subcultures and transgender people.

Added to this critical human rights situation are the difficulties in the implementation of the Comprehensive National Program for the Substitution of Illicitly Used Crops (PNIS), in addition to the announcement of the resumption of aerial spraying with glyphosate and forced eradication without reaching agreements with the cultivating communities. In rural territories, these facts are in addition to the reappearance of armed paramilitary actors and the consequent resurgence of armed clashes and even bombings in which minors have been killed. It should be noted that in some territories these paramilitary armed groups have used threats of violence to enforce quarantines and curfews and taken advantage of the pandemic situation to expand territorially, causing forced displacements (Alberti & Pozzebon, 2020).

Another of the structural problems expressed in the pandemic context concerns police violence against civilians, particularly racialized youth and youth from poor sectors, as well as people with dissident bodily expressions that include both young people from various urban subcultures and transgender people. During periods of confinement and quarantine, police controls increased, increasing cases of police abuse that include physical violence, arbitrary arrests, and even murders.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the case of the lawyer Javier Ordóñez, who was murdered on September 8, 2020, in a police Immediate Action Command (CAI) in the city of Bogotá, by police officers after being repeatedly beaten and tortured. This case of police brutality was widely condemned, and during the following days, there were demonstrations in various cities in which another ten people were killed and several CAIs in Bogotá were burned down. During these days there were also complaints of sexual violence in these same police centers.

Before this high-profile case, two young black men were allegedly killed by police officers. In the city of Puerto Tejada in the department of Cauca, in May 2020, 19-year-old Anderson Arboleda died after a policeman hit him in the head with a baton for violating a quarantine measure (Guerrero, 2020). Also, Janner García, 22 years old, in the same city, died from two shots allegedly fired by a policeman during a confrontation between gangs during lockdown (El Tiempo, 2020).

## THE NATIONAL STRIKE

Finally, the most significant event of the year 2021 is worth mentioning: the national strike. On April 28, 2021, a national strike was called with protests in various cities as a citizen response and show of opposition to the introduction of a tax reform called by the government the "Sustainable Solidarity Bill", which days later was withdrawn by the then-minister of finance, who also resigned from his post. The tax reform was the straw that broke the camel's back, and from that moment different demands merged, such as the fulfilment of the peace agreements, the demand for a universal basic income, access to education and employment, and opportunities, especially for young people.

On May 31, the NGO *Temblores* presented a report in which it reports 3,789 cases of police violence not including cases of disappearances [...]. The strike has also been used as an excuse by the national government to cover up the failure of the public health response, claiming that because of these demonstrations the number of COVID-19 infections has increased [...].

On May 31, the NGO *Temblores* presented a report in which it reports 3,789 cases of police violence not including cases of disappearances, 705 violent actions against peaceful protests, 1,284 victims of physical violence by the police, 1,649 arbitrary detentions of demonstrators, 65 victims of eye injuries, 180 cases of shooting by firearms, 25 victims of sexual violence, 6 victims of gender-based violence, and 45 people killed, allegedly by

the security forces. (Temblores ONG, 2021). Colombia was visited by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights between June 7 and 11, 2021, to monitor the human rights situation in the context of the national strike protests. This visit took place thanks to the request of 650 civil society organizations to the IACHR to investigate the violence against and repression of protests in Colombia, and later the Duque government refused the commission entry to the country (De Justicia, 2021).

The strike has also been used as an excuse by the national government to cover up the failure of the public health response, claiming that because of these demonstrations COVID-19 infections increased and blaming the organizers of the strike for the current third peak and even for delaying the vaccination plan.

Experts - including Minister Ruiz - agree that it is difficult to know exactly how much blame the protests have for the health crisis because the outbreak coincided with several steps to resume economic activity and the arrival, verified by the authorities, of at least two of the four variants of COVID-19 that increase transmissibility. (Pardo, 2021).

## SEXUAL POLITICS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

### THE *PICO Y GÉNERO* POLICY

One of the most relevant developments in sexual politics in relation to the pandemic in Colombia was the "*pico y género*" (peak and gender) measure. In order to reduce the movement of people in the streets and indoor places such as government offices, public transportation, and supermarkets, several measures were taken to organize schedules so that people could go out to the streets and stock up on food. In the case of Colombia, in most cases, this was done by using the even or odd ending of the ID card number, and in some cities, a number was assigned for each day of the week. One of these methods of mobility control was the so-called "*pico y género*", implemented in the capital by decree 106 on April 8, 2020, which basically managed this movement with the criterion of "gender".

The "*pico y género*" measure became a gender surveillance device that once again put in public space naturalized stances on what it means to be a man or a woman. Although the mayor's office of Bogotá considered some aspects of transgender people and took measures to alert officials, it could not prevent mistreatment and discrimination in the context of this policy, which had been warned of by transgender organizations and various academic groups, as expressed in a letter sent directly to the mayor of the city which stressed that:

- *So far, the measures taken by the local administration have been the result of evidence, the possibilities of their implementation, and adequate analysis of their effects on the citizenry, criteria that we consider not to have been sufficiently applied in this case. This measure, at least as far as is known, as in the cases of Peru and Panama, has not shown to be effective; it is applied in an arbitrary and discretionary manner and has not had an educational effect.*
- *Although the decree takes into account respect for gender identity, a welcome development, we are concerned that the direct administration of this rule will be carried out by the police, an institution that has a history of mistreatment of the transgender population as documented by several studies, some of which have been conducted in the framework of public policies in the city.*
- *Many gender-fluid and transgender people do not change their name or sex (which is the category that appears on the identity card) on their identity card, either because they do not have the means to do so or because they do not wish to do so (which is their right). We are concerned that in these situations discrimination, violence, and abuse of authority are generated when they are questioned by officials who do not have adequate knowledge of and sensitivity to gender issues. (Academics in the area of gender, 2020).*

Despite the strong opposition to this measure by various social organizations and academic groups in the field of gender studies, the policy was continued and finally, due to lack of effectiveness, it was suspended. It is worth mentioning, however, that its

application left a disastrous result because it contributed to underestimating violence against transgender people in the city. This is because, somehow, this violence was considered "collateral damage" and not an important problem that should be taken into account when making such a decision.

As was warned in a public statement by the same group of activists and academics, given the lack of response from the mayor's office, the concerns about possible situations of discrimination have been substantiated. There were episodes of verbal and physical violence by supermarket workers, revictimization through social networks, and even an attempted femicide "of a trans beautician in Ciudad Bolívar [which was added] to a series of at least ten acts of discrimination against the trans population on account of the *Pico y Género*<sup>2</sup> (Academics and scholars in the area of gender, 2020) (Mutante, 2020).

## GENDER VIOLENCE, FEMICIDES, AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Another relevant issue is the increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence and femicides during periods of confinement. Women's rights to a life free of violence, to economic autonomy, to access to education, and to sexual and reproductive health have been the most infringed upon in the context of the pandemic. According to a report by the feminist organization *Sisma Mujer*, based on information from the Integrated Information System on Gender Violence (SIVIGE) of the Ministry of Health, of the total of 23,032 victims of sexual violence, 85.53% are women, while of the victims of domestic violence (75,799), 79.15% are women, this being the second most reported crime according to the attorney general's office. The same report shows an increase of 95.8% in the number of calls to the hotlines for women victims of violence. The highest percentage increase occurred during April 2020, the month in which the measures were most restrictive when compared to the same month in the previous year (Sisma Mujer, 2020).

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2 A complete report on these cases was prepared by the Mutante organization, with information provided by various social collectives, entitled "Jeers, Discrimination, and Stabbings: The Violence Revealed by Pico y Género".

The increase in sexual violence toward women from different groups is also worrisome. In the case of women from the LGBT sector, it is 380%, increasing from 10 cases in 2019 to 48 in 2020. Cases of women heads of household or family went from 21 to 24 in these same years, from 75 to 107 cases of women in condition of displacement, from 52 to 263 whose victims were women belonging to ethnic groups and from 4 to 7 cases against women bus drivers. In addition to these figures, there was a 20% increase in cases of sexual violence against women in military or police garrisons, and there was a case in an ambulance (Sisma Mujer, 2020).

Women have also been victims of violence by the security forces in the context of social protest. During the demonstrations that took place between September 9 and 11, 2019, in Bogota, three women were killed. Of 137 complaints filed regarding police abuse on September 9, 72 correspond to males, 39 to females, and 16 to transgender people, and one case of sexual violence was reported (Veeduría Distrital, 2020). During the demonstrations that occurred between April 28 and May 18, 2021, in a statement of June 2, the NGO *Temblores* reported 25 incidents of sexual violence and 6 victims of gender-based violence (including physical, verbal, economic, or sexual violence) by members of the security forces. This social organization also maintains that there is an underreporting of these cases due to revictimization, obstacles to accessing the justice system, and fear of reprisals (Temblores ONG, 2021).

[...] another fundamental milestone of sexual politics in the pandemic period was [...] the submission of a new unconstitutionality lawsuit against the crime of abortion.

Regarding the increase in femicides, according to the annual summary presented by the *Observatorio Femicidios Colombia of the Red Feminista Antimilitarista*, during 2020, 630 cases were recorded throughout the country and there were 208 additional cases between January and April 2021. Of the femicides committed in 2020, one of these cases

was the murder of a transgender woman by an army soldier on a national highway. A few days later, another transgender woman living with HIV died due to the discrimination and negligence of a team of health professionals that caused her not to receive timely medical attention (Observatorio Femicidios Colombia, 2020).

The results of the "International survey on sexual and reproductive health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia" reported changes in sexual behavior, intimate relationships, and the sexual and reproductive health of individuals, in addition to tensions experienced by women in family relationships and a greater burden in domestic and care tasks. Negative effects of the most restrictive measures have been reported both on access to health services and on physical and mental health (The PMNCH WHO, PAHO WHO and Asociación Profamilia, 2020).

## CAUSA JUSTA: A NEW STEP TOWARD THE DECRIMINALIZATION OF ABORTION

However, another fundamental milestone of sexual politics during the pandemic period was very positive: the presentation of a new unconstitutionality lawsuit presented by *Causa Justa* (Just Cause), a movement that seeks to eliminate the crime of abortion from the penal code. Colombia has partial decriminalization of abortion on three bases regulated by ruling C-355 of 2006.

In September 2020, a lawsuit was filed at the Constitutional Court arguing the unconstitutionality of article 112, which deals with the voluntary interruption of pregnancy. In view of these facts, the attorney general's office presented a statement requesting that the court declare itself unable to make decisions on the issue and that the Congress of the republic is urged "to issue the regulation of the fundamental right to the voluntary interruption of pregnancy as a manifestation of the sexual and reproductive rights of women, as well as to decide the appropriateness of its total decriminalization" (*Procuraduría General de la Nación*, 2020). In this month of November 2021, the court must give an answer to this request, and according to reports, the group of magistrates is divided on this decision<sup>3</sup>.

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3 On February 21, 2022, after concluding the process for this report, the Constitutional Court decriminalized abortion up to the 24th gestational week, after several delays and in the midst of many debates and disagreements with the current government

In this same context, House Representative Ángela María Robledo promoted and coordinated a public hearing to discuss "Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy and Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Colombia" in April 2021. It is noteworthy that in the final part of the event, anti-gender organizations tried to boycott the event, but also expressed in the chat (it was a virtual event) information about the so-called "gender ideology", "feminist indoctrination" and the relationship between feminism and communism, in addition to identifying these ideas about abortion as a threat not only to the traditional family but also to democracy itself.

## **ACTIONS OF ANTI-GENDER ACTORS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT**

Anti-gender actors in Colombia have not halted their agendas and activities in the pandemic context<sup>4</sup>. Because of restrictions on direct contacts, they have moved most of their activities to the virtual world, which has allowed them to strengthen international ties and create spaces that were not so common before, such as seminars, talks, and workshops, as well as other spaces for debate and training. Leaders of these conservative sectors and congressmen have organized to advocate legislative bills supporting the traditional family and opposing women's reproductive rights. The following are some of the organizations and actions that we have been following.

### **CHOOSE LIFE COLOMBIA**

This organization follows the traditional line of groups that call themselves pro-life and have an important presence in Latin America, economically and politically supporting measures against women's reproductive rights with funds from the United States. In Colombia, their main activity was focused on the development of a camp aimed at young people that sought to provide tools to "defend life from the moment of conception" through workshops, talks, and activities. Despite the pandemic, this camp was held virtually and took place on June 27 and 28, 2020.

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<sup>4</sup> Details about these anti-gender actors can be found in (Granados & Amador, 2018) and (Gil, 2020).

The actions of this organization are an example of the development of the youth recruitment strategy (Gil, 2020) and of the use of discourses that they call feminist to rebrand their activities. This organization broadened its work by carrying out online activities such as "pro-life breakfasts" and "women's dialogues for life" where resources and elements of institutional feminism are adopted. It is common in these spaces to speak of feminine empowerment, and they claim to fight against feminism that they describe as hegemonic and radical, relating it to gender ideology and even to paedophilia. Some of the topics they discuss are the importance of including men in decisions on abortion; chastity; suicide, depression and psychological consequences after abortion; and euthanasia. In addition, they consistently denounce organizations that have defended women's reproductive rights, such as *Oriéntame* and *Profamilia*.

Faced with the virtualization of many spaces, this organization began training to certify "pro-life" agents throughout Latin America. It is worth noting that in these spaces most of the speakers are men, and they are committed to providing the participants with counter-arguments to respond to those who defend women's reproductive rights, sexual diversity, and sexual education. That is, as already mentioned in the previous study, these actors dedicate a good part of these training activities to the study of feminist positions and sexuality studies (Gil, 2020). In the follow-up, we have identified that there have been three training courses that have had low-cost enrollments for three-day sessions, with the objective of creating influencers to make these discourses viral.

### **INSTITUTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN SOCIAL SOLIDARIDAD (INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH SOLIDARITY)**

This organization has a profile similar to that of Choose Life Colombia, but with a different audience. It is a group clearly associated with Samuel Ángel and the Catholic Solidarity Movement and is aligned with the strategy of secularization of the arguments of these conservative groups and the development of a more academic profile (Gil, 2020). It is worth mentioning the diploma courses "Pro-life argumentation in the face of feminism, abortion, and biopolitics" and "Argumentation for the ideas of the 21st century" of the Institute of Social Research Solidarity:

*The advanced studies program aims to master the fundamental concepts of the prevailing ideas of the 21st century and to know how to respond from a critical and proactive point of view.*

*The themes cover the areas of political science, law, religion, psychology, social work, and social sciences in general. (Solidarity Movement, 2021)*

The cost of each diploma course is \$350 and it is not accredited by any university or academic institution, although its web page is designed to look as if it were. Among the teachers are very visible conservative authors and activists such as Agustín Laje, Sara Winter<sup>5</sup>, Pablo Muñoz Iturrieta, Cristian Rodrigo Iturralde, Miklos Lukasc de Pereny, Juan Ángel Soto, Alicia Rubio, a militant of the Spanish movement Vox, and, of course, Samuel Ángel.

### **UNIDOS POR LA VIDA (UNITED FOR LIFE)**

This is another important organization. On April 7, 2020, when the debate on euthanasia took place in the House of Representatives, they called for a massive demonstration on Twitter to prevent the hearing from taking place. Likewise, they have led constant persecutions against feminist organizations, accusing feminism of carrying out a plan with economic interests through abortion, since they claim that behind it there is a large industry that forces women to terminate their pregnancies.

Then, on May 1, they held the First International Congress United for Life in which, with talks on the holy family, prayers, virtual rosaries and other religious activities, they addressed the country again with attacks on the feminist movement (Episcopal Conference of Colombia, 2021). During the same month, the National March for Life was held virtually, which was accompanied by the Eucharist (Mundo Cristiano, 2021). The phrase "every life

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<sup>5</sup> On this organization's website there is a campaign to support her in the legal proceedings in Brazil against her for raising funds to finance extreme right-wing armed groups and for threatening national security.

counts" brings together diverse agendas against abortion and against euthanasia, but it is also used to dismiss the possibility of dying because of exclusions caused by sexism, misogyny, or racism, analytical perspectives that they consider to be false or ideologically influenced.

In the midst of attacks on feminist organizations, these groups have assumed positions that ostensibly support women's rights but which in the end reproduce very traditional approaches.

As in the previous work, it is important to emphasize the Catholic nature of these agendas, which is reflected in the support and sometimes the organization of these activities by the Catholic hierarchy, as well as in specific statements by these religious authorities in the context of the debate on abortion and euthanasia. These organizations are formally secular but use rhetorical resources drawn from Catholic theology. *Unidos por la Vida*, for example, bases much of its discourse on the "theology of the body", an idea developed by John Paul II in which he proposes to "know the human body from theology" in order to analyze its relationship with the love of the married couple (Red de Universidades Anáhuac, 2020).

On September 25, 2020, this organization and others held a sit-in for life and against the decriminalization of abortion in Colombia in reaction to the *Causa Justa* initiative. This event took place in front of the Palace of Justice, where the Constitutional Court is located, where in addition to prayers, rosaries, and speeches, the street was also painted with the phrase "Colombia is pro-life" (El Tiempo, 2020). This produced an immediate reaction from the feminist movement, who the next day, in a sit-in, covered the graffiti made by these groups and reiterated their demand for the total decriminalization of abortion filed on September 16 (La Patria, 2020).

## **EMPODERADAS COLOMBIA (EMPOWERED WOMEN COLOMBIA)**

This is another organization that illustrates the same secularization strategy but in a different vein. It is an organization created by Angélica Rubio and Carol Borda that advocates the empowerment of women from a "pro-life" perspective. In their network, they talk about the menstrual cycle and women's health and refer to contraceptives and abortion as forms of colonization of women's bodies. In the midst of attacks on feminist organizations, these groups have assumed positions that ostensibly support women's rights but which in the end reproduce very traditional approaches.

What makes these discourses very confusing to situate is their appeal to certain arguments drawn from diverse feminist perspectives, which in fact fit very well with some of their conservative positions on sexuality. Unfortunately, these correspondences between certain feminist principles and conservative positions are not a novelty (Rubin, 1989), and we have very problematic contemporary alliances between right-wing parties and feminist organizations, as in the Spanish case with the Vox party, for example, carrying out joint actions against the rights of transgender people. Let us not forget that many of these conservative programs have been imported from Spain and the connection with Colombia is evident through organizations such as Hazte Oír (Make Yourself Heard) (Gil, 2020).

## **LEGISLATIVE ACTION AND REACTIONS TO THE NATIONAL STRIKE**

Apart from this field of training, dissemination of knowledge, and social mobilization, these groups have also been actively lobbying in Congress. In July 2020, a bill was filed for the creation of the pro-life legal commission, formed by a group of congressmen, which seeks to promote respect for life from conception to death by natural causes. Throughout 2020, the pro-life caucus held 27 meetings in defense of life, which included meetings with other parliamentarians in the various regions, participation in forums, and discussions in Latin America, in addition to expressing its explicit rejection of the bill aimed at regulating euthanasia (Senate of the Republic, 2021).

Finally, in the context of the national strike actions, several of these actors have distinguished themselves by making speeches in defense of the government and institutionality, supporting some voices that support the legitimate use of violence by the state. The platform *Unidos por la Vida*, for example, published on its Facebook page a statement about the acts of violence that have occurred in the framework of the national strike that ignores the murders committed by the security forces and paramilitary actors and supports the strategy of stigmatizing the social mobilization, in this case focusing attention on the case of a minor who died in an ambulance due to tear gas inhalation (Unidos Por la Vida, 2021).

Let us remember that these positions not only have a conservative agenda with regard to gender, sexuality, and family issues but also have relations with or are explicitly part of sectors that defend private property, the neoliberal and extractive model, and a strong state. It is common for organizations of this type to spread conspiracy thinking about what they identify as "communism" and to make openly xenophobic and racist statements. In addition, several of them reject proposals such as universal basic income, which is one of the focuses of the current social mobilization and is clearly identified as communist.

## **EVANGELICAL GROUPS AND OTHER CHRISTIAN CHURCHES**

Some individuals from these different churches have a presence in several of the movements and spaces described above; we can also distinguish important activities on the Internet and social networks. The new communication technologies provide platforms that have been successfully used by some churches, not only to broadcast their services (they already had an intensive use of television and radio channels) but also to distribute messages against the organizations working on the abortion agenda. This was crucial because public services could not be held, being one of the activities prohibited by health authorities.

Specifically in relation to the pandemic, several churches carried out charitable works and a protest against the restrictions on worship, a measure that greatly affected all types of churches. Finally, it is worth mentioning the presence of evangelical and other Christian churches in Congress. These groups have gradually increased their presence in each electoral period and currently converge in two main parties: the *Movimiento Independiente de Renovación Absoluta* (MIRA), linked to the *Iglesia de Dios Ministerial de Jesucristo Internacional and Colombia Justa Libres*, which represents a coalition of several evangelical Christian churches. Among the most notable events is the formation of the pro-life caucus, already mentioned, which was also sanctioned by law; that is to say, anti-rights lobbying was legalized in Colombia. Congressman Jhon Milton Rodríguez of the Colombia Justa Libres party presented bill number 163 of 2020 to create the Pro-Life Legal Commission "in order to articulate legislative initiatives and political control in favor of the defense of human life, from conception to the end of its natural cycle, facilitate feedback, and allow a permanent dialogue from different approaches, to qualify and enhance the subject matter within the Congress, according to the needs and realities of the country" (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 2020).

The negative results of measures such as “pico y género” and the increase in gender violence during periods of confinement show that the pandemic has become a favorable context for gender control and a platform both for debating ideas about gender and for reinforcing very conservative perspectives on gender.

## FINAL WORDS

The pandemic situation in general is very serious in Colombia at the public health, social, and economic levels. The government's response to the situation has not been optimal and the pandemic has accelerated a situation of generalized deterioration of both the material living conditions of the population and the health system. In the context of this epidemiological crisis, a national strike is also taking place in response to a series of economic measures taken by the current government, the historical accumulation

of inequalities, and the consequences of the pandemic in the form of the very high unemployment and economic precariousness figures described above.

In this difficult context, the main advances and movements of anti-gender actors have been related to the development of networks at national and international levels, the management and development of virtual training spaces, the use of social networks, and the dissemination of their messages on channels such as WhatsApp. In this last aspect, the appearance of conservative "influencers" stands out, mainly young women who counter and respond to the approaches of the feminist movement, dressed in a current and fresher profile, which can make these messages reach audiences that previously were not interested in these discourses due to their more religious character.

The negative results of measures such as "pico y género" and the increase in gender-based violence during periods of confinement show that the pandemic has become a favorable context for gender control and a platform both for debating ideas about gender and for reinforcing very conservative perspectives on gender.

The pandemic also serves as a magnifying glass that has revealed strong gender inequalities, already documented, in care work and women's disproportionate time and effort in sustaining life and caring for the sick, children, and the elderly. The confinement also increased the tensions inherent to this unfair form of family organization, which, with children at home all the time not attending school, has become unsustainable and the cause of various situations of violence and deterioration of emotional health.

This magnifying glass has also been applied to the health care system. The highly privatized model and the deterioration of the public health system showed the consequences of years of application of the nefarious health reform promoted by Law 100 of 1993, one of the bastions of the neoliberal measures developed in the 1990s.

In the case of Colombia, the combination of this very difficult pandemic and a great deterioration of basic living conditions - not due to the pandemic, but as a consequence

of the economic model – added to a great social discontent that has not been handled well by the government and has generated a highly complex crisis with a very discouraging outlook. The increase in violence is due, among other things, to the lack of compliance with the peace accords together with the state violence that has characterized this government in the face of demonstrations and the strengthening of paramilitary groups that have expanded their territory in the midst of the crisis.

Finally, as already mentioned, in addition to training for more effective and larger-scale use of social networks and other virtual resources to disseminate their agenda, conservative and anti-gender actors organized political lobbying in Congress through the "pro-life" caucus, which has been effective in hindering legislative advances on gender and sexuality issues. Moreover, they have reacted with great energy to the *Causa Justa* initiative.

The upcoming presidential elections, which will take place in 2022, are beginning to bring gender and sexuality issues into the public debate, as well as the candidates' positions on the pandemic, vaccination, containment measures, the relationship with science, patents, and pharmaceutical interests, and other health policy issues. The current debate on the decriminalization of abortion has caused the position of the current right-wing government to become more radical on this issue.

On the side of the opposition and leftist groups, a controversy is beginning to develop around the positions of some parties and alliances on the abortion issue, particularly with the recent adherence to candidate Petro's campaign of an evangelical pastor known for his positions against women's rights and LGBT sectors. The recent incursion of a feminist party into the electoral landscape, "Estamos listas" (We're Ready), which had already participated with some success in past local and regional elections, will also bring issues of sexual politics to the upcoming electoral debate.

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# NEOCONSERVATIVE POLITICS AND MOBILIZATIONS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT: THE CASE OF COSTA RICA

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## **SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC**

The pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that produces the disease COVID-19 has generated, since the end of 2019, a concatenation of crises that ranges from basic aspects of public health and the economy, politics, gender, ethnic-racial, and migratory issues, to the cultural industry, sports, and education. Costa Rica has not escaped these problems, and both the population and the government have had to face them in a climate particularly vitiated by the social and political polarization that the country has suffered in the last decades which has directly affected the communicative legitimacy of the central government to face the pandemic and its repercussions.

As analyzed in the first phase of this cycle of regional studies on neoconservative politics, this polarization is not a recent phenomenon in the country or in the region. Understanding what happened in the 2018 Costa Rican elections requires situating this dynamic in the long cycle of expansion and politicization of neoconservatism in the context of neoliberal entrenchment.

These elections were won, in the second round, by Carlos Alvarado of the ruling Citizen Action Party (PAC) against a neo-Pentecostal and neoliberal movement led by Fabricio Alvarado of the National Restoration Party (PRN), which had won the first round<sup>1</sup>. As regional studies show, the result of this race was an electoral cycle that revealed deep cracks in the Costa Rican imaginary by pitting conservative sectors against progressive

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1 <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/Ebook-CostaRica%2020200203.pdf>

ones on the issue of religious beliefs. The campaign was focused on "post-material" issues in the sense that, more than the economy or unemployment, same-sex marriage was discussed as were, tangentially, abortion and religious freedom, in a confrontation of values rather than proposals.

In January 2018 (weeks before the first electoral round) the Inter-American Court published Advisory Opinion OC 24/17 on gender identity, equality, and non-discrimination of same-sex couples by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which had been requested previously by the Costa Rican government. As the issuance of the IACHR opinion obliged the state to ensure the right to marriage for same-sex couples, there was a strong conservative reaction that took advantage of the situation to give greater visibility to the discourse against what these sectors have called gender ideology. This narrative permeated the electoral landscape thanks to the fact that grassroots work in religious communities had been going on for several years warning about the feminist threat and "gender ideology". This expression of the culture war led to an electoral campaign and presidential and legislative elections framed around issues that generated more division than political integration and ended up facilitating more attacks against women's reproductive rights<sup>2</sup>.

Carlos Alvarado's final victory can be interpreted as a vote "against" the fundamentalist option and not so much "for" the pro-government option. This was clear in the distribution of seats in the Legislative Assembly, where the PAC is only the third largest force, behind the National Liberation Party (PLN) and the PRN itself. This is important because, even before taking office, Alvarado's administration was seriously compromised in its ability to present and negotiate its own agenda in Congress. In fact, during the second half of 2018, the government was able to gauge its own weakness by attempting to pass an urgent fiscal

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, see the essays "Religión, conservadurismo y progresismo en las elecciones del 2018: de las desigualdades socioexistenciales a las diferencias políticas y morales" by sociologist Andrey Pineda Sancho, "Restauración Nacional en las elecciones del 2018: ¿guerra de religiones en una democracia posmaterial?" by political scientist César Zúñiga, and "Las mujeres, sus derechos y sus acciones en las elecciones del 2018 en Costa Rica", by analyst and activist Ana Carcedo Cabañas, in: Rojas Bolaños, M. and Treminio Sánchez, I. (2019).

reform that lacked popular support because it was markedly regressive, which resulted in the longest general strike in the country in the last 20 years<sup>3</sup>.

When the COVID-19 pandemic finally affected Costa Rica, the leadership and communication of government authorities were already seriously compromised, and this has been one of their main challenges in the management of the pandemic. It is relevant to mention that in the development of the 2018 strike, some elements could already be identified that would become evident in the 2020 protests, in particular the similarity of certain union leaders' discourse to narratives used by religious fundamentalist groups. We will expand on this in the following sections.

## **THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST, GENDER, AND SEXUAL POLITICS SINCE 2019**

The election of the ruling party's Carlos Alvarado in the 2018 elections did not necessarily end the debates on issues related to sexual rights and reproductive rights, nor did it stop the reactions of religious, conservative sectors regarding the issue. However, it at least led, over time, to contain two key points of the fundamentalist neo-Pentecostal political agenda: the boycott against the recognition of same-sex marriage and, to some extent, the excessively discretionary application of therapeutic abortion.

In fact, on May 26, 2020, the deadline passed that the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice had given to the Legislative Assembly to issue a legal norm regulating civil marriage between persons of the same sex, indicating that the laws prohibiting such unions would be repealed. Congress did not pass any law on the matter, and therefore equal marriage was law from that date (DW, 2020). Since then, the civil registry has processed an average of eighty same-sex marriages per month (Hidalgo, 2020).

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3 La huelga general contra la reforma fiscal en costa rica setiembre 2018, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UCR. [https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/09/20/america/1537408351\\_248571.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/09/20/america/1537408351_248571.html)

In addition, through executive decree 42113-S, signed on December 12, 2019, the "Technical Norm for the Therapeutic Interruption of Pregnancy" was approved in the country. The approval of this technical standard is part of the friendly settlement negotiated by the parties (complainants and the Costa Rican state) in the case known as *Ana and Aurora v. Costa Rica*, in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. This case against Costa Rica for obstructing access to safe abortion was brought by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to the Inter-American Court. The Costa Rican state agreed to negotiate with the complainants to avoid another sanction, like the one imposed in the case of *Artavia Murillo v. Costa Rica*. The alternative of a negotiated solution is undoubtedly less damaging to the national image than a sanction by the IACHR Court. The approval of the technical standard was in process for more than 12 years and finally came to fruition only when the government was forced to do so because of this international judicial process<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, the main neo-Pentecostal party in the Legislative Assembly, *Restauración Nacional*, suffered a series of internal rifts between its president Carlos Avendaño and its former candidate Fabricio Alvarado. This resulted in a split within the party's legislative bench and the creation of a new party with deputies loyal to Fabricio Alvarado under the name *Partido Nueva República* (PNR). If the dynamics of polarization of tendencies within this movement continue, it seems difficult for them to repeat the electoral achievement of 2018 in the future. However, it is very likely that the figure of Alvarado will have influence in the election of deputies to the Legislative Assembly if he makes use, once again, of the agitation typical of religious neoconservatism. At the beginning of November 2021, one hundred days before the first electoral round of February 2022, Fabricio Alvarado was in third place in the polling with 5%, well behind the former president and current PLN candidate José María Figueres Olsen, who then had 19% of the intended vote, but not far behind Lineth Saborío of Social Christian Unity, who appeared in that survey with 8% support (Murillo, 2021).

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4 <https://semanariouniversidad.com/ultima-hora/mujer-que-acuso-al-estado-mantendra-demanda-hasta-que-se-aplique-norma-de-aborto-terapeutico/> [https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AN\\_v\\_Costa\\_Rica\\_Spanish.pdf](https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AN_v_Costa_Rica_Spanish.pdf)

## THE PANDEMIC IN COSTA RICA AND THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The first death from COVID-19 in Costa Rica was reported on March 18, 2020, and by mid-May of that year, the number of deaths had reached a dozen. The fact that the initial infection and mortality rate was not higher can be attributed to the government's effective closure of its borders, airports, and public places such as parks, schools, and universities, as well as workplaces that could operate remotely via the Internet (telework and virtual education). However, these health measures produced negative effects in the medium term, as in other countries where control strategies were implemented to prepare the health response for what was to follow. However, the communication problems of the Ministry of Health and the governmental pandemic response commission led to the creation of overly optimistic expectations among the population.

These protests were also incited by groups that for several years had been trying to generate social instability and political polarization. These groups have been linked to neo-Pentecostal churches and political parties for several years.

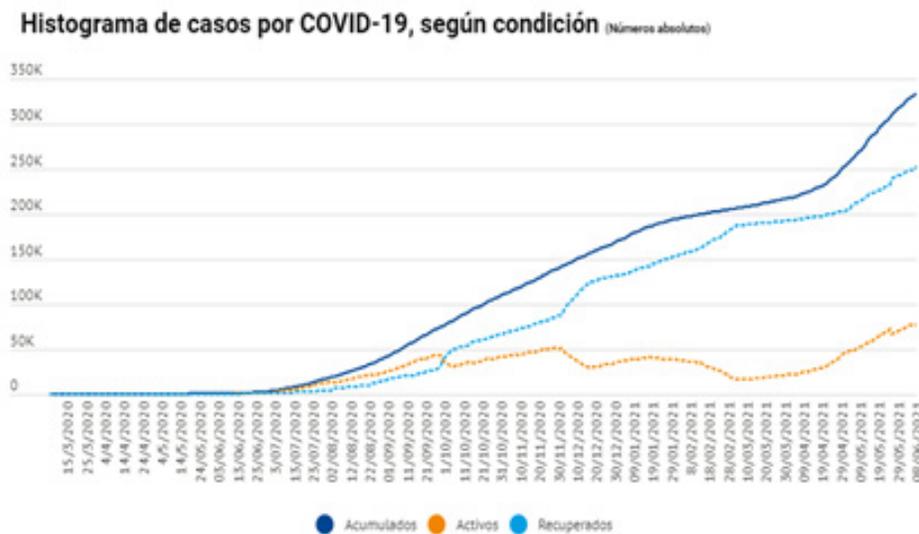
The condescending and paternalistic way in which health and government authorities communicated decisions and initial scientific information about COVID-19 led many people to believe that the emergency would last only a few months. Consequently, the mental disposition of the people after the first weeks of closure and restrictions, coupled with the country's already complex economic situation, started to become a serious political management problem for the government, which was torn between the demands of the economic elites and obligations regarding the health of the population. The government was unable to sustain for long the solidarity policy of the Protection Voucher, which was intended to help small businesses and working people who lost their jobs shortly after the restrictive measures were introduced<sup>5</sup>.

5 <https://semanariouniversidad.com/pais/240-860-personas-se-quedaron-sin-bono-protger-porque-se-acabo-el-dinero/>  
[https://iice.ucr.ac.cr/conferencia\\_prensa/bono%20protger.pdf](https://iice.ucr.ac.cr/conferencia_prensa/bono%20protger.pdf)

The economic crisis undoubtedly generated protests and pressure against the social distancing measures, but these protests were also instigated by groups that for several years had been trying to generate social instability and political polarization. These groups have been linked to neo-Pentecostal churches and political parties for several years.

This situation was compounded by internal divergences between the health sector and the economic sector of the government regarding the management of the pandemic. As can be seen in the graphs below, infection and death rates (which were very low until July 2020) drastically increased since then. From June 2020 through early 2021 there was a second, less controlled wave of COVID-19 cases, attributable to the relaxation of public health measures. At the beginning of June 2021, the evolution of COVID-19 cases in the country looked like this<sup>6</sup>:

**FIGURE 1**



6 The data and graphs are from official reports of the Ministry of Public Health of Costa Rica at the time of the final drafting of this report.

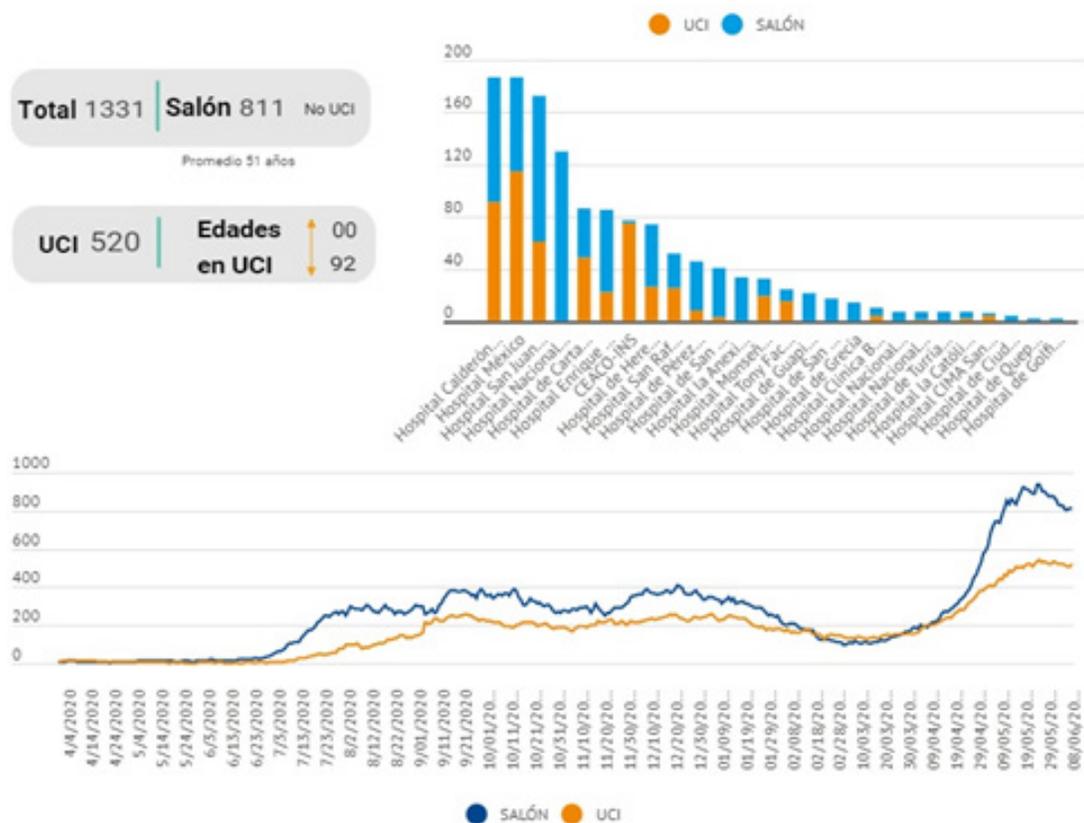
Since mid-April 2021, the country has been experiencing a third wave, attributable this time to the natural spread of the pandemic in situations where people have returned to common, family, or public spaces (although it is still mandatory to wear masks in public places and in work and educational settings), at a time when the statistical probability of contracting the disease has increased due to the increase in the R-rate. At the beginning of June 2021, the total numbers reported by the Ministry of Public Health were as follows, including deaths, after several weeks of mass vaccination:



At that time the situation in the hospitals was very serious since the pandemic has been managed by the public health system and this implied an extraordinary challenge for the limited resources of the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS):

FIGURE 2

**Hospitalizaciones actuales por COVID-19, según hospital y servicio** (Números absolutos)



On December 8, 2021, and after a total of 7,928 deaths, Costa Rica finally achieved the first day without deaths caused by COVID-19. Although this was a great relief for the country's medical infrastructure, the truth is that it happened just when the Omicron variant was already circulating throughout Europe and the United States, so it is difficult to predict the political and public health behavior of the country in the coming months, especially considering that Costa Rica allows foreigners to enter the territory without vaccination or a negative PCR test, which may affect the overall risk levels for new infections.

## VACCINATION SITUATION

The vaccination program implemented by the country's public health system throughout the year 2021 has resulted in 64% of the population having already received two doses, and the application of the third dose is beginning in the adult population that received its second dose more than 6 months ago.

### *General Description of Vaccination - Costa Rica*

Doses administered	Persons vaccinated with 2 doses	% of the population vaccinated with 2 doses
7 220 000	3 280 000	64,4 %

Source: Our World in Data. November 2021

The government's success in negotiating the acquisition of vaccines without relying exclusively on the COVAX mechanism is undeniable, as is the impressive work of the CCSS, which has managed to increase its capacity for severe COVID-19 patients. However, it is also essential to point out that hospital overcrowding has had negative effects on the quality of health care for patients with chronic diseases and for people who urgently needed scheduled surgeries. The most alarming and serious case is that of gynaecological-obstetric care. The quality of health services for pregnant women was drastically affected by hospital overcrowding, which contributed to an increase in situations of obstetric violence<sup>7</sup> and, even worse, to a significant increase in maternal mortality.<sup>8</sup>

7 For more information, see the campaign to demand respect for the health rights of pregnant women launched by the Observatorio de los Derechos Reproductivos del Centro de Investigación en Estudios de la Mujer <https://www.ucr.ac.cr/noticias/2020/09/28/la-academia-demanda-una-adecuada-atencion-para-las-mujeres-embarazadas-durante-la-pandemia.html#:~:text=Seg%C3%BAAn%20la%20acad%C3%A9mica%2C%20la%20Caja,las%20mujeres%20y%20y%20adolescentes%20embarazadas%E2%80%9D>

8 <https://www.inec.cr/noticia/mortalidad-materna-se-incremento-un-259>

Finally, the mental health of the general population has also been profoundly impacted by this concatenation of crises, and as reported by the Ministry of Health itself, socioeconomic vulnerability is the main factor in psychological and emotional disturbances<sup>9</sup>.

## EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC: GENDER VIOLENCE, MIGRANTS, UNEMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION

During the pandemic, physical and sexual violence against girls, adolescents, and women in the domestic sphere has increased<sup>10</sup>. The restriction measures have made it easier for aggressors to have more control over their victims due to several reasons, namely that girls and adolescents stay at home longer because schools and colleges went into the virtual mode, while women also spend more time at home and with fewer opportunities to talk to other people, either because they lost their jobs or because they went to virtual mode, or because they were informal workers and these activities are not viable due to the complete change in the daily dynamics during the pandemic.

[...] the reluctance of the economic elites to support the approval of a temporary solidarity tax, unemployment has been one of the adverse effects of health policies to control and prevent contagion. This situation has hit women hard.

In addition, support options for women victims of physical, emotional, sexual, or domestic violence have been limited since many support organizations depended on meeting spaces in the public sphere. For many such organizations, it is impossible to

9 <https://www.ministeriodesalud.go.cr/index.php/centro-de-prensa/noticias/746-noticias-2021/2041-vulnerabilidadsocioeconomica-incide-en-la-salud-mental-de-la-poblacion-de-costa-rica>

10 For more information, check <https://costaricamedios.cr/2020/11/25/30798/>

do the same work virtually. The digital divide clearly affects all areas of social life. For example, counselling that might have been available in a school, college, or community organization, and to which a woman could go without her aggressor knowing about it, cannot be offered in the same way through a Zoom call. Many women with limited schooling do not have a smartphone or computer, nor do they know how to use information and communication technologies<sup>11</sup>.

Another sector that has been strongly affected by the consequences of the pandemic is the migrant population<sup>12</sup>. Not only have they been especially affected by the loss of their means of subsistence (mainly informal jobs), but they have also suffered xenophobic discrimination and even the denial of access to health services<sup>13</sup>. After much social pressure and many public complaints, the vaccination of the migrant population (in regular and irregular conditions) improved substantially.

The lack of political will on the part of the government and the reluctance of the economic elites to support the approval of a temporary solidarity tax have worsened the impacts of unemployment, which has been one of the adverse effects of health policies for the control and prevention of contagion. This situation has hit women hard. At the present time (December 2021), the unemployment rate for women is 19.8%, while that for men is 12.2%<sup>14</sup>.

Another area deeply affected by the generalized crisis in the wake of the pandemic is public primary and secondary education. In fact, there is talk of an "educational blackout" caused by the suspension of face-to-face lessons and the switch to virtual education. Public

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11 Informe OO8-CXI-2020-UINV-INAMU. Afectaciones del COVID-19 en la vida de las mujeres en Costa Rica, 2020

12 <https://www.ucr.ac.cr/noticias/2020/08/18/impacto-de-la-pandemia-covid-19-en-las-familias-inmigrantes-en-costa-rica.html>

13 Just to illustrate, we mention this case of a Nicaraguan worker who was denied the vaccine and ended up hospitalized for a month. <https://www.nacion.com/el-pais/salud/ccss-interno-por-un-mes-a-nicaraguense-contagiado/V6VJOVIM5NEHRPJ5TAYNOO5T7E/story/>

14 <https://www.larepublica.net/noticia/empleo-femenino-retrocedio-tres-decadas-por-la-covid-19-segun-estado-de-la-nacion> <https://semanariouniversidad.com/pais/problemas-estructurales-traban-la-recuperacion-del-empleo/>

schools and colleges were not prepared to make this change quickly and effectively, and the vast majority of families who depend on public primary and secondary education did not have the basic material conditions for this change. The digital divide has taken its toll on thousands of children and adolescents who have lost practically two years of education, with the consequent adverse effects on their future, possibilities for development, and quality of life<sup>15</sup>.

As in other countries, groups of pandemic denialist doctors have also emerged, attacking vaccines and public health measures. [This movement even managed to be welcomed by the Ombudsman of Inhabitants, Catalina Crespo, who is another figure of Costa Rican conservatism.

## POLITICAL TENSIONS IN THE PANDEMIC

The increase in infection rates from June 2020 onwards was due to a combination of factors. The situation had become untenable for many underemployed and informal workers who were forced to contravene prevention protocols such as physical distancing and avoiding crowds to ensure their survival. On the other hand, these situations were also exploited by sectors of the most neoliberal right wing and by some anti-system groups that for months have been promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19, vaccines, treatments, and public health measures. Their aim has been to mobilize narratives and protests of contempt for health measures and distrust of government authorities.

Several extremist groups are linked to conspiracy theories. The list includes QAnon (led in Costa Rica by a collective calling itself Patricio Villeda, working through Facebook and Telegram) and social leaders allied to religious fundamentalist sectors

15 <https://www.crhoy.com/nacionales/informe-revela-que-pais-esta-ante-peor-crisis-educativa-en-decadas/> <https://www.unicef.org/costarica/comunicados-prensa/unicef-desigualdades-y-efectos-de-la-pandemia-amenazan-a-la-ninez>

(such as Oscar Campos, now a congressional candidate, and Célamo Guido, leader of the *Movimiento Rescate Nacional*). During 2020, these forces promoted a series of protests that brought together a wide diversity of sectors whose political agenda was full of internal contradictions. Although the common denominator seemed to be the popular discontent that had been present since the approval of the fiscal reform, it was also evident that a good part of the mobilization had to do with the repudiation by religious fundamentalist and neoconservative groups of the current government. That is, the same groups that had raised the narrative of "gender ideology" in the 2018 elections are now still united on the platform of Patricio Villeda and other neo-Pentecostal leaders.

This coalition was also joined by emerging actors allied to *Restauración Nacional* who gained visibility in the media through effective actions such as protests in front of the Presidential House with a conspiratorial narrative against public health measures, which even went to the extreme of denying the existence of COVID-19. These groups reproduce the discourse of other groups espousing conspiracy theories in the US and Europe, which in turn are also strongly linked to religious-political organizations.

As in other countries, groups of pandemic denialist doctors have also emerged, attacking vaccines and public health measures. In Costa Rica, the physician Jimena Campos, close to figures of *Restauración Nacional*, has become the spokesperson and leader of these extremist groups. This movement even managed to be welcomed by the ombudsman, Catalina Crespo, who is another Costa Rican conservative figure.

However, despite all these media and political efforts, by the end of 2021, it is possible to confirm the wide acceptance of the vaccination regimen among the general population of the country. Even so, the cases in the Huetar Caribe and Huetar Norte regions, where around 25% of the population remains reluctant to be vaccinated, are still worrying. It should be noted that these regions also show an electoral behavior that reveals a deep penetration by neo-Pentecostal religious groups, which suggests a link between this type of ideology and high-risk behaviors regarding the pandemic.

La vacuna contra La COVID es segura y no hay razón para preocuparse - actitud según RIPSS  
-Porcentajes, columna-

Actitud	RIPSS						
	Brunca	Central Norte	Central Sur	Chorotega	Huetar Caribe	Huetar Norte	Pacífico Central
De acuerdo y totalmente de acuerdo	58	58	69	59	58	63	65
Ni de acuerdo ni desacuerdo	24	19	17	30	17	14	18
En desacuerdo y totalmente en desacuerdo	19	22	13	11	25	23	18
<i>n</i>	59	232	458	71	83	35	62

Source: Conocimientos, actitudes y prácticas en Costa Rica sobre la vacunación y la vacuna contra la COVID-19.  
CID-Gallup, OPS y UNICEF. September, 2021. p. 35

While this denialist pressure exerted by citizens and important economic groups in the country was growing (Arrieta, 2020), there was an apparent communication divergence between the minister of health, Dr. Daniel Salas, and President Carlos Alvarado. While the former put the country's health interests first, the latter increasingly seemed to be guided by these political pressures. Above all, it is essential to recognize that these mobilizations would not have had such an effect if the government had made sufficient efforts to provide financial support during longer confinement periods<sup>16</sup>.

The political conflict generated by the pandemic between the public interest in health and the private interest in the economy makes perfect sense within a larger dynamic that has developed in the country since the 1980s. Indeed, the structural adjustments and the redesign of the state in those years, which were followed by privatization and market opening policies in the following decades, have generated a perennial debate about the public role of the state – since Costa Rica still maintains a series of services and institutions of the social rule of law – and the private power of the market, that is, between public institutionality and private freedom. The pandemic once again illuminated a series of antagonisms that reveal the deep social and economic divisions in the country.

16 The government opted to use the CCSS hospitals and clinics as a buffer. A commentary by Gabriela Arguedas on the disastrous consequences of this decision can be found here: <https://delfino.cr/2020/03/covid19-la-avaricia-y-arrogancia-de-unos-destrozara-la-salud-mental-de-todo-el-personal-sanitario>

With a Gini index of 48, by 2019, Costa Rica faced the global COVID-19 crisis as one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (World Bank, 2019). However, very early in the pandemic, the editor of the opinion page of the newspaper *La Nación*, Guiselly Mora, published an article with economists collaborating with her outlet Eli Feinzaig (former presidential candidate for the Progressive Liberal Party), Dennis Meléndez, Luis Mesalles, and Thelmo Vargas (former Minister of Economy), in which they argued that:

*[...] the state should be supportive and strongly reduce its expenses (temporarily close institutions that do not satisfy a social purpose, reduce working hours and their respective remunerations, cut overtime, eliminate superfluous expenses, etc. The reduction of expenses should serve to help the private sector and lower the cost of living for those who work in large or small companies, as well as in state institutions [...]). (Mora et al, 2020).*

This proposal seemed to be less concerned with dealing with the pandemic than with taking advantage of it to push a neoliberal agenda (reduction of public employment, flexibilization of working hours and of social and tax burdens), in the name of a supposed mantra of "social solidarity". As David Díaz-Arias and Luis Adrián Mora Rodríguez pointed out in their public response to the article:

*Solidarity would be, for example, to significantly reduce usurious interest rates and not to support generalized impoverishment due to debt. Solidarity would be, for example, to demand the repatriation of Costa Rican capital protected in tax havens. (Díaz and Rodríguez, 2020).*

These types of exchanges in the public debate show very different agendas and opposite ways of understanding the country's economic problems in the conditions of the pandemic. This explains why the government's image and authority have been questioned

in the midst of the tensions caused by the crisis<sup>17</sup>. It is a fact, for example, that the tourism industry was strongly affected by the closure of borders and airports and that the restriction of movement of nationals and the reduction of their family incomes made it impossible for local tourism to make up for the shortfall.

To this must be added the economic links of tourism with transportation and food. For example, several industries have also been strongly affected in the cities due to the closing of schools and offices. This reduction in employment meant – as already mentioned – a reduction in family income, which in turn meant a reduction in tax revenues for a government already seriously compromised by exceptional expenditures on health and social coverage during the crisis. All in all, at the beginning of the crisis it was estimated that the country's economy would shrink by 3.6% during the remainder of 2020 (Flores-Estrada Pimentel, 2020).

The Nueva República deputy Jonathan Prendas presented, then, the inclusion of the “right to conscientious objection” in two projects processed in the Government and Administration Commission.

## CONSERVATIVE FORCES IN THE PANDEMIC

In an article for Open Democracy, Claire Provost (2020) warned about the clear conservative tendencies that the management of the pandemic would have on issues such as migration, xenophobia, and women's rights, precisely because COVID-19 had forced many countries to adopt and even naturalize policies that have traditionally been part of the agendas of the extreme right.

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<sup>17</sup> Some reflections on this contrast of perspectives, published by Gabriela Arguedas: Conversaciones en aislamiento. "Esta crisis civilizatoria demuestra que la lógica valor = precio es absurda y dogmática" in Teorética [https://teoretica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2004\\_BuchEdEs02\\_Conversaciones\\_GArguedas\\_NViera\\_PJRamirez.pdf](https://teoretica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2004_BuchEdEs02_Conversaciones_GArguedas_NViera_PJRamirez.pdf) . In a pandemic there are no easy decisions: <https://www.pressreader.com/costa-rica/la-nacion-costa-rica/20201230/282003265042610>

Also, in Costa Rica, these forces have moved in the pandemic context, but in a rather peculiar way. Since 2019, the conservative agenda of the parties of a religious leaning has had to be modified since both equal marriage and the technical norm for the therapeutic interruption of pregnancy had become a reality. Their new strategy has been to introduce the issue of "conscientious objection" in national legislation, especially in laws governing health services and family matters.

It is significant that this was done during the extraordinary sessions of the Legislative Assembly for the period December 2020-July 2021, that is, in the midst of the health crisis. The Nueva República deputy Jonathan Prendas presented, then, the inclusion of the "right to conscientious objection" in two projects processed in the Government and Administration Commission. This proposal aims to limit the repercussions of same-sex marriage and the technical norm of therapeutic abortion and appeals to the "right to religious freedom", which would prevent the government from forcing citizens to perform acts that go against their moral or religious beliefs (Díaz Zeledón, 2020). It is widely known that the mechanism he proposes will not guarantee the individual exercise of conscientious objection, but rather aims to generate massive movements of civil disobedience.

That said, in Costa Rica it is necessary to underline the close alliance between the neo-Pentecostal parties, which offer, through their churches, an extensive infrastructure close to the electorate with leaders of the economic right wing of the country who have exploited the crisis to promote their neoliberal agenda. This alliance is, to a large extent, what explains the impact of the protests against the distancing policies that made the government yield. This group of conservative forces has sustained continuous criticism of the executive branch due to the economic consequences of the crisis.

In other words, in the context of the pandemic, the impact of neoconservatism and the right-wing has been mainly economic since the governmental challenges generated by the pandemic have forced the government to yield to the pressures of business groups in economic matters to the point that there have even been objections from the economic right wing to accepting a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to face the crisis since in these sectors the loan is seen as a debt that must be repaid with taxes.

In fact, the anti-tax narrative has been the main rhetorical weapon of the economic right, which has even managed to consolidate movements with a strong media presence such as the Bloque Patriótico Pacifista (Patriotic Pacifist Bloc) and Despierta Costa Rica (Wake Up Costa Rica). These anti-tax groups are pernicious in the context of extreme public indebtedness in the face of a crisis, but they have been the instrument of media penetration of these groups.

Finally, it is possible to hypothesize that these effects will have an impact on the presidential elections of February 2022 because they favor the consolidation of a different type of political conservatism. The political situation we have considered for this essay closes, for the moment, with the triumph of former president José María Figueres Olsen (1994-1998) in the convention of the National Liberation Party (PLN), which made him the first name to be seriously considered as an option for the 2022 elections.

Figueres is a former president strongly criticized for the aggressive policies of economic liberalization and dismantling of the state undertaken during his government in the 1990s, in addition to being involved in a corruption scandal related to the entry into the national market of the firm ALCATEL. However, in the current pandemic context and in view of the perceived inability of a young president like Carlos Alvarado and a relatively new party like PAC to manage the crisis, the electoral trends in the country seem to point to the resurgence of old leadership, like Figueres, and even of local caudillos.

For the electorate this would be a way of "playing it safe", but it also means a way of resisting the political, economic, cultural, and other changes that the country has experienced in recent years. The main theme of Figueres's pre-candidacy is economic revival, aimed at a government that, undoubtedly, will continue to be affected by the tension between the public and the private, health and the economy.

Figueres's historical and political weight could assure him a place in the second round of elections in April 2021. So far there are no clear signs that his campaign discourse is turning towards positions that could ingratiate him with the neoconservative political-

religious sectors. As mentioned, Figueres's core program seems to be an economic revival, and it is unlikely that his campaign will seek to rekindle the ideological tensions of the last campaign. However, it should be clear that not mentioning an issue in the campaign does not imply that it will not be included in the platform's proposals.

In any case, it is possible that the unresolved human rights issues for women and the sexually diverse population will not progress or, even worse, will regress significantly in the midst of a deeply polarized climate that favors all-or-nothing positions during the electoral campaign. Furthermore, we reiterate that, in the Costa Rican case, even more important than the presidential election is the composition of the legislature, and due to the enormous electoral choice (of which a majority is more inclined towards traditionalist or unprogressive positions) it is impossible to foresee how social discontent will be expressed when it comes to electing representatives.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ecuador already had important challenges in terms of its policies related to gender and sexualities. Ecuador has one of the highest rates of femicide, sexual violence, and forced pregnancy in girls and adolescents in the region, and criminalizes abortion<sup>2</sup>. One of the fundamental obstacles to progress in guaranteeing rights has to do with the proliferation of disinformation campaigns and initiatives that deepen stigmas and stereotypes, such as those that describe themselves as being against "gender ideology"<sup>3</sup>. In this context, Sexuality Policy Watch's regional research on anti-gender and anti-abortion actors and networks in Latin America has made it possible to map and analyze their impacts in several countries in the region<sup>4</sup>.

The first study in Ecuador (Viteri, 2020) found that, in addition to organizations and individual voices in society, anti-gender and anti-abortion politics have penetrated party and state policies. The financing of anti-gender and anti-abortion groups is linked to groups with substantial resources and conservative ideology, coupled with transnational networks (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Their budgets are concentrated in disinformation campaigns that circulate on the web, which demonstrate the significant role of social

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2 See the report of the UN special rapporteur following their visit to Ecuador in 2019: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/121/46/PDF/G2012146.pdf?OpenElement>

3 As indicated in the report "Avances y Desafíos hacia el reconocimiento de los derechos de las personas LGBTI en las Américas", available here: <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/LGBTI-ReconocimientoDerechos2019.pdf>

4 See the Ecuador chapter of this study: <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

networks. Viteri also points out that in Ecuador there is evidence of the development of anti-gender and anti-abortion groups based on complex interreligious alliances. For example, from the #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas marches, a solid alliance was created that joins Catholics, Evangelists and Adventists, most notably, which has obvious international connections.

This article provides information and analysis on what has happened after 2019 (when the study was finalized) with special attention to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects, and the responses of state, civil society, and anti-gender/anti-abortion actors in sexual and gender politics in Ecuador.

The text is comprised of six sections. The first, Pandemic Overview in Ecuador, provides a timeline of the pandemic and its social impacts from March 2020. The second section, Responses of the State and Society, critically examines the measures adopted by the state in the management of the pandemic, as well as the actions taken by the community and civil society networks. The third section, Relevant Political Facts in the Pandemic Context, looks at the impact of corruption during this period, the austerity and precarization measures, and the context of the 2021 elections. The fourth section, Relevant Political Facts Regarding Sexual and Gender Policy in the Pandemic Context, focuses on two crucial moments: the veto of the Organic Health Code and the Constitutional Court's ruling on the decriminalization of abortion after rape. The fifth section, Positioning of Anti-gender and Anti-abortion Actors in the Pandemic Context, emphasizes how anti-gender and anti-abortion networks have developed in this context. Finally, the last section presents conclusions and recommendations based on the research conducted.

## PANDEMIC OVERVIEW IN ECUADOR

Ecuador officially reported<sup>5</sup> its first case of COVID-19 on February 29, 2020, with a 70-year-old female patient who arrived from Spain<sup>6</sup>. Following her death on March 13, the National EOC (Emergency Operations Committee) was activated to coordinate the emergency response. On March 16, the Ecuadorian government decreed a health emergency in the National Health System and a national state of emergency<sup>7</sup>. From March 2020 to June 2021, four state of emergency decrees were issued for the mobilization of the Armed Forces and the National Police to enforce curfews and mobility restrictions. It is noteworthy that the decree of December 21, 2020 was declared unconstitutional. As of April 2020, the quarantine was implemented through a system with three levels: red, orange and green; where red implies a total restriction of mobility and in-person work activities, orange is a partial restriction of activities and resumption of economic and productive sectors, and green means few restrictions<sup>8</sup>.

Between April and May 2020, Guayaquil faced an unprecedented health crisis due to the collapse of the health and funerary systems and was the city with the second highest number of cases in Latin America.

Between April and May 2020, Guayaquil faced an unprecedented health crisis due to the collapse of the health and funerary systems and was the city with the second highest

5 Subsequent research in 2020 indicated that this was indeed not the first case. See, for example: <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/sociedad/paciente-cero-coronavirus-ecuador/>

6 <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/ecuador-medidas-prevencion-covid19-coronavirus.html>

7 <https://www.gestionderiesgos.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Informe-de-Situaci%C3%B3n-No008-Casos-Coronavirus-Ecuador-16032020-20h00.pdf>

8 <https://www.gestionderiesgos.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/INFOGRAFIA-NACIONALCOVI-19-COE-NACIONAL-12042020-08h00.pdf>

number of cases in Latin America<sup>9</sup>. In July, there was a new peak in which Quito had the highest number of confirmed cases in the country<sup>10</sup>. Once the first state of emergency decree was lifted in September 2020<sup>11</sup>, the COE decided that the different state institutions and local governments should develop their own policies on vehicle restrictions, safe conduct, biosecurity measures, and social distancing in public spaces. The mandatory use of masks was continued, while the national government promulgated the #YoMeCuido campaign, in which a discourse of "new normality", resumption of economic activity, and "personal responsibility" regarding contagion prevailed<sup>12</sup>.

The vaccination program proposed by Lenin Moreno faced delays in the delivery and distribution of vaccines, as well as multiple cases of corruption and "VIP" vaccination lists. In April 2021, an ICU occupancy rate of 90% was recorded in Quito and Guayaquil and a new state of emergency was decreed for thirty days in eight provinces, followed by another decree in sixteen provinces<sup>13</sup>. In this context of a severe pandemic crisis, the 2021 elections were held in February and April. In May, Lenin Moreno left office as president with the economy in a crisis and with the vaccination plan far behind schedule. Guillermo Lasso, a right-wing candidate and former banker, took office on May 24 on a campaign pledge to vaccinate 9 million people in 100 days<sup>14</sup>, a goal he met in September 2021.

As of October 2021, Ecuador recorded 515,859 people infected by COVID-19 and 32,958 deaths. As for the vaccination process, a total of 10.31 million people are fully vaccinated (58.9%) and another 1.90 million have received their first dose (10.9%)<sup>15</sup>.

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9 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52116100>

10 <https://www.dw.com/es/ecuador-supera-quito-a-guayaquil-en-casos-confirmados-de-covid-19/a-54306603>

11 <https://www.dw.com/es/ecuador-concluir%C3%A1-el-domingo-estado-de-excepci%C3%B3n-por-pandemia/a-54909273>

12 <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/sociedad/nueva-normalidad-13-septiembre-covid/> <https://www.facebook.com/ComunicacionEcuador/posts/3580092335336605>

13 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-04-03/los-contagios-por-coronavirus-se-disparan-en-ecuador-sin-afectar-la-fecha-de-las-elecciones-presidenciales.html> trocar por esse

14 <https://www.elcomercio.com/tendencias/sociedad/lasso-plan-vacunacion-coronavirus-salud.html>

15 <https://www.covid19ecuador.org/vacunas>

Nationally, the excess of deaths in 2020 was 36,351 persons over the average for the previous three years and the mortality rate was 207.6 per 100,000 (Hurtado Caicedo and Velasco Abad, 2020). People aged between 20 and 49 years have been the most commonly infected with COVID-19 throughout the pandemic, while older adults have suffered a higher risk of severe illness and death. In 2020, the leading cause of death in men was COVID-19 (INEC, 2021). A large percentage of the most affected Ecuadorians do not have income or access to stable, permanent, and adequate resources: 2 out of 10 households do not have indoor plumbing, i.e., 20% of the population has been more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection due to lack of water (Velasco Abad, Tapia and Hurtado Caicedo, 2020).

## GENDER IMPACTS

Women have been particularly affected as pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including increased gender-based violence, lack of income, insufficient access to sexual and reproductive health services, and an overburden of care work (CNME, 2020). Indigenous populations have continuously denounced the negligence of the state in managing the pandemic in their territories<sup>16</sup> and the structural weaknesses of the health system so peoples and nationalities have had to resort to forms of self-management and community management.

The restrictive measures taken by Lenin Moreno's government - confinement, curfew, and use of public force - did not contribute to addressing the structural factors that have unequally affected the population and did not take into account how inequality, precarization, and multiple forms of violence shape the pandemic experience. These measures make invisible, for example, that the #StayAtHome slogan has resulted in increased vulnerability to violence and an overload of care given by women and girls.

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16 See this WHO bulletin co-authored by Amazonian indigenous leaders and academics from the Universidad de las Américas: <https://confeniae.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/BLT.20.283028.pdf>

Prior to and during the pandemic, the Ecuadorian government dismantled and left the adolescent pregnancy prevention strategy<sup>17</sup> without funding and made significant cuts to the comprehensive protection teams. According to official figures from the 14 institutions that are part of the Protection System, only 3,128 women in situations of psychological, physical, and sexual violence were attended to during the pandemic out of a total of 45,028 calls to 911. That is, 41,900 women did not receive assistance (CNME, 2020).

Feminist and women's organizations have continuously warned about the situation of gender-based violence during the pandemic, the increase in femicides and disappearances of girls, adolescents and women, and the lack of policies to prevent them in the context of quarantine and pandemic.

According to data from the BID/Cornell Coronavirus Survey, two-thirds of the women surveyed stated that they were the only ones doing the cleaning and cooking in their homes<sup>18</sup>. In Ecuador, according to the Social Observatory of Ecuador, on average, women contribute three times as much to these activities (31 hours per week) as men do (11 hours per week)<sup>19</sup>. A policy approach based on economic austerity and control is not enough to address how the precariousness of life is a factor to consider in the treatment of the pandemic.

In its measures and policies, the government has not taken into account how certain jobs, informal and historically assigned to women, increase the risk of infection and complications. As of 2018, 6% of women over the age of 15 in Ecuador were engaged in paid household work. Of these, six out of ten women did not have access to social security and their income was less than the minimum wage. According to the 2018 National Health and

17 <https://www.elcomercio.com/tendencias/sociedad/reduccion-presupuesto-prevencion-violencia-genero.html>

18 <https://publications.iadb.org/es/encuesta-coronavirus-bidcornell>

19 <https://www.covid19ecuador.org/post/trabajo-precario-pandemia>

Nutrition Survey, 46% of paid female household workers were obese, 31% were overweight, and 32% had respiratory problems, all pre-existing conditions that increase the risk of COVID-19 infection<sup>20</sup>.

Feminist and women's organizations have continuously warned about the situation of gender-based violence during the pandemic, the increase in femicides and disappearances of girls, adolescents, and women, and the lack of policies to prevent them in the context of quarantine and pandemic<sup>21</sup>. On the one hand, low demand for contraceptives was reported in the first months of the pandemic due to fear of contagion, and on the other hand, there was a greater risk of sexual violence and an increase in unwanted pregnancies, STDs, and high-risk abortions (CNME, 2020). As pointed out by the National Women's Coalition of Ecuador, the costs of violence against girls, adolescents, and women represent \$4.608 million each year, 50% of which is borne by women themselves.

## STATE AND SOCIETAL RESPONSES

The state response to the pandemic in Ecuador during Lenin Moreno's mandate was based on authoritarianism and the use of punitive measures, budget cuts, lack of job protections, job insecurity, and corruption. Moreno's approach favored an approach of economic and social austerity, in addition to prioritizing control policies over epidemiological surveillance. He faced critical situations at various levels, as exemplified by irregularities in the purchase of medical supplies<sup>22</sup>, documented cases of dead COVID-19 patients' bodies that were lost in public health system hospitals,<sup>23</sup> and massive protests against his economic policies<sup>24</sup>.

20 <https://www.covid19ecuador.org/post/trabajo-precario-pandemia>

21 June 2020 open letter: <https://www.womenslinkworldwide.org/files/3121/carta-a-lenin-moreno.pdf>

22 <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-06-05/una-oleada-de-casos-de-corrupcion-golpea-ecuador-en-medio-de-la-pandemia.html>

23 <https://www.cdh.org.ec/informes/461-informe-cuerpos-extraviados.html>

24 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52814371>

In response to state negligence, organized civil society and community networks have played a fundamental role in dealing with the pandemic. Civil society responses have developed in various areas, depending on the communities and their priorities (violence, precariousness, and difficulty in accessing food and health services, among others). The *Diálogo Diverso* study by Viteri, Yépez, De la Torre and Carrera (2020) highlights the crucial role of civil society and community organizations in addressing the effects of the pandemic, even with limited funds, in coordination with international development organizations, multilateral organizations, and local governments. During the pandemic, 59% of participants in the study indicated that they received support or were aware of support from foundations and civil society organizations, 13% said they received support from faith-based organizations and church networks, and only 5% reported support from government institutions. During the pandemic, community support and solidarity networks have been organized<sup>25</sup>, and civil society organizations have provided cash, food kits and community kitchens, medical care, legal advice, psychosocial support, counseling, and training for economic sustainability.

## POLITICAL HIGHLIGHTS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

During the pandemic period, corruption in Ecuador increased at the national level. The year 2020 ended with 196 prosecutions underway for bribery, embezzlement, illicit gain, extortion, influence peddling, and organized crime.<sup>26</sup> One of the findings of the investigations is that the public procurement system, due to the notion of "emergency contracting" during the pandemic, leaves loopholes for discretionary actions that result in overcharging the state. A report by the Public Procurement Service (Sercop) identified that 46% of the alleged anomalies detected are related to acquisitions made by municipalities and public hospitals. The list also includes parish councils, state institutions, and prefectures, among others. Corruption in Ecuador has been called "the other pandemic"

25 See, for example: <https://www.kaleidos.ec/cuidado-radical-y-comunitario-desde-movimientos-feministas-durante-la-pandemia-en-el-ecuador/>

26 See this article from El Comercio in which the report cited below is referenced: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/corrupcion-sorprendio-pandemia-ecuador-contratos.html>

and is one of the main challenges for Lasso's government<sup>27</sup>.

The 2021 elections also made visible how, on the one hand, the figure of Rafael Correa weakened his candidate, Andres Arauz,<sup>1</sup> and on the other hand, how machismo and racism were systematically directed against the indigenous candidate Yaku Perez even from supposedly "leftist" sectors.

In June 2020, Lenin Moreno approved the "Organic Law of Humanitarian Support" formulated to carry out economic reforms in the context of the pandemic in areas such as labor agreements, educational subsidies, fees for basic services, financial services, and agreements between debtors and creditors, among others<sup>28</sup>. The law was widely criticized and was challenged as unconstitutional, especially by social organizations and the workers' movement<sup>29</sup>. In addition, feminist and women's organizations pointed out the problems with this law: the economic terms and initial agreements of an already-established labor relationship can be changed, unions and workers' organizations are limited, and labor flexibility is legalized, as the employer can unilaterally reduce workers' salaries and working hours<sup>30</sup>.

The pandemic context in Ecuador, in addition to being marked by corruption, restrictive measures, and the precarization of life, was also marked by the end of Lenin Moreno's government and the 2021 elections. The electoral campaign made visible how machismo continues to be a critical element in Ecuadorian politics, not only in terms of

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27 See this article from El Universo detailing cases of pandemic corruption under investigation: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/politica/corrupcion-ecuador-lenin-moreno-guillermo-lasso-glosas-nuevo-gobierno-nota/>

28 See this article about Correa's statements on "abortion because of hedonism": <https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/columnistas/15/aborto-por-hedonismo>

29 <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/ley-humanitaria-demandas-inconstitucionalidad-trabajadores.html>

30 See, for example, these images shared on networks of the Plurinational and Popular Parliament of Women and Feminist Organizations in which the Humanitarian Support Law is analyzed from a feminist perspective: <https://www.facebook.com/Parlamento-Plurinacional-y-Popular-de-Mujeres-y-Organizaciones-Feministas-106463874268626/photos/pcb.14789246345%209100/147892313459115/>

the lack of parity in candidacies but also in the political violence that is normalized in the campaign season<sup>31</sup>. Virtual campaigns and debates on social media networks reveal how violence is an aspect of Ecuadorian politics. According to a press release by El Telégrafo, 15,093 degrading expressions were broadcast in a 10-month period against women who decide to engage in politics<sup>32</sup>. 66% of female candidates have suffered psychological violence, mainly via social media networks, and 58% of the aggressors are political actors, adversaries, party colleagues, and campaign staff<sup>33</sup>. These aggressions include homophobic, sexualizing, and racist insults, as well as offensive expressions based on social stereotypes.

The 2021 elections also made visible how, on the one hand, the figure of Rafael Correa weakened his candidate, Andres Arauz<sup>34</sup>, and on the other hand, how machismo and racism were systematically directed against the indigenous candidate Yaku Pérez even from supposedly "leftist" sectors<sup>35</sup>. During the campaign, Arauz proclaimed himself an "ecologist and feminist" and used feminist slogans in his public statements and social networks, which was criticized as an exploitation of the feminist struggle. Correa's stance was against urgent issues such as the decriminalization of abortion and, as Viteri (2020) points out, during the era of Correaism, a platform for anti-abortion and anti-gender groups was constituted from a supposedly leftist ideology. Despite this, the feminist-LGBTI movement showed itself to be divided in this tension between two lefts, that of Arauz and that of Pérez, and a portion of the feminist and LGBTI movement proclaimed its support for Arauz<sup>36</sup>. Meanwhile, Pérez managed to attract sectors of the indigenous

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31 <https://www.expreso.ec/actualidad/elecciones-2021-machismo-factor-todavia-pesa-momento-votar-100157.html>

32 <https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/elecciones-2021/1/la-violencia-politica-contra-las-mujeres-una-lucha-que- apenas-comienza>

33 <https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/sociedad/6/violencia-politica-contra-mujeres-ecuador>

34 See this article about Correa's statements on "abortion because of hedonism": <https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/columnistas/15/aborto-por-hedonismo>

35 See this video about Correa's statements on "abortion because of hedonism": <https://twitter.com/bnperiodismo/status/1357724976384794624>

36 See this press release published by the Silhouette X Association: <https://siluetax.org/2021/02/03/colectivo-lgbt-de-ecuador-se-decanta-por-arauz-y-la-izquierda-segun-sondeo/>

movement, as well as feminist, LGBTI, and environmental movements. This coalition of diverse causes made it possible to go beyond the polarization between Correism and anti-Correism and offer a vision of "another possible left"<sup>37</sup>.

The right-wing candidate, Guillermo Lasso, had to move his discourse towards the center to win the second round, yet he began his mandate with positions that make evident a regressive stance towards women's rights and LGBTI communities<sup>38</sup>. Lasso has repeatedly highlighted his position as a member of Opus Dei and his ties to the Catholic Church<sup>39</sup>, including the conservative group "*Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana*" (Sodalitium (Community) of Christian Life), which entered Ecuador in 2002.

Six months into his term, Lasso faces a critical situation in several areas. On the one hand, there is the opposition of social movements to his economic policies and labor reforms – which led to the demonstrations as part of the national strike in October 2021. On the other hand, there is the seriousness of the prison crisis and the extreme violence of the four prison massacres<sup>40</sup> that occurred in 2021.

Lasso is also being investigated by the National Assembly, the comptroller's office, and the attorney general's office for the Pandora Papers<sup>41</sup> case and his alleged links with tax havens. Lasso allegedly used 14 opaque financial companies in Panama and the United States, but apparently, he stopped most of this activity before the 2021 elections in order to comply with a law that prohibits candidates and public officials from maintaining offshore companies.

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37 <https://vientosur.info/yaku-perez-y-otra-izquierda-posible/>

38 <https://gk.city/2021/04/12/discurso-guillermo-lasso-palabra-mujeres-lgbti/>

39 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56713408>

40 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-11-13/nueva-masacre-en-la-carcel-de-guayaquil-con-al-menos-58-presos-muertos.html>

41 <https://elpais.com/pandora-papers/2021-10-07/papeles-de-pandora-la-lista-completa-de-nombres-relevantes.html>

## SEXUAL AND GENDER POLICY IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

On August 27, 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the National Assembly approved the Organic Health Code (COS) and it was sent to the executive, so Lenin Moreno, then president, had one month to approve or veto it. This code, with 405 articles, had been eight years in the making and included important reforms in terms of sexual and reproductive rights<sup>42</sup>. For example, Article 201 proposed that abortions of any type and for any apparent cause and all pathologies that compromise maternal and fetal health should be considered emergencies and therefore prohibited health care providers and health professionals from denying care for these emergencies. Article 115 proposed that the state implement public policies and programs for education and counseling on sexual and reproductive health in order to prevent child and adolescent pregnancy, considering that Ecuador has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the region. Article 208 prohibited the offering of services aimed at changing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, by any method and under any circumstances.

The anti-gender and anti-abortion networks in Ecuador have remained active throughout the pandemic and have mobilized with greater force at specific moments, as mentioned above in response to the veto of the Organic Health Code and the ruling of the Constitutional Court on the decriminalization of abortion [...].

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42 The synthesis of the articles below was taken from the statement of women's and feminist collectives in relation to the approval of the COS, and in reaction to the positions of anti-abortion groups that also call themselves "pro-life" or "pro-family" in relation to the COS. Available here: [www.bit.ly/3lqHOhT](http://www.bit.ly/3lqHOhT)

Guillermo Lasso, at that time a presidential candidate, drafted an open letter to the then-president, Lenin Moreno, requesting the total or partial veto of the COS. Lasso mentioned the articles that caused the most concern to the "pro-life/pro-family" groups and asserted that "it is evident that the regulation approved in the assembly allows for impunity for the crime of abortion" and that "it reflects a controversial and questionable ideology which does not deserve to be elevated to a status of legality that legitimizes it"<sup>43</sup>. The COS was dubbed by the Catholic Church and anti-abortion groups as "the Code of Death". In response to this, the Archbishop of Quito, Monsignor José Espinosa Mateus asked President Lenin Moreno to veto the COS in its entirety and stated:

*Let us not be deceived, that it does not enter through "the window", that which a whole people rejected in a vote. We do not want abortion for a supposed obstetric emergency, we do not want parents to lose their role in the sexual education of their children, we do not want doctors to be unable to exercise their conscientious objection to abortion, we do not want surrogate wombs that threaten the very dignity of women and the meaning of motherhood, and we do not want someone to be unable to decide to be professionally assisted in order to embrace their biological sexuality.*<sup>44</sup>

Finally, then-President Lenin Moreno vetoed the Organic Health Code (COS) in its entirety and in a press conference stated that the cause of the veto was "purely technical and professional", due to "technical and scientific gaps" and asserted that his decision was not due to pressures from anti-gender and anti-abortion groups<sup>45</sup>. In response, Pamela Troya, feminist and LGBTI activist, argued that "this government's total veto of the COS is not technical; it is political, and echoes the positions of conservative and anti-abortion groups, leaving the rights of women and the LGBTI population defenseless"<sup>46</sup>. The reaction of rejection of the COS veto was widespread among social organizations and human rights

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43 <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/lasso-moreno-veto-codigo-salud.html>

44 <https://es.aleteia.org/2020/09/04/ecuador-codigo-de-salud-o-codigo-de-muerte/>

45 <https://www.salud.gob.ec/por-vacios-tecnicos-y-cientificos-ejecutivo-veta-codigo-de-salud>

46 <https://opcions.ec/portal/2020/09/26/el-veto-total-al-cos-una-nueva-arremetida-contranuestros-derechos/>

sectors. The Ecuadorian Network of Women Scientists (Remci) issued a statement saying: "We view with great concern the statements made by groups that, without scientific evidence, put at risk the exercise of human and constitutional rights, especially those of women."<sup>47</sup>

Despite anti-abortion and anti-gender sectors seeing the veto of the COS as a victory, these actors were unable to stop other processes linked to the decriminalization of abortion for rape. On April 28, 2021, the Constitutional Court of Ecuador issued a ruling in favor of decriminalizing abortion for rape. Guillermo Lasso, president-elect of Ecuador at the time of the ruling, issued a statement in which he stated that, despite being Catholic, he and his government will respect the court's decision, affirming that he believes "strongly in principles such as the secular character of the state and the separation of powers"<sup>48</sup>. This position reflects Lasso's inclusion in his cabinet of sectors of the feminist-LGBTI movement and human rights professionals who advocated a more moderate reaction. However, María de Lourdes Alcívar, Guillermo Lasso's wife, wrote on her Twitter account:

Let us pray to God that abortion will not be legalized in our country. It is murder. May our hearts ache just saying it. We all have the right to life. Mothers, fathers, educate your sons and daughters in values from the time they are born so that they know to respect life<sup>49</sup>.

In a statement, the National Coalition of Women, *Fundación Desafío*, and *Mujeres con Voz* described the ruling as a necessary but incomplete step forward, so the struggle continues to guarantee the decriminalization of abortion in all circumstances<sup>50</sup>. On the other hand, anti-abortion activists were opposed the decision. Gerson Almeida, former

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47 <https://lahora.com.ec/noticia/1102328772/la-reaccion-fue-generalizada-amplio-rechazo-al-veto-del-cos>

48 See this article that includes Lasso's statements: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/politica/guillermo-lasso-quiero-manifestar-mi-total-respeto-a-lo-resuelto-por-la-corte-constitucional-sobre-la-despenalizacion-del-aborto-por-violacion-nota/>

49 <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/corte-constitucional-aborto-violacion-demandas.html>

50 See this press release that includes the positions of both feminist organizations and anti-abortion actors: <https://www.nodal.am/2021/04/ecuador-colectivos-feministas-celebran-la-despenalizacion-del-aborto-en-casos-de-violacion/>

presidential candidate and member of the group 'Pro' and '*Vamos por la vida*', stated that the crime of rape should be judged more severely and that abortion is not the solution: "The child that has been conceived (by rape) has no guilt".

Reactions spilt over to the legislature. In October 2021, under the leadership of Ricardo Vanegas (assemblyman for Pachakutik), twelve assemblymen presented the "Organic Bill for the Harmonization of the Protection of Human Life from Conception with the Decriminalization of Consensual Abortion in Case of Rape and other Human Rights". This bill, which is contrary to the ruling issued by the Constitutional Court, is loaded with anti-gender and anti-abortion content and is regressive in terms of human rights<sup>51</sup>. The text of this bill is still under evaluation. However, another bill presented by the ombudsman's office to the Assembly on July 28, 2021, which was in compliance with the ruling, included human rights standards and already has a technical report. As there are two bills in progress, the Assembly will have to decide what to include and what to leave out from each one and whether to prioritize the health and life of women, girls, and people with gestational capacity or to give in to the power of the anti-gender and anti-abortion sectors.

## POSITIONING OF ANTI-GENDER AND ANTI-ABORTION ACTORS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Anti-gender and anti-abortion networks in Ecuador have remained active throughout the pandemic and have mobilized more forcefully at specific moments, as mentioned above in response to the veto of the Organic Health Code and the Constitutional Court's ruling on the decriminalization of abortion for rape, as well as for the 2021 elections. They have also advanced legislative proposals.

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51 <https://gk.city/2021/10/27/vanegas-proyecto-ley-aborto-violacion-desacato/>

Anti-gender groups reacted by holding a press conference [...] the national and international network of anti-gender and anti-abortion activists was evident, as there were contributions from Mexico, Spain and Argentina [...].

Before the beginning of the pandemic in Ecuador, on January 23, 2020, the "Project of Organic Law for the Strengthening of Families in Ecuador" was presented<sup>52</sup>. The main advocate and sponsor of the law was Héctor Yépez, an anti-abortion activist and independent assemblyman for Guayas. This bill establishes traditional concepts of the heterosexual family constituted within the institution of marriage, and has as its pillars life starting from conception, the heterosexual family in marriage, the right of fathers, mothers, and legal guardians to decide on and even prohibit content that is not in accordance with their values and beliefs based on the concept of "family sovereignty", and the guarantee of the right to life starting from conception. This text is still a draft bill and has not yet been assigned to any committee in the Assembly.

In April 2020, UN representatives in Ecuador presented the "COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan"<sup>53</sup> in which a total of \$46.3 million was estimated to cover the needs of the sectors that required the most attention. In the health sector, the protection and guarantee of sexual and reproductive health, maternal, neonatal and child health was provided for. Anti-gender groups reacted with a press conference on May 25 denouncing the so-called "humanitarian blackmail"<sup>54</sup>. They accused the UN of wanting to violate Ecuadorian sovereignty and impose a "gender ideology" and an "agenda of death", according to several anti-gender and anti-abortion delegates. In this press conference, the national and international network of anti-gender and anti-abortion activists was evident, as there

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52 <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/asambleistas-de-ecuador-presentan-proyecto-de-ley-para-fortalecer-lafamilia-80854>

53 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200430-EHP-ECUADOR-COVID-19.pdf>

54 Press conference available here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=598765837406203>

were contributions from Mexico, Spain and Argentina, and from the Ecuadorian cities of Cuenca, Loja, Guayaquil, Quito, Manta, and Machala.

It is noteworthy that these forces have been very active in the electoral process. In the first round of elections, the anti-gender and anti-abortion pairing were Gerson Almeida and Martha Villafuerte, with their presidential and vice-presidential candidacies for the United Ecuadorian Party<sup>55</sup>. Gerson Almeida is a lawyer, and founder and evangelical pastor of the "Ministerio Betel Casa Apostólica" church, and Martha Villafuerte is a self-described Catholic and founder of Familia Ecuador, an international network of "pro-life" and "pro-family" groups.

In addition, in the context of the electoral campaign, on December 20, 2020, a new initiative called "*Voto familia*" (Family Vote) emerged<sup>56</sup>, a campaign by anti-gender and anti-abortion groups that urges citizens to vote for candidates who, as mentioned on their website, commit themselves "to defend life from conception to natural death, to provide education without gender ideology and to combat addictions". Below are four images taken from the campaign website.

### IMAGE 1



55 <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/10/01/nota/7998223/elecciones-presidenciales-ecuador-2021-consejo-nacional-electoral/>

56 <https://twitter.com/votofamilia>

IMAGE 2



IMAGE 3



## IMAGE 4



This initiative was supported by 17 organizations and groups including *Frente Nacional por la Familia*, *Fundación Familia y Futuro*, *A mis hijos los Educo Yo*, *Familia Ecuador*, *Frente Joven Ecuador*, and *Red Vida y Familia Ecuador*, among others.

## FINAL WORDS

The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed militarization and securitization based on a discourse of "protection" in the face of the health crisis in Ecuador and has become a pretext to undermine violence prevention and access to sexual and reproductive rights.

In this context, anti-gender networks remain active and have reorganized themselves using available technologies to continue advocating for anti-gender, anti-abortion, and anti-LGBTI policies. The use of virtual communication platforms and social networks has facilitated broader regional coordination of anti-gender actors. In the 2021 elections, anti-gender actors were active both as candidates and as civil society initiatives that disseminate an anti-gender and anti-abortion discourse.

Similarly, regarding the veto of the Organic Health Code, these same forces and sectors united to oppose its approval. The outright veto, although seen by them as a victory, also highlighted the need to continue fighting comprehensively for the rights

of girls, adolescents, women, and LGBTI people. On the other hand, the ruling of the Constitutional Court for the decriminalization of abortion for rape in 2021 is an important achievement for sexual and reproductive rights in Ecuador, even more so in a context as adverse as the pandemic. The anti-abortion sectors in Ecuador have used this ruling to propose a regressive human rights bill with anti-gender and anti-abortion content. In this context, the role of social movements and civil society is crucial in demanding that the ruling of the Constitutional Court is respected and that the resulting law guarantees abortion as a right.

In a context as complex as that of the pandemic and with Guillermo Lasso's mandate as the new president of Ecuador, it is crucial to maintain a critical and vigilant stance on how he actually implements, if he does so, his discourse of "respect for the secular state". This is in light of his changing discourse, as detailed in this report, and his links to anti-gender and anti-abortion groups.

It is also pertinent that social movements and civil society are in constant mobilization in Ecuador against Lasso's economic policies, in addition to being vigilant about the results of the investigation of the Pandora Papers case and demanding that the government act on the prison crisis in a way that protects the lives of detainees from extreme violence and not with a securitizing and militarizing posture that shields itself in the discourse of a supposed "fight against drugs".

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## INTRODUCTION

For some years, MYSU has been analyzing the actions of anti-gender groups in Uruguay and a special instance of this is demonstrated by the research whose results were recorded in the publication *Políticas Antigénero en Latinoamérica: Uruguay, el Mal Ejemplo* (Abracinskas et. al, 2019). The 2019 study provided a genealogy of anti-gender actors in Uruguay and of the strategies gathered around the discourse of "gender ideology" in the country, identifying three periods of coalescence.

The first moment was from 2009 to 2013, when religious expressions were more visible in the political system than before, in particular the first mobilization of evangelical groups and their rapprochement with sectors of the National Party. Part of these alliances became visible in the process of the attempted repeal of the law on voluntary termination of pregnancy (IVE) (Abracinskas et. al, 2019).

A second moment, between 2014 and 2016, saw a coalescence of these alliances around the figure of the then-Senator Verónica Alonso in Parliament with other minoritarian expressions, and social activism with the emergence of non-denominational groups such as *Varones Unidos* (Males United) or *A Mis Hijos No Los Tocan* (Don't Touch My Children), with a more pseudo-scientific discourse and even using human rights language stripped of the more religious expressions and references (Abracinskas et. al, 2019).

The third moment, of definitive coalescence, occurred in 2017, when the discourse of "gender ideology" was established with greater force and actions began to be organized for the 2019 election. The attempt to repeal the comprehensive law for trans people was the major milestone in this period. Political and social actors made their links explicit with

greater force and managed to put issues on the agenda, generating public discussions with a far from a negligible impact on traditional media and social media networks (Abracinskas et. al, 2019).

Strategies common to other countries in the region were identified, in an adapted version, and it became clear that the most active actors at the community level were evangelicals, while other groups such as the Catholic church continued to develop advocacy strategies at the elite level, even with elites of the progressive forces (Abracinskas et. al, 2019). The diagnosis made in that study did not consider, since it was outside the period analyzed, the new scenario that emerged from the last electoral cycle, nor the new actor that would eventually become the most visible anti-gender political actor, the *Cabildo Abierto* (Open Lobby) party.

[...] there are entire hospitals that lack health professionals willing to perform abortions, and where they push misinformation and willing to perform abortions, and where they push misinformation and instill fear in patients. instill fear in patients.

## A NEW SCENARIO: "TURN TO THE RIGHT" AND THE PANDEMIC

Uruguay stands out in the region, as it "has advanced significantly towards compliance with the Montevideo Consensus, particularly with regard to sexual and reproductive rights [...] with legal frameworks of reference" (Miraquetemiro, 2018). However, it does not remain unaffected by the process of regional onslaught by anti-gender and anti-abortion groups. The achievements made here caught the attention of these forces, making the country the

target of their actions because they considered it a "bad example"<sup>1</sup>, and feminist, women's, sexual diversity, and gender dissidence movements were defined as their main enemies. Therefore, Uruguay became the focus of their actions, there was strong economic support for local forces from their regional and international coreligionists, and the country has been a base for their meetings and congresses, with the recurrent presence of the main anti-gender spokespersons from all Latin America.

Uruguay is today, therefore, one of the countries in the world where openly antigender forces are established in state power, which is not insignificant.

During 2019 the country had, in its presidential electoral process, a strong media campaign that used strategies similar to those used, for example, by Bolsonaro to win in Brazil. The result ensured the victory of Lacalle Pou of the National Party in a second electoral round, with barely 23% of the valid votes. That victory was ensured by the creation of a coalition of conservative, right-wing, militarist, and evangelical pastors' parties. Identified as the "Multicolor Coalition", it is made up of the historic National and Colorado Parties (PN and PC), with the third important partner being the new Cabildo Abierto (CA), an extreme right-wing party led by a former military man<sup>2</sup>. The President's party contributes 41 of the 74 legislators in the coalition, which means 55.4% of the coalition's seats, while it represents 31% of the total number of legislators in the General Assembly. The coalition harbors several actors identified as forces opposed to "gender ideology" and abortion rights, especially figures from Cabildo Abierto, whose political agenda is flagrantly "anti-communist" and shares pro-natalist views typical of the European right (Queirolo, 2020). Uruguay is today, therefore, one of the countries in the world where openly anti-gender forces are installed in state power, which is not insignificant.

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1 Revista Noticias (2019, February 1) "El género es el nuevo demonio". <https://noticias.perfil.com/noticias/general/2019-02-01-el-genero-es-el-nuevo-demonio.phtml>

2 Two small parties, the Independent Party and the People's Party, both with only one seat in the Chamber of Deputies, are also part of the coalition.

Less than two weeks after the new government took office, on March 13, a health emergency was declared due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Uruguay. As a result, several aspects of daily life and citizenship were affected by the physical distancing measures and the government's exhortations to "stay at home". From March 16, 2020, classes were suspended at the primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels, resuming in a phased manner and with some difficulties during the month of June. In March 2021, educational activities were resumed, but were suspended once again on March 23, 2021. Between June and July, the calendar for the return to educational activities was drawn up. By October, face-to-face activities were fully resumed in the educational system<sup>34</sup>, including the universities<sup>5</sup>.

## EVOLUTION OF THE PANDEMIC

From March to October 2020, the evolution of the pandemic in Uruguay differed greatly from the rest of the world and the region in the levels of infection, hospitalization, and deaths, reaching zero new cases for a few days in June of that year. The first wave arrived in October 2020 and since then the increase in infections and deaths placed Uruguay in April/May 2021 in the highest rankings in the world in COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants.

The arrival of the vaccines was later than in other countries, but it quickly reached 30% of the population fully vaccinated and 53% with at least one dose by June 1, 2021. In the first week of October, 74% of the population was already fully vaccinated<sup>6</sup> (two doses), and at that time, the number of deaths due to COVID-19 was 6,064, which represented

3 <https://www.anep.edu.uy/15-d/primaria-complet-el-retorno-presencialidad-con-75000-alumnos-montevideo-y-canelones>

4 <https://www.gub.uy/presidencia/comunicacion/noticias/alumnos-secundaria-utu-todo-pais-retoman-presencialidad-aulas-partir-del-12>

5 <https://coronavirus.udelar.edu.uy/comunicado-no-48-presencialidad-a-partir-del-25-de-octubre-en-distintas-sedes/>

6 You can follow the progress of vaccination on the official site Monitor Vaccines COVID: <https://monitor.uruguaysevacuna.gub.uy/>

1,751 deaths per million. At the end of July, it was decided to allow a booster dose with Pfizer vaccines for those more than 90 days after the second dose, to be implemented in a staggered manner.

As of November 11, 2021, almost 1,300,000 people had been vaccinated with the third dose, a little less than half of the people who received the two doses. This decision was taken even though international organizations urged countries not to do so in order to ensure further progress in vaccination worldwide<sup>7</sup>.

Unlike in Brazil, at the beginning of the pandemic, the government established a strong link with the national scientific community, creating the Honorary Scientific Advisory Group (*Grupo Asesor Científico Honorario*, GACH). This relationship, however, had many ups and downs [...].

## STATE RESPONSES

Unlike in Brazil, the government at the beginning of the pandemic established a strong link with the national scientific community, creating the Honorary Scientific Advisory Group (*Grupo Asesor Científico Honorario* - GACH). This relationship, however, had many ups and downs and the initial attitude of taking government measures based on scientific recommendations in a climate of strong appreciation and listening<sup>8</sup> led to the situation of 2021 in which the relativization of scientific contributions predominated

7 La Diaria (2020, August 04). OMS pidió que se postergue la tercera dosis para priorizar vacunación de países pobres. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/coronavirus/articulo/2021/8/oms-pidio-que-se-postergue-la-tercera-dosis-para-priorizar-vacunacion-de-paises-pobres/>

8 El Observador (2020, July 23). Por qué Uruguay está en una “zona fría” de la pandemia y cuáles herramientas intensifican el monitoreo. <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/por-que-uruguay-esta-en-una-zona-fria-de-la-pandemia-y-cuales-herramientas-intensificaran-monitoreo-2020723153232>

to the point of ignoring<sup>9</sup> and attacking scientific authorities<sup>10</sup>. The GACH, in this context, ended its activity on June 16, 2021, after 14 months of work<sup>11</sup>.

In the health sector, it is important to highlight the robust structure of the health system ensured by a reform that has expanded coverage and access based on the principle of health as a right and not as a commodity which has emphasized proactiveness and prevention. Compared to other countries in the region, the pandemic was handled by a robust network of health services (public and private subsystems), with resources that dealt with problems on a case-by-case basis, and with a strong commitment of health personnel to overcome moments of system saturation.

## ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

Economic activity was halted, with ups and downs in several sectors. Unemployment peaked at 11.2% in October 2020 (14.2% for women). The return to pre-pandemic unemployment levels has been much slower for women, which has increased the gender gap in this field. At the beginning of October, unemployment stood at 9.5% (8.9% for men and 10.1% for women), with a trend to return to pre-pandemic levels, although not yet reaching them<sup>12</sup>. Poverty increased from 8.8% in 2019 to 11.6% in 2020, an increase of 100,000 people.

9 Semanario Búsqueda (2021, May 24 - June 2). El gobierno y la sociedad perdieron la “oportunidad” de blindar abril y sin más medidas, “nos puede ir mucho peor todavía”. <https://www.busqueda.com.uy/Secciones/El-gobierno-y-la-sociedad-perdieron-la-oportunidad-de-blindar-abril-y-sin-mas-medidas-nos-puede-ir-mucho-peor-todavia--uc47902>

10 La Diaria (2020, May 27). Rodrigo Goñi: “Hay gente que parece estar pidiendo una tecnocracia, que gobiernen los científicos”. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2021/5/rodrigo-goni-hay-gente-que-parece-estar-pidiendo-una-tecnocracia-que-gobiernen-los-cientificos/>

11 La Diaria (2021, June 16). Tras reunión con Lacalle Pou, el GACH terminó su vínculo con Presidencia y se prepara un “acto de reconocimiento público”. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2021/6/tras-reunion-con-lacalle-pou-el-gach-termino-su-vinculo-con-presidencia-y-se-prepara-un-acto-de-reconocimiento-publico/>

12 <https://www.gub.uy/presidencia/comunicacion/noticias/desempleo-agosto-se-ubico-95-punto-debajo-medicion-del-mes-anterior>

## THE POLITICAL CONTEXT: NEOLIBERALISM, PANDEMIC, AND TENSIONS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

It is important to underline that the pandemic did not restrain the implementation of the robust neoliberal agenda of the new government. This was immediately manifested in the measures to restrict movement during the pandemic, since the priority of the national government was not to impose a mandatory "quarantine", but to suspend some activities (education, culture, gastronomy, physical activity, and sports). In other words, the pandemic management paradigm aimed to avoid stopping the functioning of the economy, on the one hand, and assigned the responsibility of care to families and individuals, on the other.

In the economic sphere, the two central policies were the increase in (temporary) unemployment insurance coverage and financial support to companies. The government publicly bet on an economic dynamic based on the protection of the business sectors (which it called the "golden net")<sup>13</sup>, reinstalling the failed logic of "trickle-down economics", according to which short-term measures benefiting the richest would benefit society in the long term, something that has not been proven to be true.

In addition, the legislative agenda was dominated not only by COVID-19 but also by the discussion of a Law of Urgent Consideration (LUC) presented in the first months of government. The LUC consists of 476 articles, legislates on more than twenty topics, and reflects to a large extent the general ideological and programmatic orientation of the coalition government, since it includes measures to reduce the role of the state as a regulator and participant in economic matters, emphasizes the repressive nature of the police, and broadens the interpretative framework of legitimate self-defense. It also seeks to diminish the rights of organized workers and criminalizes social activism in general (MYSU, 2020b). The law was approved with some modifications in July 2020<sup>14</sup>.

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13 El Observador (2020, April 09). Los argumentos de Lacalle de por qué no gravar más al capital y la certeza de que habrá recesión. <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/los-argumentos-de-lacalle-de-por-que-no-gravar-mas-al-capital-y-las-criticas-de-la-izquierda-20204981329>

14 The passage of the Law of Urgent Consideration (LUC) on July 8, 2020, can be read as a show of strength on the part of the coalition.

In the second half of 2020, the budget discussion was initiated, which involved the debate of many issues at the same time. The approval of the national budget, which in Uruguay has a five-year scope, maintains the objective of fiscal tightening at any cost despite the consequences of the pandemic, applying measures that have caused the loss of salaries, reduction of pensions, increase in public fees, and tax exemptions for the economically favored sectors.

These neoliberal advances can be measured quantitatively, as shown in a study by ECLAC (2020): until the end of 2020, Uruguay was the country that allocated the lowest percentage of GDP to the health, economic, and social response to the pandemic. The government expressed its disagreement with this assessment, questioning the figures presented by ECLAC and asking it to retract them<sup>15</sup>, but the data show the increase in poverty and inequality during this period.

In addition, rates for the main services (electricity, water, fuel) had significant increases despite the pandemic; during the month of April 2020, when the pandemic was at its highest peak of movement restriction, telephone rates increased by 9.8%, electricity by 10.5%, and water by 18%. They increased again in January 2021, while salaries and pensions increased around 4% in January 2020, before the beginning of the current government. In the case of fuel, the increase between March 2020 and October 2021 was 28%.

Even more relevantly, real wages decreased by the most in the last 17 years during 2020, while between July 2020 and July 2021 they continued to fall (approximately 1.5%).

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15 La Diaria (2020, August 25). El gobierno pidió a CEPAL que rectifique por su informe acerca del gasto social en la pandemia. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2020/8/gobierno-pidio-a-cepal-que-rectifique-por-su-informe-acerca-del-gasto-social-en-la-pandemia/>

Even more relevantly, real wages decreased by the most in the last 17 years during 2020, while between July 2020 and July 2021 they continued to fall (approximately 1.5%). Finally, between January and July 2021 the concentration of wealth resulted in an increase of 2.845 billion dollars in the accounts of companies and individuals in local banks (a figure that represents the annual total in 2020). Ninety percent of this almost 2.9 billion dollars corresponds to accounts with more than 100,000 dollars, owned by 2% of bank clients, and if accounts with more than 250,000 dollars are considered, they account for 73% of the growth in deposits, owned by 0.7% of clients, that is, some 19,000 companies and individuals. This fails to take into account deposits abroad, which have also grown and have reached, according to March data, some 8.7 billion dollars, equivalent to 16% of GDP<sup>16, 17</sup>.

Finally, throughout the pandemic, the government's statements have emphasized and praised the commitment and professionalism of the health workers and academics involved in the response to the crisis. However, this did not translate into increased resources in the public budget for health salaries, policies, and services, or for scientific research. There has been a reduction in salaries and purchasing power during this period, as well as severe cuts to the University of the Republic and the National Agency for Research and Innovation (ANII).

## RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY:

### DISQUALIFICATION AND ARBITRATION

From the most active Uruguayan social and popular organizations, the main demands in the context of the pandemic have been aimed at demanding that the government give priority to the most vulnerable sectors, emphasizing care as a way to better balance the protection of living conditions and the preservation of the economy. Income support has been demanded for the poorest sectors, in which children and women are the most affected.

16 Uruguay: multitudes movilizadas contra el ajuste. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/06/27/uruguay-se-retira-de-la-asamblea-general-de-la-oea-en-rechazo-a-reconocimiento-de-delegacion-de-juan-guaido/>

17 <https://www.aebu.org.uy/noticias/24565>

The social and economic crisis had, for example, as a reaction the emergence of a strong network of "soup kitchens" sustained by social collectives, unions, and residents. In 2021, more than 100,000 people used these kitchens as their main source of food, and to date, the government has not taken measures to ensure that each person and family can access basic nutritional requirements<sup>18</sup>.

For its part, the governing coalition has had an attitude of sustained dismissal of social and political groups that are not aligned with its ideology. In this sense, the same narrative of "responsible freedom" that was applied to the management of the pandemic is used at its discretion to accuse those who demonstrate against the government's political and health approaches of being "irresponsible", creating a climate of social criminalization of activism and protest.

For example, the campaign to collect signatures for the partial repeal of the LUC led to a high level of tension as the government took actions limiting the rights of assembly and movement through laws regulating articles 37 and 38 of the Constitution<sup>19</sup>, under the precept of avoiding gatherings<sup>20</sup>. In other words, it has resorted to the exceptional nature of the pandemic to coercively interpret constitutional norms. This clearly restricted the possibility that the adjustment plan implicit in the LUC could be modified. The departmental and municipal elections have also been postponed.

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18 Montevideo Portal (2021, August 17). Coordinadora de ollas se manifestó en reclamo de más recursos al gobierno. <https://www.montevideo.com.uy/Noticias/Coordinadora-de-ollas-se-manifesto-en-reclamo-de-mas-recursos-al-gobierno-uc795448>

19 Law 19.932, accesible at: <https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19932-2020> and Law N° 19.941. <https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19941-2021>

20 La Diaria (2020, December 17). Gobierno y oposición chocan por proyecto de ley para limitar el derecho de reunión, que se vota este viernes en el Parlamento. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2020/12/gobierno-y-oposicion-chocan-por-proyecto-de-ley-para-limitar-el-derecho-de-reunion-que-se-vota-este-viernes-en-el-parlamento/>

[...] the polarization scenario of the electoral cycle still persists. [...] The issues of gender and abortion rights are undoubtedly part of this dynamic.

## A PARADOXICAL SCENE

There was high volatility in the ministerial teams during the first year of government, but gradually the coalition government has shown a relatively more unified front. Despite all that is going wrong in the Uruguayan economy, the pandemic has had a unifying impact on the new administration. This is reflected in the high approval ratings in opinion polls of the president and, in particular, the health minister.

On the other hand, the polarization of the electoral cycle still persists. Government leaders and parliamentarians, even when their approval ratings are high, generate a constant polarization in society, especially by using the aforementioned strategies of dismissal of dissenting or questioning voices. The issues of gender and abortion rights are undoubtedly part of this dynamic. However, until recently this has not been more intense, either because attempts at reversals were partially contained by agreements within the government coalition, or because the government had the pandemic and economic reforms as a priority. But that does not mean that controversies and threats have not occurred.

## ANTI-GENDER AND ANTI-ABORTION POLICY IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

### EXECUTIVE POLICIES

As a first point, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Public Health (MSP) expressed very contradictory signals regarding the sexual and reproductive rights agenda. Beyond statements by political figures such as Minister Salinas himself

against abortion, the inconsistencies are reflected in the documentation produced by the ministry and its actions.

On March 24, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Program Area of the MSP sent an official communication to the technical directorates and those responsible for the services, declaring sexual and reproductive health, especially abortion services, as essential<sup>21</sup>. The communiqué contains recommendations for the operation of the services and urges the incorporation of telemedicine to facilitate access and reduce the risk of contagion. Mention should also be made of the guide "Recommendations for the care of pregnant women and newborns in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic"<sup>22</sup>.

However, there are many problems beyond the official procedures. There are difficulties in accessing information regarding the functioning of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SSR) services and there are no campaigns to disseminate the strategy adopted in March. The designation of area coordinators has also been postponed, as in the case of the STD/HIV Program, and the spaces for dialogue between the state and civil society have not been convened, such as the National Advisory Commission on SSR at the level of the Ministry of Public Health, created in 2004, in which different state institutions and civil society organizations participated.

In addition, on April 2, 2020, Law 19.869<sup>23</sup> was passed, which defined the general guidelines for the implementation and development of telemedicine as a mechanism for the healthcare providers that make up the National Integrated Health System (SNIS). The law established a 90-day deadline, after its enactment, to issue action protocols, which ended on July 2, 2020, but as of October 2021 the protocols for telemedicine care in crucial dimensions of health care, such as sexual and reproductive health, were not yet available.

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21 <http://www.mysu.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MSP-Procesos-IVE-en-pandemia-COVID-19.pdf>

22 Guía Recomendaciones referidas a la asistencia de la mujer embarazada y el recién nacido en el marco de la pandemia por COVID-19 (2020). [https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-salud-publica/sites/ministerio-salud-publica/files/documentos/noticias/MSP\\_RECOMENDACIONES\\_MUJERES\\_EMBARAZADAS\\_COVID\\_19.pdf](https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-salud-publica/sites/ministerio-salud-publica/files/documentos/noticias/MSP_RECOMENDACIONES_MUJERES_EMBARAZADAS_COVID_19.pdf)

23 <https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19869-2020>

Above all, this formal commitment to the maintenance of abortion services contrasts with the explicit position of state actors in relation to the right to choose.

As expected from a “pro-life” government and in line with the pro-natalist discourse that CA has adopted, the focus of SSR policy now falls primarily on pregnancy, childbirth, and post-partum.

As is to be expected from a "pro-life" government and in line with the natalist discourse that CA has adopted, the focus of SSR policy now falls primarily on pregnancy, childbirth, and post-partum care. However, even though this is the priority area of action, the rights of women in childbirth, especially the right to be accompanied, are not being respected and this has been denounced by civil society<sup>24</sup>.

On the other hand, gender-based violence quickly became one of the most important issues in the discourse of the national government, aligning the discourse with the priorities of the United Nations agenda, particularly UNWOMEN, linked to economic autonomy and the intrafamily expression of violence<sup>25</sup>. However, sexual violence has not been mentioned in the manuals distributed to provide information on where to seek help. In addition, the purchase of electronic anklets for aggressors appears to be the main action taken by the authorities, while campaigns to disseminate responses to gender-based violence have been limited, and even less has been invested in broader campaigns to promote lives free of violence (MYSU, 2020).

In this vein, another contradiction is apparent. Publicity has been given to the Ministry of the Interior's online reporting system, which allows citizens to report public

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24 Canal 180 (2020, May 11). Embarazo y parto: el derecho al acompañamiento y la atención más allá de COVID-19. [https://www.180.com.uy/articulo/83231\\_embarazo-y-parto-el-derecho-al-acompanamiento-y-la-atencion-mas-alla-de-covid19&ref=delsol](https://www.180.com.uy/articulo/83231_embarazo-y-parto-el-derecho-al-acompanamiento-y-la-atencion-mas-alla-de-covid19&ref=delsol)

25 See ONU Mujeres <https://lac.unwomen.org/es/donde-estamos/uruguay>

safety incidents, including cases of gender-based violence, without having to go to the police station. But the established rule requires that "once the report is made online, for it to be legally valid, it must be ratified by signature within 48 hours at the nearest police station". This implies that people who could report anonymously must break their anonymity by going to the police station, which would undermine the intended purpose and expose people in situations of violence and others to reprisals.

## THREATS TO ABORTION RIGHTS

Since 2019, several state authorities have made anti-gender and, more especially, anti-abortion statements. The president of the republic himself declared that his government is "pro-life" and a defender of the "unborn". During the pandemic, these regressive measures have remained at low intensity. But in the second half of 2021, when the effects of COVID-19 were already diminishing, stronger signs of the threat to abortion rights became blatant. For example, in October, the leader of the National Party proposed to the Ministry of Public Health a program that aims to offer women seeking abortion services access to an NGO that will be able to persuade them not to have an abortion and eventually give the babies up for adoption. According to the deputy, this would not violate the law of 2021<sup>26</sup>. These projects have some support from the highest authority of the public health services<sup>27</sup>.

Through requests for information submitted by various political and social actors (including MYSU), official figures from the Ministry of Public Health have shown that the number of legal abortions decreased in 2020 for the second consecutive year. Although this drop is expected after legalization, according to the press and feminist organizations, it could be an effect of the COVID-19 crisis, but also of surreptitious strategies of

26 La Diaria (2021, October 11). "Iafigliola presentó a Cipriani propuesta para 'desestimular los abortos' en ASSE y dice que hay 'voluntad política' ". <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2021/10/iafigliola-presento-a-cipriani-propuesta-para-desestimular-los-abortos-en-asse-y-dice-que-hay-voluntad-politica/>

27 La Diaria (2021, October 28). "Cipriani dijo que ASSE revisará los procesos de aborto para asegurarse de que los equipos no los aprueben de forma 'muy automatizada'."

resistance to voluntary termination of pregnancy. The technical report prepared by MYSU on the data points to important flaws in the system for collecting information on services and procedures<sup>28</sup>. Above all, the report reiterates that conscientious objection remains a structural obstacle to the implementation of the 2012 law, an issue that will be the subject of a subsequent report by the organization<sup>29</sup>.

At the beginning of November, an even more problematic episode showed that the anti-abortion ideology propagated in the institutional apparatus may be more widespread and deleterious. A physician who coordinates the sexual and reproductive health area of the State Health Services Administration (ASSE) was accused of having coerced a woman into not having an abortion<sup>30</sup>. The complaint provoked an immediate reaction from feminist organizations that called for a public protest on November 10<sup>31</sup>, under the slogan #LaIveSeDefiende<sup>32</sup>, also requesting the dismissal of the physician and of the authorities responsible for the appointment. In response, the director of ASSE has initiated an investigation into the doctor's actions and declared that even though she is personally against abortion, the law will be complied with<sup>33</sup>.

## IN THE LEGISLATIVE SPHERE

The pandemic did not prevent the presentation and reopening of regressive bills on sexual and reproductive rights, even though these initiatives did not had major advances in their consideration during a good part of 2020 and 2021. A first example was the bill that

28 MYSU <https://www.mysu.org.uy/web/multimedia/noticia/nuevo-informe-aborto-en-cifras-2021/>

29 <https://www.mysu.org.uy/web/multimedia/noticia/presentacion-del-informe-objecion-de-conciencia-en-cifras/>

30 La Diaria <https://ladiaria.com.uy/articulo/2021/11/referente-de-salud-sexual-y-reproductiva-de-la-rap-metropolitana-fue-denunciada-en-asse-por-interferir-en-un-proceso-de-aborto-legal-confirmando-mysu/>. To access the article: <https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/bRPbCH>

31 La Diaria <https://ladiaria.com.uy/feminismos/articulo/2021/11/una-marea-naranja-otra-vez-feministas-autoconvocadas-se-manifestaron-para-defender-el-cumplimiento-de-la-ley-de-interrupcion-voluntaria-del-embarazo/>

32 [https://twitter.com/ive\\_se/status/1458469714942902275](https://twitter.com/ive_se/status/1458469714942902275)

33 La Diaria <https://ladiaria.com.uy/salud/articulo/2021/11/cipriani-confirmando-que-se-inicio-investigacion-en-asse-a-gerarca-denunciada-por-interferir-en-proceso-de-aborto-legal/>

intends to modify sexual education in educational institutions, enabling the intervention of the parents in the selection of contents, reading materials, and even teachers, and it also provides alternatives so that the public education system does not restrict the religious education that adults choose to provide to their children.

This project was originally presented in 2019; however, it was brought forward in the current legislature and although the matter was opened in the Education and Culture Committee of the House of Representatives, it has been left without further debate and for the time being its consideration has not been continued, possibly because the debates on the pandemic, the LUC, and the budget have not allowed it. However, this does not mean that the matter will not return to the agenda.

Moreover, in October 2021, when attacks on abortion rights were already becoming more evident, Parliament began debating a bill to ensure the burial or cremation of stillbirths. Journalist Paula Delgado analyzes the proposal in an article published in *Búsqueda* magazine<sup>34</sup>, correctly observing that it is an indirect strategy to erode the effective implementation of the 2012 law.

Anti-vaccine positions have also manifested themselves in the CA, which opened fissures with the policy adopted by the MSP to manage the pandemic, which, at least at the rhetorical level, has defended the value of scientific evidence.

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34 <https://www.busqueda.com.uy/Secciones/La-fe-y-la-agenda-antiaborto-uc49873>

## FINAL WORDS

The most important aspect to underline in this new evaluation of the anti-gender offensives in Uruguay is that, between 2019 and 2021, the shift to the right and the patterns anchored in neoliberal rationality and sociocultural neoconservatism added to the pandemic crisis have inevitably affected the democratic quality of public debate and the normal exercise of the tools of direct democracy.

On the other hand, new dynamics have been observed in the sphere of political forces that have driven the conservative restoration. While in the context of the electoral process the different anti-gender actors (partisan and non-partisan) found points of encounter and programmatic and ideological coordination, the pandemic has made visible situations of disagreement, distancing, and sometimes opposition between the more pragmatic positions of those in power and the more extreme positions of some conservative social and religious actors. An example of this has been the questioning of the state response to COVID-19 by evangelicals, led by Pastor Márquez of *Misión Vida*, who have adopted denialist positions on the pandemic and questioned the government's measures regarding church congregations<sup>35</sup>.

Anti-vaccine groups that share anti-gender positions and have remained in tension with the government have also emerged. The Doctors for Truth collective, an initiative that, as investigated by *La Diaria*, emerged in Germany and spread to Latin America via Spain, is one of the central actors of this new formation<sup>36</sup>. These groups have denied or minimized the real impact of the pandemic and questioned measures to discourage movement, sometimes coming into conflict with state actors who are their allies in other fields such as health policies and sexual and reproductive rights or opposition to the gender agenda.

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35 Montevideo Portal (2021, January 26) Pastor Márquez difunde su teoría negacionista de la pandemia de COVID: “Es una pandemia”. <https://www.montevideo.com.uy/Noticias/Pastor-Marquez-difunde-su-teoria-negacionista-de-la-pandemia-deCOVID--Es-una-plandemia--uc776577>

36 La Diaria (2021, May 11). El entramado internacional de Médicos por la Verdad. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2021/5/el-entramado-internacional-de-medicos-por-la-verdad>

Anti-vaccine positions have also manifested themselves in the CA, which opened fissures with the policy adopted by the MOH to manage the pandemic, which, at least at the rhetorical level, has defended the value of scientific evidence. Even when the Minister of Health is linked to the CA, spokespersons of the party at the legislative level have declared in the press not to be vaccinated since, due to their Christian faith, they had natural immunity<sup>37</sup>.

The Catholic church, in turn, has played a role closer to pragmatism, prioritizing a position of dialogue with the government, following the more moderate position led by Pope Francis on issues such as vaccination. Its links with the National Party and *Cabildo Abierto* have favored this dialogue and distanced it from more extreme positions such as those of evangelical groups.

In conclusion, although the 2019 election and the pandemic context have favored the presence of anti-gender and anti-abortion expressions associated with denialism, the context of COVID-19 has generated points of disagreement between conservative forces, preventing common strategies such as those that have been developed in Brazil, where these actors are in government, or in Argentina, where they are in opposition.

The end of restrictive measures and the advance of vaccination suggest that the pandemic is over. The latest opinion polls show that pandemic issues are less relevant and structural issues such as unemployment are emerging. In this new context and given certain indicators, it is possible to imagine that the anti-gender and anti-abortion agenda will gain more political strength. The alarm does not cease.

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37 El Observador (2021, September 11). Diputada de Cabildo dijo tenía “inmunidad natural por su fe”; Salinas lo reprobó y ella aclaró sus dichos.

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# ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES 2019-2021: MORE OF THE SAME, BUT NOT SO MUCH

Mirta Moragas

## INTRODUCTION

The G&PAL<sup>1</sup> study on the presence and actions of anti-gender forces in the OAS covered the period 2013-2018; in this article we seek to recall and analyze what has happened since then, focusing on 2019, 2020, and 2021 assemblies and the changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The General Assembly of 2019 was the last held in person before the health emergency; the following assemblies have been held remotely in virtual mode, thereby altering the working method, the organization of the sessions, and the dynamics of the advocacy processes.

The previous study had already identified a set of methods used by the anti-gender forces, such as strategic secularism, NGOization, and co-optation of the language of human rights used to advance their regressive agenda, which are still in use today. In addition, it was observed that anti-gender groups have increased both the number of participants and the quality of their participation in the OAS political space, in addition to assigning prominence to youth and women. This trend has continued to a large extent in the period we are now analyzing, but to this is added a new working area: the use of the discourse of religious freedom to hinder the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights and justify discrimination.

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1 The original study is available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/Ebook-Ofensivas-Antigenero%2020200203.pdf>

## THE 2019 OAS GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

This assembly, which was the last one in person before the pandemic, had as its slogan "innovating to strengthen strategic multilateralism"<sup>2</sup> and was characterized by the deepening of obstacles to civil society participation, the increased visibility of the rifts in evangelical activism, and the introduction, for the first time, of a chapter on religious freedom in the Resolution on Human Rights.

### OBSTACLES TO CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

The presence of civil society organizations in the OAS GA has been growing year by year. In 2019, of the 622 organizations, at least 173 were anti-gender, most of them linked to evangelical churches. The leadership of the Ibero-American Evangelical Congress can be seen in this, although that year it was also verified that the evangelical presence is not monolithic, since of the six evangelical coalitions present, only five answered to the congress. In any case, out of 33 existing coalitions, 11 were openly anti-gender and, of course, anti-abortion.

As in previous assemblies<sup>3</sup>, the argument (or excuse) for restricting the participation of civil society was the lack of physical space, which was untenable. On the first day of activities - when there was a dialogue between civil society, the secretary general, the assistant secretary general, and the heads of delegation - around 800 people participated without major problems. On the second day, when the plenary and the negotiation of the resolutions began to take place, the space was moved from the large hall of the convention center to a smaller hall where only 40 chairs had been provided for the whole of civil society.

2 Site of the 49a General Assembly: <https://www.oas.org/es/49ag/introduction.asp>

3 For example, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in 2016.

Predictably, this caused angry protests from all the organizations present. The anti-rights organizations took advantage of the moment to try to publicly claim that only they had had problems with access due to discrimination against their religious agenda<sup>4</sup>. Something similar happened with admission to the General Commission where resolutions are negotiated. For the first time, it was decided that only the coordinators of the coalitions would be admitted, which generated protests from all the coalitions. In response, both the host country and the OAS attributed the decision exclusively to a question of space, although it was clear that there was an underlying intention to restrict participation.

With regard to the dominant discourse, the evangelical coalitions maintained the themes of previous years but with a new focus: “corruption”.

## EVANGELICAL PRESENCE AND DISCOURSES AGAINST GENDER AND CERTAIN HUMAN RIGHTS

At the South American Congress for Life and Family held in Uruguay<sup>5</sup> at the end of 2018, the Ibero-American Evangelical Congress proposed forming five new coalitions to add to the five already active in the OAS.<sup>6</sup> This implied recruiting at least 50 organizations. It is not known if they managed to find 50, but at that time the rules of participation of the OAS<sup>7</sup> had already established the number of 32 fixed coalitions in addition to a national coalition of the host country, so it was not possible to add a new coalition.<sup>8</sup>

4 <https://www.evangelicodigital.com/latinoamerica/8314/restringen-acceso-a-la-oea-a-representantes-provida-y-familia>

5 <https://noticias.perfil.com/noticias/general/2019-02-01-el-genero-es-el-nuevo-demonio.phtml>

6 <https://noticias.perfil.com/noticias/general/2019-02-01-el-genero-es-el-nuevo-demonio.phtml>

7 <http://www.oas.org/es/49ag/docs/49AG-OEA-Formato-y-Metodologia-del-Trabajo-en-Coaliciones-de-OSC-ESPANOL.pdf>

8 The evangelical coalitions and their spokespersons were the "Coalition for the Progress of Society", represented by Milagros Aguayo; "Education and Culture for Democracy", by Patricia Cortés; "Opportunities for Social Order", by Clara Vega de Rocha; "Building New Horizons", by Silvana Vidal, "Ibero-American Evangelical Congress", by Marco Aurelio Camargo, and "Life and Family", by Miguel Ortigoza of the Association of Evangelical Churches of Paraguay. The fact that this last coalition is not identified as being part of the Ibero-American Congress for Life and Family can give us an indication of the diversity within the evangelical movement.

Regarding the dominant discourse, the evangelical coalitions maintained the contents of previous years but with a new focus: "corruption". In previous years, their main issues had been abortion, so-called "gender ideology", opposition to lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, and intersex (LGTBI) rights, and the defense of "natural" marriage between men and women. In 2019, the new target, "corruption", was clearly aimed at delegitimizing the OAS itself.

There emerged on the scene the coalition "Self-determination of the Peoples vs. Institutional Corruption", whose spokesman was Santiago Guevara. This coalition declared that there was corruption in the OAS, which could be verified when its authorities "use their position with abuse of power, privileging their personal objectives and interests to direct the course of the institution outside the mandates conferred upon them".<sup>9</sup> At another point, Guevara pointed out that the Inter-American Human Rights System is not independent or impartial. For example, he said that by analyzing the contributions received by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, one can see that the government of Spain made a contribution to Advisory Opinion 24/17 on sexual orientation and gender identity "in order to impose ideologies that are alien to the will of the peoples of the Americas, their culture, and their democracies".<sup>10</sup> He further argued that "the partiality and lack of seriousness of some commissioners and judges of the Inter-American Human Rights System is also corruption". As an example, he underlined that Panamanian Commissioner Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño - who at the time was a candidate for reelection - had said that the presence of conservative and anti-rights groups was a threat to human rights.

He also stated that the personal interests of the commissioners of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights as well as judges of the Inter-American Court "have come to replace what the states agreed to" and instead promote "arbitrary, whimsical, and ideological" interpretations. This line of discourse on the "deviation" of the Inter-American System from its original and primary objectives began to be noticed months earlier when

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9 The intervention is available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=319321089020189>

10 The intervention is available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=319321089020189>

in April, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Paraguay delivered a document to the executive secretary of the IACHR, Paulo Abrão, in which they noted negative observations about the functioning of the Inter-American system<sup>11</sup>. These points took up several criticisms made by anti-gender groups, such as the lack of respect for the principle of subsidiarity<sup>12</sup>, the need to apply the principle of the margin of appreciation<sup>13</sup>, and that the jurisprudence and decisions are only valid for the parties in litigation.<sup>14</sup> These points, among other things:

*1. Emphasize that the principle of subsidiarity, which underpins the legal prerequisites for the admissibility of a petition, has a twofold dimension. On the one hand, it assumes that the state concerned has the obligation to investigate any violation of the convention occurring in its territory and, on the other hand, that the state concerned has the right to have its own jurisdictional system resolve the situation before being submitted to an international authority.*

*2. Consider that the states' legitimate autonomy must be respected in order to ensure to all persons subject to their jurisdiction, through their own democratic processes, the rights and guarantees enshrined in the convention in accordance with their constitutional systems.*

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11 Available at: <https://www.mre.gov.py/index.php/noticias-de-embajadas-y-consulados/gobiernos-de-argentina-brasil-chile-colombia-y-paraguay-se-manifiestan-sobre-el-sistema-interamericano-de-derechos-humanos>

12 There is a line of argument that is being maintained by anti-gender organizations and some members of both the commission and the Inter-American Court who say that the system "is not a fourth instance" to resolve internal conflicts that should be resolved within countries.

13 The margin of appreciation is a doctrine accepted in the European human rights system and not in the inter-American system that states have a "margin" within which international law should not rule on domestic rights decisions. This is an argument widely used by anti-gender groups in their presentations to the system. On this argument, see: Nash, Claudio. La doctrina del margen de apreciación y su nula recepción en la jurisprudencia de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos. Available online: <https://revistas.urosario.edu.co/xml/4295/429555530003/html/index.html>

14 This is an argument widely used to oppose the region-wide enforceability of advisory opinion OC 24/17 on gender identity and equality and non-discrimination for same-sex couples, available online at [https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea\\_24\\_esp.pdf](https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea_24_esp.pdf)

3. Also consider that, in the context of the measures adopted to reduce the procedural backlog at the commission, the right to a defense, legal security, and procedural equality must be guaranteed.

4. Emphasize the importance of a strict application of the sources of international human rights law and the recognition of the margin of appreciation of the states in the fulfillment of the obligations established in the convention. They also recall that the resolutions and judgments of the organs of the inter-American system have effects only for the parties to the litigation.

5. Emphasize the importance of adequate knowledge and due consideration of the political, economic, and social realities of the states by the organs of the inter-American human rights system. In this context, they emphasize the need for forms of reparation to maintain due proportionality and to respect both the constitutional and legal systems of the states, as well as the requirements of the rule of law.<sup>15</sup>

Taking into account the analyses, it can be asserted that this strategy is not only focused on hindering the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights but also on weakening the entire system of human rights protection and undermining the legitimacy of the OAS as a multilateral organization. It is evident that this strategy is going to proliferate, which is why it is necessary to develop renewed strategies of response.

## POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

A relevant fact that marked the discussion was the recognition of the Venezuelan delegation consisting of representatives linked to Juan Guaidó by Colombia, the host country<sup>16</sup>, with the support of the United States. Countries such as Bolivia, Nicaragua,

15 Full text available at <https://www.mre.gov.py/index.php/noticias-de-embajadas-y-consulados/gobiernos-de-argentina-brasil-chile-colombia-y-paraguay-se-manifiestan-sobre-el-sistema-interamericano-de-derechos-humanos>

16 <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/06/27/uruguay-se-retira-de-la-asamblea-general-de-la-oea-en-rechazo-a-reconocimiento-de-delegacion-de-juan-guaido/>

Mexico, and several Caribbean countries<sup>17</sup> criticized the decision.<sup>18</sup> Faced with this decision, Uruguay withdrew from the assembly as it considered that what was decided there would not be legitimate with the presence of an illegitimate representation of Venezuela<sup>19</sup>. This discussion resonated in subsequent assemblies when, using the precedent of the 2019 assembly, the presence of Guaidó's representatives continued to be recognized while the same countries continued to criticize this recognition.

Several English-speaking Caribbean states have maintained criticism of this position, which has permeated several decisions, including the election of commissioners for the IACHR and of the secretary general of the OAS held in early 2020. Likewise, the Caribbean has a very critical stance towards the management of Luis Almagro, whom they accuse of prioritizing issues such as Venezuela and neglecting issues of vital importance for that sub-region, such as climate change<sup>20</sup>.

## ELECTION OF COMMISSIONERS FOR THE IACHR

In 2019, the mandates of four of the seven members of the IACHR were renewed, with five candidates. Commissioners Margarette May Macaulay, from Jamaica, and Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño, from Panama, were seeking re-election. In addition to the two commissioners, Julissa Mantilla of Peru, a renowned women's human rights expert, Stuardo Ralón of Guatemala, and the host country's candidate, Everth Bustamante, joined the field. A panel of independent experts analyzed the candidacies<sup>21</sup> and concluded that candidates Ralón and Bustamante did not have a recognized human rights background and were not suitable for the position. It is important to mention that Ralón is an explicit opponent of

17 <https://washdiplomat.com/almagro-enjoys-backing-of-us-for-top-oas-post-but-faces-caribbean-opposition/>

18 [https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/06/27/colombia/1561658158\\_874402.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/06/27/colombia/1561658158_874402.html)

19 <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/06/27/uruguay-se-retira-de-la-asamblea-general-de-la-oea-en-rechazo-a-reconocimiento-de-delegacion-de-juan-guaido/>

20 <https://washdiplomat.com/almagro-enjoys-backing-of-us-for-top-oas-post-but-faces-caribbean-opposition/>

21 <https://www.wcl.american.edu/impact/initiatives-programs/center/documents/2019-informe-del-panel-independiente-de-expertos/>

reproductive rights.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, anti-gender groups asked Jamaica to withdraw the candidacy of May Macaulay because of her support for the rights of women and LGBTI people<sup>23</sup>.

In the case of Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño, in addition to what was stated by one of the coalitions, anti-gender groups started a campaign with the hashtag #EsmeraldaDiscrimina, criticizing her for her concern about the rise of anti-gender groups. Julissa Mantilla was criticized by several conservative countries, such as Paraguay, for being a feminist and for her defense of women's rights. Despite these campaigns, both were elected, Arosemena with the most votes<sup>24</sup>, along with Julissa Mantilla and Stuardo Ralón. This election also marked a milestone since the host country's candidate, contrary to tradition and possibly due to the influence of the tensions mentioned above, was not elected.

[...] for the first time, the Human Rights Resolution incorporated a chapter on freedom of religion and belief proposed by the United States under the Trump administration.

## **RESOLUTIONS: CHAPTER ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INTRODUCED FOR THE FIRST TIME**

Anti-gender organizations have expended significant efforts trying to obstruct the advancement of language in the section on LGBTI rights within the resolution "Promotion

22 <https://twitter.com/StuardoRalon/status/1144725834915299328>

23 <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/lead-stories/20190323/pm-urged-withdraw-support-iachr-commissioner-macaulay>

24 The fact that the strongest campaign on social media was against Arosemena and that she was elected with a large number of votes calls into question the importance of social media as a measure of the political impact of events such as this one.

and Protection of Human Rights". With that objective in mind, and with the leadership of the Paraguayan delegation and the support of Saint Lucia, these organizations mainly objected to two issues. The first attack was against the inclusion of language on "sexual characteristics" to include intersex persons, and the second was against the statement that sexual orientation and gender identity can be "real or perceived". Paraguay also proposed the inclusion of a paragraph establishing the sovereignty of states to apply these standards in their public policies. However, as the positions in favor of the inclusion of these terms were also strong, especially on the part of the member countries of the LGBTI Core Group<sup>25</sup>, Paraguay, in turn, proposed that a vote be taken on the issue, something almost unprecedented in the OAS, as voting is an exception that is rarely used; consensus prevails as a decision-making mechanism. After several informal meetings, it was finally possible to incorporate the language on sexual characteristics as long as there was a paragraph alluding to sovereignty. Even with this condition, Guatemala, Paraguay, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Barbados submitted footnotes to express their disagreement with the approved proposal. Although they did not explicitly clarify the reason for their disagreement, it can be inferred that they are totally opposed to the gender equality language. For its part, Jamaica submitted footnotes throughout the human rights resolution and not just in this chapter noting that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender are not defined in its domestic laws.

In addition to that controversy that effectively negatively impacted the outcome, for the first time, the Human Rights Resolution incorporated a chapter on freedom of religion and belief proposed by the United States under the Trump administration. That section - which passed virtually unmodified since there was no discussion - requests the General Secretariat to organize, with existing resources, a regional dialogue on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and belief, to which member states, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, civil society, and other social actors would be invited to contribute. In addition, it requests that the Committee on Juridical and Political

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25 The LGBTI Core Group is a group of countries friendly to LGBTI rights in the OAS. [https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media\\_center/preleases/2016/097.asp](https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2016/097.asp)

Affairs organize, with existing resources, a special session in which member states can share lessons learned and exchange best practices in order to promote the goals of this resolution and then present the results of that session to the permanent council prior to the fiftieth regular session of the General Assembly<sup>26</sup>.

## **PANDEMIC STATE: FIRST VIRTUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY, OCTOBER 2020**

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bahamas withdrew its offer to host that year's General Assembly<sup>27</sup>, leaving its organization in the hands of the Washington headquarters. Due to the uncertainty of the onset of the pandemic, the General Assembly was postponed in order to establish the most appropriate working methodology. The most relevant aspect of this stage was the re-election of Luis Almagro as secretary general.

### **RE-ELECTION OF LUIS ALMAGRO**

In March 2020, Luis Almagro was re-elected secretary general of the OAS<sup>28</sup>. On that occasion, two other candidates were presented: Hugo de Zela, from Peru, and María Fernanda Espinosa, from Ecuador. Espinosa was supported by a large part of the English-speaking Caribbean as an alternative, as they considered that Almagro's management model was not appropriate for the organization<sup>29</sup>. As noted above, the criticisms are related to his intransigent stance on the crisis in Venezuela; the preeminence of this issue contrasts with other issues of interest to the subregion, such as climate change. On the other hand, Almagro's candidacy was strongly supported by the United States precisely because of his position on Venezuela<sup>30</sup>. In the end, Almagro obtained 23 votes and Espinosa 10. This

26 The full text of the Resolution can be found in here: <https://www.oas.org/es/49ag/introduction.asp>

27 <https://www.thebahamasinvestor.com/2020/bahamas-withdraws-from-hosting-oas-assembly/>

28 <https://www.thebahamasinvestor.com/2020/bahamas-withdraws-from-hosting-oas-assembly/>

29 <https://washdiplomat.com/almagro-enjoys-backing-of-us-for-top-oas-post-but-faces-caribbean-opposition/>

30 <https://washdiplomat.com/almagro-enjoys-backing-of-us-for-top-oas-post-but-faces-caribbean-opposition/>

reelection meant the continuity of the OAS position on Venezuela and the continuity of the Caribbean bloc's criticism of Almagro's management.

## THE 2020 VIRTUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The General Assembly (GA) was finally held virtually, adapting to the participation formats, which had advantages and disadvantages. For example, the discussions of the Committee on Juridical and Political Affairs (CAJP) were held virtually and people from civil society could observe. Prior to the pandemic, access to this meeting was reserved for people in Washington, DC, because it was held in person at OAS headquarters. This change generated the possibility of greater participation of organizations regardless of their location. In addition, issues of physical space were no longer an obstacle to civil society participation. However, access to the CAJP and the general commission was limited in number, which was explained by the argument that the virtual platform had limitations. On the other hand, the possibilities for effective advocacy were more limited due to the lack of direct contact, which gave a qualitative advantage to organizations with previous experience working in this setting.

Under the banner "Facing the challenges of COVID-19 in the hemisphere: a collaborative approach to address vulnerabilities and build resilience in times of crisis, based on the four pillars of the OAS", the GA was once again marked by the predictable geopolitical conflicts where Venezuela and Nicaragua became topics that occupied a lot of time, as well as the criticism of the management of Secretary General Luis Almagro<sup>31</sup> by the Caribbean bloc.

Weeks prior to the GA, anti-gender groups had met with Almagro<sup>32</sup>, which was reflected in his inaugural speech in which he emphasized the importance of the family.

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31 <http://antiguanewsroom.com/commntary-oas-general-assembly-failed-the-people-of-the-americas/>

32 In this presentation, one of the speakers refers to this meeting and the commitments made by Almagro: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=392267545098572](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=392267545098572)

Almagro had initially been strongly criticized by these groups after his assuming the post in 2015 for coming from progressive and secular Uruguay. Since then, he took a sharp turn to the right to gain support (or at least lessen criticism) from these anti-gender groups and possibly from the Trump administration. The 2020 GA registered 425 civil society organizations, of which at least 110 were mostly evangelical anti-gender organizations. There was no change in the methodology on coalitions, so the anti-gender coalitions continued to number 11: six evangelicals, of which five belonged to the Congreso Evangélico Iberoamericano (Ibero-American Evangelical Congress).

As noted above, at the beginning of the dialogue Almagro placed special emphasis on the importance of the family in the pandemic. This line of argument was followed by almost all the coalitions that spoke about strengthening the "family approach", even stressing that the family is more important than the state in overcoming the pandemic. Another striking theme was the explicit mention of the *Manuela v. El Salvador* case, which at the time was pending before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.<sup>33</sup> Several conservative coalitions stressed that this was a "fabricated case," the result of the "judicial activism" of the IACHR. The states, for their part, showed very little interest in participating. Three sessions were scheduled for responses and comments from the states, but by the last session, no delegation had asked to speak, and the day's proceedings were adjourned.

## RESOLUTIONS

The chapter on LGTBI rights in the resolution was adopted without the friction recorded the previous year<sup>34</sup>, as the strongest discussions took place in other sections, especially those focusing on women's rights and the chapter, presented for the second time, on freedom of conscience and religion.

33 The *Manuela* case concluded on November 30, 2021, with a ruling against El Salvador. Available online: [https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec\\_441\\_esp.pdf](https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_441_esp.pdf)

34 The LGTBI chapter had footnotes from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Paraguay, St. Lucia, Guatemala, Honduras, Suriname, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Barbados.

In this debate, of particular concern was a paragraph proposed by Bolivia that mentioned the right of religious communities to choose teachers.

The chapters on strengthening the follow-up mechanism for the implementation of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (MESECVI) and the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) were the focus of the most heated discussions. The main points of debate were surprisingly the incorporation of "intersectionality" and the allusion to "women in all their diversity". Colombia, which had not previously been so vocal in its opposition to gender issues, took a very active opposing position. As is customary, Paraguay, St. Lucia, and Barbados were also very active in opposition. During the negotiations, both in the CAJP and in the general committee, the United States and Brazil made it clear that they understood "gender" as a synonym for "man and woman". In the end, intersectionality<sup>35</sup> was eliminated but "women in all their diversity" was retained. Jamaica, the United States, Paraguay, and Guatemala added footnotes to these sections of the resolution, most of which refer to their domestic legislation that does not define "sexual orientation" or "gender identity" and therefore cannot be covered by the provisions of the chapter<sup>36</sup>.

The other major issue discussed was religious freedom, and of particular concern in this debate was a paragraph proposed by Bolivia that asserted the right of religious communities to choose teachers. This proposal could be directly related to the case of *Pavez vs. Chile* before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, where discrimination against a lesbian teacher expelled from a religious educational institution was discussed<sup>37</sup>. Finally, after lengthy negotiations, it was once again agreed that this reference should be

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35 However, the word intersectionality was retained in the section on the rights of people of African descent, which makes this word accepted language. The final approved resolutions are available online: <https://www.oas.org/es/50ag/introduction.asp>

36 The final texts of the resolutions and the footnotes are available at: <https://www.oas.org/es/50ag>

37 The summary of the processing of the case is available at: [https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/tramite/pavez\\_pavez.pdf](https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/tramite/pavez_pavez.pdf). At the time of this writing, the ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights was pending.

maintained but incorporating the principle of equality and non-discrimination, as well as the best interests of the child. The report once again requested the secretary-general to organize a regional dialogue on the right to freedom of conscience and religion and belief, as well as a second special session in which the member states could continue to discuss lessons learned and exchange best practices and present the results of that session to the permanent council before the next regular session of the General Assembly.

In addition, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Saint Lucia, and Venezuela, together with the United States, presented to the plenary the declaration "Strengthening the Family and the Rights of Women of All Ages"<sup>38</sup>. The text, in addition to presenting a conservative view of women's rights and the concept of the family, also commits these countries "to work together during the HIV/AIDS pandemic and beyond:

- 1. To ensure the full enjoyment of optimal health, human rights, and equal opportunity for women at all levels of political, economic, and public life.*
- 2. To protect the family as foundational to society and as a source of health, support, and care throughout the Americas.*
- 3. To defend the sovereign right of nations to make their own laws related to the protection of life from the moment of conception; and*
- 4. To work in solidarity until these goals are fully accomplished.*

The presentation of the declaration had the strong leadership of the United States. However, the political change in November 2020 that led to the inauguration of Joe Biden may in the medium term mean the end of US support for such conservative statements and draft resolutions. At press time, no draft chapter on strengthening the family had been introduced.

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38 Full document available at: <http://scm.oas.org/Ag/documentos/>

## SECOND VIRTUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY: NOVEMBER 2021, GUATEMALA

The continuing pandemic meant that the 2021 GA would also be held virtually, this time with Guatemala as the host country. For some months, due to the arrival of the vaccines in the region, there was speculation about the possibility of a face-to-face or hybrid assembly, which in the end was rejected. It is important to underline that, a few weeks before the GA, Guatemala joined the Geneva Consensus<sup>39</sup> in a very elaborate ceremony<sup>40</sup> with the presence of two Brazilian authorities, Minister Damares Alves (Women, Family and Human Rights), and Angela Gandra, the national secretary of family, and Valerie Huber, who was the official responsible for this area of policy in the Trump administration. On the other hand, the virtuality, in the end, meant a disadvantage for the anti-gender forces, which have great mobilization capacity and high-level political connections in Guatemala, which had already been seen in 2013.

The GA was once again characterized by heated discussions regarding the term "intersectionality". For his part, Almagro, perhaps reacting to changes in the US administration, in early 2021 signed an agreement with the Alianza Evangélica Latina (AEL)<sup>41</sup> which is not aligned with the Ibero-American Evangelical Congress. However, prior to the Assembly, in November, he also met with the LGTTTBI Coalition. Finally, a very relevant event was the election of commissioners for the IACHR and judges for the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

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39 The Geneva Consensus is a conservative statement on promoting women's health and protecting the family. The full text is available at <https://www.observatoriobioetica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/geneva-consensus-declaration-spanish.pdf>

40 <https://agn.gt/guatemala-se-adhiere-al-consenso-de-ginebra-que-promueve-la-proteccion-de-la-familia/>

41 <https://rcc.com.py/internacionales/el-secretario-general-de-la-oea-se-reunio-con-la-alianza-evangelica-latina/>

## ALMAGRO SIGNS AN AGREEMENT WITH EVANGELICALS AND GENERATES INTERNAL DISCUSSION

In the meeting of Secretary General Luis Almagro with the AEL, in January 2021, whose leaders are spokespersons of the only evangelical coalition that does not belong to the Ibero-American Evangelical Congress, they agreed to advance in a memorandum of understanding to work on the issue of religious freedom. This agreement was effectively concluded in March<sup>42</sup>. It is interesting to note that the signing of this agreement generated a debate in the evangelical camp itself and was criticized by sectors linked to the Ibero-American Evangelical Congress. Among the criticisms, two arguments stand out. One refers to the fact that the agreement with the AEL gave the "false impression" that there was a consensus with all the evangelical churches and that it could be used to silence evangelical "voices critical" of the OAS. The other argument is that the text of the agreement is ambiguous because they consider the OAS an entity with an ideology of "anti-Christian principles"<sup>43</sup>. This debate is interesting in order to show the diversity within the evangelical churches.

The most unusual thing is that, even though many of these groups had been attacking science regarding COVID-19 and vaccines, at the OAS they were clamoring for adherence to the science that defines two sexes.

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42 [https://twitter.com/OEA\\_oficial/status/1370107005835350025](https://twitter.com/OEA_oficial/status/1370107005835350025)

43 <https://www.evangelicodigital.com/latinoamerica/17673/anuncio-de-acuerdo-ael-oea-genera-debate-entre-liderazgoevangelico>

## MEETING WITH THE LGTBI COALITION AND ANOTHER ALMAGRO TWIST

Months after these meetings with the evangelical groups and the signing of the agreement, for the first time since he began his mandate, Luis Almagro held an official meeting with the LGTBI and sex workers coalition where he pledged to maintain a more fluid relationship. After the meeting, Almagro called for the signature and ratification of the convention against all forms of discrimination and intolerance<sup>44</sup>. This new political turn by Almagro was consolidated in his initial intervention in the dialogue with civil society held on November 9, where he expressed concern for the situation of LGTBI persons and sex workers, abandoning the reference to the importance of the family which he had made in previous assemblies. These changes in Almagro's positions can be interpreted as accommodations in relation to the new US administration (Almagro's main supporter) under Joe Biden.

## CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUE WITH THE SECRETARY-GENERAL AND DELEGATION LEADERS

Since the event was held virtually, it was more difficult to make a quantitative evaluation, but we did detect some important qualitative changes. The Ibero-American Evangelical Congress has promoted a public speaking contest for young people where one of the prizes was participation as a spokesperson in the dialogue<sup>45</sup>. As a result, many very young spokespersons were present, even 15-year-olds, which effectively changed the image of the network, since previously only male pastors and their pastor wives used to be present.

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44 [https://twitter.com/Almagro\\_OEA2015/status/1456300598937243657](https://twitter.com/Almagro_OEA2015/status/1456300598937243657)

45 <https://www.evangelicodigital.com/latinoamerica/19525/jovenes-mexicana-y-panamena-seran-voceras-provida-antela-oea>

Another relevant aspect of this change concerns the style of the speeches of these groups, which have been very violent this year. The spokespersons, even very young people, have been very aggressive. Some girls sounded as if they were shouting with the official delegations. That may be an effect of virtualization, since it was not seen in face-to-face events where there was etiquette to follow and it would be difficult for someone to behave in such a manner. However, one cannot help but consider the possibility that instead of speaking only for the OAS audience, they were actually putting on a performance for their own audiences.

The speeches were characterized by very strong language against "gender ideology" and even the "gender ideology industry", as well as the term "gender feminism" and the focus on "ideology-free education". And as is now customary in the agenda of these groups, there were many attacks on the right to abortion, defined as "baby-killing". What is most unusual is that, even though many of these groups had been attacking the science on COVID-19 and vaccines, at the OAS they were clamoring for adherence to the science that defines two sexes<sup>46</sup>.

In the field of argumentative strategies, another discursive itinerary with strong appeal is the thesis that "gender violence" does not exist "because violence has no gender". Furthermore, these anti-gender strategies were extended to the issue of quotas with statements such as "we do not want quotas because personal and political autonomy is harmful to women". We may have to take a closer look at these slogans. It may even be argued that the stage of "sanitization" of these speeches has passed and they are now entering a stage in which there is more confidence and they again feel comfortable frankly expressing their true principles and values.

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46 Important referents of anti-gender groups are also anti-vaccine and denialist. Here is an example from Argentina: <https://ojo-publico.com/2336/argentina-los-lideres-que-buscan-frenar-avance-de-derechos>

The term “intersectionality” has become one of the targets of conservative forces that define it as a maneuver to refer to LGTBI rights without saying so: a deception like “gender ideology”.

## RESOLUTIONS

As in the previous year, the LGTBI chapter of the resolution was approved without major problems despite some initial stances. Nevertheless, a new text on religious freedom was presented but practically the same as the previous one, and since there was no one actively defending it, as happened in 2020, it was approved almost without discussion. Meanwhile, the issue that mobilized the debates in 2021, once again, was intersectionality. On the one hand, there were the countries that supported the term, Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Panama, where the racial issue is important. In the opposing camp were the same countries that had opposed it in 2020.

However, in 2021, some countries presented slightly more flexible and conciliatory positions, as was the case of Colombia. This can be explained by the fact that, in 2020, after the assembly, the State was strongly criticized<sup>47</sup> by Afro-Colombian organizations that rightly said that its position compromised the racial and gender equality policy. As in other situations, this was a semantic and symbolic struggle. The term "intersectionality" has become one of the targets of conservative forces that define it as a maneuver to refer to LGTBI rights without saying so: a deception like "gender ideology". In the "collective unconscious" of the OAS delegate community, the word evokes "disordered sexuality" which completely removes the centrality of inequality and racial discrimination that are at the origin of the concept<sup>48</sup>. After several negotiations, the term "intersectionality" was

47 <https://www.elespectador.com/mundo/mas-paises/la-postura-antiderechos-de-colombia-en-la-oea-en-contra-de-mujeres-y-lgbti-article/>

48 The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in the field of critical race theory. On the origin of the concept, see: <https://perifericas.es/blogs/blog/interseccionalidad-definicion-y-origenes>

replaced by the expression "from an approach that understands the interconnectedness of multiple forms of discrimination, exclusion, and inequality, respecting and valuing the full diversity of the situations and conditions in which they are found"<sup>49</sup>. In any case, the term intersectionality was retained in the section on racial discrimination.

Finally, a very short chapter on religious freedom was approved with practically no additions. It resolves

*To request the General Secretariat to continue to follow up on the mandates contained in resolutions AG/RES. 2941 (XLIX-O/19) and AG/RES. 2961 (L-O/20), to organize a regional dialogue on the right to freedom of conscience and religion and belief, ideally within the framework of the International Day for Religious Freedom, celebrated on October 27, with the contributions of the member states, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and other religious and civil society actors, leading to a debate on best practices, such as the protection of places of worship; and requests the CAJP to organize, within existing resources, a special session in which member states can continue to discuss lessons learned and exchange best practices; and to present the results of that session to the permanent council before the next regular session of the General Assembly.<sup>50</sup>*

Another significant development is the Holy See's decision to appoint Neydy Casillas as its representative for the region on the general commission; for many years she was the top lawyer for Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a US-based organization that coordinates legal strategy in opposition to sexual and reproductive rights<sup>51</sup>. Since April 2020 she has been working for Concerned Women for America as vice president for

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49 Resolution on Human Rights, Chapter 12 "Strengthening the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) for the Promotion of Gender Equality and Women's Rights," resolution paragraph 1.

50 Resolution on human rights. Chapter 23 "Right to freedom of conscience and religion and belief".

51 For a profile of ADF, see: OURs (2021). Rights at risk. Time for action. Available online: <https://www.awid.org/ours-2021> page 88 onwards.

international affairs<sup>52</sup> and now has resurfaced as the Vatican's delegate. This is a perfect illustration of what we have termed "conservative ecumenism", as the ADF not only has certain origins but also has a very strong presence within fundamentalist evangelicalism. Although it is significant, it is not entirely a novelty since at other times the Holy See had sent as its delegates people linked to conservative NGOs from the United States. In 2019, in Colombia, Gualberto García Jones, executive director of the International Human Rights Group<sup>53</sup> – a well-known Washington D.C.-based group. – was the representative of the Holy See at the general commission. In other words, there is effectively a flow between the Holy See and representatives of these groups that pretend to present themselves as NGOs with no religious ties but suddenly emerge as Vatican representatives.

## ELECTIONS FOR THE IACHR AND THE IAHR COURT

In January 2021, the president of the court, Elizabeth Odio Benito, together with other women leaders from different areas, made a call<sup>54</sup> for women candidates to be considered in the elections of that year. The data presented was overwhelming: out of 39 judges of the Inter-American Court, only five had been women. This argument was successful and the number of women candidates increased as intended, including conservative women such as the candidate from Paraguay.

The IACHR had three vacancies. Five candidates were presented: Joel Hernández (Mexico, for reelection), Antonia Urrejola (Chile, for reelection), Carlos Bernal Pulido (Colombia), Roberta Clarke (Barbados), and Alexandra Huneeus (United States). The most concerning candidacy was that of Bernal Pulido, as Colombian human rights organizations had strongly criticized him<sup>55</sup>. Previously available information indicated that the US

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52 <https://concernedwomen.org/team-2/>

53 <https://www.ihrgroup.org/about-us>

54 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-01-27/se-buscan-juezas-para-la-corte-interamericana-de-derechos-humanos.html>

55 Some of these criticisms are included in the final report of the panel of independent experts that analyzed the nominations. The report can be viewed here: <https://www.wcl.american.edu/impact/initiatives-programs/center/publications/documents/informe-final-del-panel-de-expertos-as-independientes-2021-esp/>

candidate had the necessary votes. However, the day before the vote, in the general committee, there was a fierce argument between the United States and the Caribbean bloc over a resolution that included language on universal access to vaccines, which was unacceptable to the United States and indispensable for the Caribbean. This, coupled with the fact that Colombia had donated one million vaccines to Caricom months before the election<sup>56</sup>, may explain why Bernal, Hernandez, and Clarke were elected. With Bernal, who joined Guatemala's Edgar Stuardo Ralón, now two of the seven commissioners have a conservative outlook.

Regarding the court, there were seven candidates for four positions: Rodrigo de Bittencourt Mudrovitsch (Brazil), Verónica Gómez (Argentina), Nancy Hernández López (Costa Rica), Maytrie Vidia Kuldip (Suriname), César Landa Arroyo (Peru), Miryam Peña Candia (Paraguay), and Patricia Pérez Goldberg (Chile). There were no candidates for reelection. The most votes went to Rodrigo Bittencourt, who received 19 of the 24 possible votes. Although the candidacy was submitted by Bolsonaro's government, he also received support from the Brazilian opposition, namely the Brazilian Bar Association and groups linked to the Workers' Party (PT) such as the Prerrogativas Group. This diversity of support may explain why both progressive and conservative countries voted for him.

The second highest number of votes went to Verónica Gómez from Argentina, a renowned jurist, and in third place was Nancy Hernández from Costa Rica, also a renowned jurist. Both choices are considered qualitative advances both because they are two women and because they are progressive. The fourth place was disputed by the candidates from Paraguay and Chile, who tied in the first round, and the Chilean candidate, Patricia Pérez, was elected in the second round. The outcome at the court is more uncertain than at the IACHR, as there is no certainty as to how Bittencourt and Pérez will perform. One of the departing judges, Eduardo Vio Grossi, had been characterized by his open opposition to the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights. This new panel will soon be responsible

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56 <https://www.portafolio.co/economia/gobierno/colombia-dona-1-millon-de-dolares-para-vacunacion-en-paises-del-caribe-554271>

for judging cases involving discrimination based on sexual orientation such as the case of Christian Olivera Fuentes v. Peru.<sup>57</sup>

## FINAL WORDS

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the dynamics of work and advocacy in the OAS, with advantages and disadvantages. Those who already had a previous engagement and work experience benefited, from progressive as well as anti-gender organizations. The introduction of the issue of religious freedom is now a reality at the GA and will surely permeate the ISHR as a whole in the future. It remains to be seen whether or not the new composition of the IACHR and the Inter-American Court poses a risk of regression of standards on sexual and reproductive rights issues. The anti-gender sectors have managed to position one conservative on the IACHR and two on the court, although the impact this will have on the system as a whole must be observed. It is clear that there is a bet on the promotion of conservative candidacies, reinforcing advocacy to roll back standards and prevent the advancement of the achievements already made. This means that the challenges will remain tough and that in the near future the OAS General Assembly and the ISHR will require a lot of energy and attention from civil society groups and networks working in the field of human rights, gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights.

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57 <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2021/168.asp>