

Congresswomen and Substantive Representation in Brazil

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Abstract: Increasing the number of women elected to parliaments has been a historical objective of many feminist movements. The expectation is that this will not merely broaden the correspondence between parliament and society, but furthermore that advances will be seen in relation to policies for women. In order to investigate the substantivity of representation, we analyzed 10,753 legislative propositions made between 2015 and 2017 in the House of Representatives, in an attempt to evaluate the quality of the legislative production by Brazilian congresswomen and the correlation between their legislative performance and the agenda of the Articulation of Brazilian Women. As a result, we identified that, in the period, congresswomen had three times more bills transformed into law than men and that there was adherence between issues considered consensual, but little action in relation to more progressive agendas.

Keywords: Political representation; Feminist movements; Gender; Legislative productivity; Brazil.

Mulheres Parlamentares e Representação Substantiva no Brasil

Resumo: Aumentar o número de mulheres eleitas aos parlamentos tem sido um objetivo histórico de grande parte dos movimentos feministas. A expectativa é de que isso não apenas amplie a correspondência entre parlamento e sociedade, mas também que sejam percebidos avanços em relação às políticas para as mulheres. Assim, para investigar a substantividade da representação, foram analisadas 10.753 proposições legislativas apresentadas entre 2015 e 2017 na Câmara dos Deputados, buscando avaliar a qualidade da produção legislativa das deputadas federais brasileiras e a correlação entre a sua atuação legislativa e a agenda da Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras. Como resultado, identificamos que, no período, as mulheres parlamentares tiveram três vezes mais projetos de lei transformados em norma jurídica do que os homens e que houve aderência entre temas considerados consensuais, mas pouca atuação em relação a pautas mais progressistas.

Palavras-chave: representação política; movimentos feministas; gênero; produtividade legislativa; Brasil.

Mujeres parlamentarias y representación sustantiva en Brasil

Resumen: Aumentar el número de mujeres elegidas para los parlamentos ha sido un objetivo histórico de los movimientos feministas. La expectativa es que ello no solo ampliará la correspondencia entre el parlamento y la sociedad, sino también que se noten los avances en las políticas para las mujeres. Para investigar la sustantividad de la representación, se analizaron 10,753 proposiciones legislativas presentadas entre 2015 y 2017 en la Cámara de Diputados, buscando evaluar la calidad de la producción legislativa de las diputadas federales brasileñas y la correlación entre el desempeño legislativo y la agenda de la Articulación de la Mujer Brasileña. Como resultado, se identificó que, en el período, las mujeres parlamentarias fueron tres veces más productivas que los hombres y que había adherencia entre temas considerados consensuales, pero poco desempeño en relación a pautas más progresistas.

Palabras clave: representación política; movimientos feministas; género; productividad legislativa; Brasil.

Introduction

In Brazil, 52.7% of the electorate is composed of women (Supreme Electoral Court, 2020). This percentage, however, does not correspond to the percentage of women who occupy formal spaces in the proportional system of political representation, such as municipal chambers, legislative assemblies, the Legislative Chamber of the Federal District, and the House of Representatives.

In 2014, only 55 women were elected to the House of Representatives, out of a total of 513 seats, representing 9.9% of the seats in that legislative house. In the following election, in 2018, the number of women elected to the House of Representatives rose to 77, reaching 15% representation, the highest percentage achieved so far. This increase was due, in part, to the new gender affirmative actions that came into effect by determination of the Electoral Courts,¹ after strong action by the Women's Bench in the House of Representatives and the Federal Senate. However, despite the timid progress, Brazil still continued to occupy a discredited position in the ranking of women's political participation drawn up by the Parliamentary Union, placing 141st among more than 190 countries (IPU, 2021). This positive result, however, does not necessarily mean an increase in the percentage of representatives aligned with the feminist agenda, since many were elected because of conservative agendas, driven by the election of Jair Bolsonaro and the rejection of the Workers' Party.² On the other hand, protest actions over the murder of Rio de Janeiro councilwoman Marielle Franco also expanded the visibility and electoral appeal of left-wing candidates, causing the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) to become the one with the largest proportional representation of women in the House of Representatives after 2018.³

Although there have been small advances in relation to the increase in the number of women elected, such numbers reflect the structural and systemic difficulties that hinder women's electoral performance, such as the sexual division of labor (Flávia BIROLI, 2018); the political tradition that resisted as long as it could before it acknowledged women as holders of political rights, even when the contradiction between patriarchy and the liberal reforms based on individualism and equality of the late 19th century was evident (Virginia SAPIRO, 1981); the lack of time to act in the public sphere derived from the overload of functions related to home and family care (BIROLI, 2018; Luis Felipe MIGUEL, 2013; Teresa SACCHET, 2009); the male domination that operates the structural dynamics of society (Pierre BOURDIEU, 2012); the majority-male composition of party structures (Clara ARAÚJO, 2005); the low electoral investment by companies and parties in women's candidacies (SACCHET; Bruno SPECK, 2012); the consummation of the political field as masculine, including the contribution of the press in reinforcing stereotypes (BIROLI, 2018; MIGUEL; BIROLI, 2010).

This scenario of inequalities and disadvantages establishes a context of political underrepresentation of women and has led the Brazilian State to create, since 1995, affirmative actions (quotas on electoral lists, space in party advertising, resources for political training, etc.) to try to mitigate the disparity between the number of women and men elected. However, many of these measures have not yet had the expected effects, in part because they apply to an electoral system that uses the open list model (and not the closed list model, in which gender quotas have proven more efficient) and because they are tied to the number of female candidates and not the number of female elected officials. In addition, it is common for political parties not to comply with such affirmative actions or to comply with them without committing to their effectiveness (SACCHET, 2020), reflecting the constant consideration of amnesties by Parliament to party groups to avoid new penalties. Political parties are the gateway to the formal representation system in Brazil, but their internal dynamics strongly reflect aspects of male domination (BOURDIEU, 2004), which, after all, end up affecting women's recruitment, access to financial resources, and electoral chances (SACCHET, 2020; 2018; ARAÚJO, 2005).

Based on the premise that the fight for gender equity is the essence-genesis of the feminist movement and that this presupposes efforts to enable women to occupy spaces that have been historically denied or made difficult for them, the question that drove this research was to analyze the extent to which the presence, albeit a minority one, of women in the Brazilian parliament has had an effect on the quality of legislative production and what the correspondence is between the legislative activities of congresswomen and the agenda of the women's movements. In addition, we evaluated whether elected women have been active only in areas known as care

¹ In 2018, the Electoral Courts, grounded on the result of the Direct Action of Unconstitutionality 5617, and after consultation prepared by the Women's Bench of the House of Representatives and the Federal Senate, determined that political parties should allocate a percentage of the resources from the Special Fund for Campaign Financing (FEFC) and space in the Free Time for Electoral Campaigns (HGPE) to women candidates according to the percentage of their presence on the electoral lists, with a minimum of 30%.

² For example, in the 55th Legislature (2014-2018), the Social Liberal Party (PSL), for which Jair Bolsonaro ran for the Presidency of the Republic, did not have any elected congresswomen. After the 2018 elections, in the 56th Legislature (2019-2022), it had 10 elected congresswomen.

³ In 2018, PSOL also increased its bench: it went on to have 60% of its bench in the House of Representations made up of women, with six women and four men. In the previous legislature, it had only one congresswoman and five congressmen.

politics (health, education, social services) or whether they have already entered historically male-dominated areas, such as economics and law.

Therefore, a qualitative and quantitative documentary research⁴ was conducted on all the legislative proposals presented by congressmen and congresswomen between 2015 and 2017, seeking to identify which themes were addressed and with what frequency. Then, the themes identified were compared with those extracted from the analysis of the *Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras* (Articulation of Brazilian Women) (AMB) plenary report produced after a meeting held in 2017, which included 50 women's movements and collectives from different regions of the country. Although the results of the plenary do not necessarily represent the varied agendas worked on by these movements individually, they give indications of the priority strategic agendas for women in a collective dimension.

In the article, we address the theoretical dilemmas related to the concept of descriptive representation and substantive representation, which permeate much of the debates related to feminist political theory and are at the heart of the debate related to gender quotas and representativeness. Next, we present a broad panorama of the feminist movements in Brazil and the evolution of the understanding that women's access to formal spaces of political representation should be adopted as a strategic action of the movements, allowing women to "change politics from within," which would create more favorable conditions for advancing in the attainment of rights and the reduction of gender inequalities. We also point out details of the methodological strategy used to collect, analyze and interpret the empirical data referring to legislative production in the House of Representatives, comparing the thematic areas identified in the legislative output of men and women. Finally, the thematic areas identified in the research were compared with the themes identified in the report by the Articulation of Brazilian Women, evaluating the adherence or dissonance between them and situating the findings in the historical-political context in which the research was developed, thus allowing for more accurate interpretations of the correspondence between the legislative actions of congresswomen and the priority agendas of the feminist movement at that time.

The dilemma of political representation

The representation of social groups excluded from political decision-making spaces has been widely debated since the end of the 19th century, thanks to the catalyst provided by the suffragist movement. In the mid-1970s, with the strengthening of the feminist movement at international level, especially with the designation of the period between 1975 and 1985 as the "Decade of Women" by the United Nations (UN), the issue of women's political representation gained more and more attention from policy-makers, the media, and academia.

The widespread discredit that democratic systems are undergoing and the distrust in institutions further strengthen reflections on the conflicts of interest that exist in the process of power delegation between the representative and the represented and the effects of the distance between one and the other on the quality of democracy.

The problem around representation is broad and full of dilemmas. For historical and demographic reasons, representative democracy was the one that was best structured in Western countries, working through the popular and periodic selection of members of society to represent it during a limited period of time, with the duty to answer to the represented about their actions (accountability). However, the troubling question surrounding the idea of representation has always been the understanding of whom, in fact, the representatives represent. This concern, for example, is seen in the classic treatise by Hanna Pitkin (1967), *The Concept of Representation*, in which the author presents four different models of representation: formalist, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive. Among them, the author is predisposed to consider substantive representation as the most pertinent to operate the logic of representation in democratic systems. In this model, the individual representative makes decisions in favor and in the interest of the individuals represented, and not only because he/she shares certain characteristics with them (such as gender, race, or sexual orientation). Therefore, in this model, the representative acts as a spokesperson for the demands brought by those who authorized him/her to act in defense of their interests.

On the other hand, for Bourdieu (1981; 2004), political fetishism is a problem inherent to the logic of representation, that is, the inversion of the power axis caused by the distancing of the people from the formation of political decisions, which is the principle of political alienation.

Bourdieu (2004) seeks to demonstrate that delegation represents a kind of magic act capable of making a series of juxtaposed individuals exist in the form of a fictitious person. He says that the symbolic power acquired by this "magical" being, who is replacing a group of people, generates what he considers the "oracle effect", meaning the condition by which

⁴ This research is a result of the work of the Research and Extension Group "*Mulheres no Parlamento: um olhar sobre a atuação das deputadas federais*" (Women in Parliament: a look at the actions of female Members of Congress), from the Center for Education and Training of the House of Representatives (CEFOP).

the spokesperson legitimizes him/herself as an authority in the absence of the agents. On the other hand, Bernard Manin (1997) states that elections are a kind of selection with a democratic appearance and aristocratic execution that ends up weakening popular sovereignty, which, although unavailable, is delegated by lack of interest or absence of spaces for participation, or by the feeling that institutions are fully functional.

If the very terminology of the word “democracy” (government of the people) already carries in itself a paradox in relation to the word “representation”, when we question who the “people” to be represented are, we perceive a generalization that has always hidden the structurally underprivileged minorities. It is precisely in the recognition of the different groups that make up the category “people” that feminist political theory has been so well recognized and evoked in order to better understand contemporary political phenomena.

In Sapiro’s (1981) view, the political system was not designed to include the presence of minority groups: for underrepresented groups to occupy significant spaces in the political arena, they must first develop a collective awareness of their own interests and realize that it is necessary to take their demands to the public in an organized way to achieve progress. Otherwise, the interests of these groups will remain in the shadows, as if their problems were of a personal and isolated nature and not shared as a consequence of a social structure that delegitimizes the needs of minorities.⁵

For Sacchet (2012, p. 401), the inclusion of social groups considered as minorities in formal political processes has been recommended by multilateral organizations, governments, and actors in the civil society space as “a means of recognizing existing differences among citizens, as well as making political processes more representative”. However, for her, two points have been raised by feminist authors: the first is the substantivity of representation (that is, the recognition of whom the representatives represent); and the second is the accusation that it would be essentializing to affirm that representation should be exercised by members of discriminated social groups, because they are better articulators and defenders of their group’s interests.

Although the debate is promising and advances the understanding of the quality of representation, authors such as Iris Marion Young (1990; 2000) argue that a political system that wants to be democratic must, at the very least, mirror itself in the composition of the social body’s essential characteristics, that is, in the recognition of its members’ differences that enable the sharing of common experiences. Hence, through this model, known as “descriptive representation”, it is possible to create actions that ensure that politically minority groups, such as women, have greater access to spaces of formal representation, since the mere fact of belonging to the female sex would already be sufficient reason to create measures that correct contexts of inequality in gaining access to political decision-making spaces.

Descriptive representation is also central to the work of Anne Phillips (1995). The author argues that political exclusion must be addressed by instituting a “politics of presence.” Phillips (1995) recognizes that the quality of representation matters and requires strict accountability and responsibility mechanisms that link the performance of representatives to the interests they claim to represent. However, the mere incorporation of ideas from excluded groups to the political arena does not solve the problem of their exclusion. Such exclusion generates demands for an effective presence of representatives from the excluded group. Phillips (1995) maintains that, as much as liberal democracy has brought into politics the diversities found in society, represented by differences of opinions, preferences, and beliefs, it cannot be said that the demand for political inclusion is solved only by incorporating these “intellectual” differences in the spheres of representation. It is necessary that members of excluded groups, who share similar experiences, also occupy these spaces.

In contradiction to this idea, Sapiro (1981) previously argued that the presence of women as political leaders is a necessary but not sufficient element for the representation of women’s interests in the public agenda. The author questions whether the election of women per se, in a political system designed by patriarchal norms – both in its recruitment criteria and its internal organization – will actually serve to bring about changes in the way politics is done.

Chantal Mouffe (1993; 1999) also criticizes the logic of descriptive representation in not recognizing as reasonable a representation that is based on fixing the identities of social groups, since each one has different preferences. A similar observation is made by Butler (2016, p. 25) when she posits that “perhaps, paradoxically, the idea of ‘representation’ will only really make sense for feminism when the subject ‘women’ is not presumed anywhere.” For her, the non-problematization of the concept of “woman” is invoked to construct a “solidarity of identity.” As such, it poses a complex dilemma to be solved: on the one hand, the union of women under a

⁵ For Sapiro (1981), the construction of collective consciousness regarding the oppressive situation experienced by minority groups is at the base of the consolidation of social movements, and in the case of the feminist movement, an example of the consciousness-raising slogan for the masses from its second wave was to constantly reaffirm that “the personal is political” as a strategy to stimulate women to bring conflicts from the private environment to which they were confined to a collective logic of publicly confronting the problems they faced.

collective identity (being a woman), with the aim of obtaining generalized collective advances and, on the other hand, the possible inhibition of the agendas of intersectional groups, such as Black women, homosexual women, trans women, indigenous women etc.

However, Young (2006) argues that the search for a more adequate representation of women in democratic institutions is not anchored in the defense that women have common interests and opinions, nor a common identity, but rather in the idea that women share a common social perspective among themselves. For her,

the structural social groups should not be thought of according to a substantial logic, which would define them based on a set of attributes that are common to all their members and constitute their identities, but rather from a more relational logic, in which individuals would be understood as situated in the structures of social groups, without these determining their identities (YOUNG, 2006, p. 161).

In this way, a woman who is in a democratic institution, by having a history, experience, and social understanding derived from her social positioning as a woman, will have points of view closer to those of other women when facing a political decision process. For Young (2006, p. 164), “social perspective is the point of view that members of a group hold about social processes due to the positions they occupy in them”. Therefore, providing the representation of groups that share the same perspectives provides for the “construction of a communicative democratic public that aims to build justice” (SACCHET, 2012, p. 408). The concept of social perspective will also be seized upon by Phillips in her later works (MIGUEL, 2013).

Feminist movements and elected women in Brazil

The term “feminist” has been used to adjectivize the social movements that have fought and continue to fight for women’s autonomy and against the mechanisms of oppression to which they have historically been subjected. Although there is no homogenization of what the “feminist movements” may be, we can say that they have a historical materialist basis, with great focus on questioning the universality of human rights by exposing the tensions between patriarchy and capitalism, uncovering “the patriarchal character of modern political thought and institutions and the matrices of domination that are at the same time patriarchal, racist, and colonialist” (BIROLI, 2018, p. 172-173).

Sapiro (1981) proposes a classification with at least eight different types of strategies used by feminist movements and organizations to promote their agenda in society, among which we highlight:⁶ (1) “*conventional pressure techniques*”, which include parliamentary lobbying, electoral participation, filing lawsuits, and contact with public officials and the press; (2) “*non conventional pressure techniques*”, referring to symbolic political actions, protests and, possibly, tactics of violence; (3) “*consciousness-raising*”, which are the activities oriented to the awareness and internal mobilization of the group.

Feminist movements have played an essential role in the conquest of women’s rights in all areas and have increasingly made explicit the conditions of domination that hold sway over women. However, their political action has always been on the periphery of the public sphere, and has even been considered by Nancy Fraser (1992) as subaltern counter-publics. For her, in a re-signification of the concept of Habermasian public sphere (Jürgen HABERMAS, 2003), the public sphere would integrate competing “publics” differentiated by the characteristics and quality of discursive interaction, there being, therefore: a) weak publics; b) strong publics; c) subaltern counter-publics.

Weak publics are those in which discursive-deliberative practice forms the opinion of the public sphere, not encompassing decision making. This is the case of the press. Strong publics, on the other hand, are those that are able to both form opinion and make decisions, as is the case of parliament. The subaltern counter-publics, in turn, are formed in

parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (FRASER, 1992, p. 123).

It is the case of what happens with feminist women, indigenous peoples, Black people, LGBTQIA+ population, and other politically minority groups⁷ in the access to formal spaces of political representation. Fraser (1992) cites the US feminist movement of the late 20th century as a

⁶ Other tactics adopted by feminist movements, according to Sapiro (1981), are: (4) the creation of alternative institutions to support women in vulnerable situations, providing social services not covered by male-majority organizations (“alternative institutions”); (5) the creation of institutions with organizational forms and objectives completely distinct from those of male-majority or non-feminist ideology (“separatism”); (6) intra-organizational action, in which the concerns are restricted to those of the women who belong to each organization (“caucus”); (7) the formation of “coalitions” between different groups of women; and finally (8) international action for the exchange of ideas and strategies by women from other countries (“international organization”).

⁷ We work on the idea of minority groups by referring to their institutional presence in spaces of political representation.

typical example of this category. For her, the wide variety of newspapers, bookstores, academic programs, conventions, and festivals allowed women to invent new terms to describe social reality, such as sexism, double working hours, marital rape, and others. Creating these concepts from internal “discursive interactions” not only strengthened the movement, but also created conditions for these concepts to go beyond the limits of the group and be incorporated into the discussion agendas of other publics in the public sphere, such as the media or parliament.

In the Brazilian reality, the scenario is no different. Like other social movements, the feminist movements act in a subaltern condition of political representation. But, aware of this, they have sought, since redemocratization, to occupy spaces of formal representation as a way to transform themselves into a strong public and start acting more incisively in the development of laws and public policies. For Biroli (2018), the political participation of women in Brazil has not taken place in formal spaces only, because, albeit with a limited presence in elective positions, women have had great participation in councils and bodies defining public policies. Therefore, “feminist movements have acted from ‘outside’ (exerting pressure from the streets) and ‘inside’ the State, participating in policies and new benchmarks for democracies (...)” (BIROLI, 2018, p. 175).

As such, there were historical periods, such as the struggle against the dictatorship and for redemocratization (in the role of subaltern counter-publics), in which the feminist movement’s agenda was, at various times, aligned with the actions of women in elected positions (who were part of strong publics). However, when the issue under debate had a more progressive slant, such as support for the decriminalization of abortion or marriage between women, to the point of confronting other dominant forces or going against public opinion, the solidarity between the women from the movements and part of the women parliamentarians weakened, since other interests, especially electoral ones, took precedence.

Taking all these factors into account, we believe that using the legislative output produced by parliamentarians in a given period of time would be a useful tool to verify the alignment between the feminist movement’s agenda and the actions of elected women in Brazil. To that end, we selected the period between the years 2015 and 2017, which represent the first three years of the 55th Legislature, and did not include 2018, because it was the last year of that legislature. Experience shows us that proposals presented in the last year of a legislature have little chance of becoming a legal norm, given the characteristics of the legislative process. Besides this, in the last year, there is a drop in productivity, especially after the second semester, when legislators leave their legislative functions to dedicate themselves almost entirely to campaigns in their states. During this kind of non-regimental recess, determined by political agreements, there are practically no voting sessions in the Legislative; therefore, the inclusion of this period in the analysis of the approved propositions could lead to the erroneous interpretation that certain topics were not supported for approval when, in fact, the temporal aspect was more determinant than the content of the proposals.

Methodological aspects of documentary research

The collection of bills was carried out based on research extracted from the Open Database of the House of Representatives, with a total of 10,753 propositions, including bills, complementary bills, legislative decree bills, resolution bills, and proposals to amend the Constitution. The draft laws were segmented according to the author’s gender, and, in cases of co-authorship, the first author (who is considered by the House of Representatives’ system as the main author) was analyzed. Each submission has a series of words related to its content, the so-called “index terms”, which were the focus of this analysis.

According to the Bureau of the House of Representatives Act n° 80/2013, indexing is defined as “the process of analyzing and representing the informational content of documents by applying a documentary language in order to facilitate information retrieval” (House of Representatives, 2013). In other words, it consists of metadata that enables the retrieval of memory in a more agile manner.

In order for the index terms to be properly analyzed, we had to filter them to select the “significant terms” and the “non-significant terms”. This is because some terms frequently used by indexes, such as “amendment” and “law”, for example, do not provide an understanding of the document’s real content to which the index refers, since practically all legislative draft proposals have the purpose of creating or amending laws. Thus, the terms considered non-significant were excluded from the sample, keeping only those that were able to indicate how the subject related to a particular legislative matter.

Each submission has, on average, ten index terms (between significant and non-significant). Therefore, 13,923 different index terms were found in the propositions included in the *corpus* of this research. Given the large number of terms, it was necessary to select those that appeared most frequently. As such, using the Access platform, we selected 20% of the most recurrent terms within the sample of propositions, and then eliminated the non-significant terms. Next, we ranked

the most significant terms in the legislative proposals submitted by women, and then we did the same with those submitted by men.

The database preparation procedures were necessary in order to include in the *corpus* only words that were meaningful when interpreted separately. However, as the research developed, we found that the combined appearance of certain terms would permit a more accurate contextualization of the area, the content, and the intention of the submission (e.g., 'violence' + 'woman'). Therefore, the methodology also involved observing the most frequent combinations of significant terms in the indexing of the same submission, so as to perform qualitative analyses that would allow for a broader understanding of the priority themes being addressed. Finally, when there were still doubts about the theme addressed by a given submission, we resorted to reading its full summary and text to understand what the legislator's intention was in presenting that proposal.

The parliamentary performance of congresswomen in the 55th Legislature

Between 2015 and 2017, 62 congresswomen and 550 congressmen served in office, totaling 612 parliamentarians.⁸ Of the total number of propositions, 90.06% (9,684) were by men and 9.94% (1,069) by women. The data reveal that, during the period, only 62% of the congressmen presented some legislative proposal, while among the congresswomen, this number reached 71%, which shows that women, although in smaller numbers, were politically very active.

When we compared the status of the propositions,⁹ as shown in table 1, we found that congresswomen, in proportion to their presence in the House, were able to transform three times more proposals into law than congressmen. This means that, of the bills presented in the period, there was a greater approval of propositions whose author was a woman.

Table 1 – Distribution of legislative proposals presented to the House of Representatives according to their status, by gender of parliamentarian, Brazil, 2018

Status	Propositions by women	Propositions by men
Transformed into a legal standard	1.31%	0.43%
Pending in the House or Senate	89.89%	90.80%
Filed	4.68%	5.02%
Withdrawn/returned by the author	4.12%	3.75%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Prepared by the author, with data from the House of Representatives (2018).

#PraTodoMundoVer (ForAllToSee) The table has three columns. The first column shows the status of the legislative proposal and, in the next two, are the percentages of women's and men's bills that were in each of these situations. The table shows five situations: transformed into a legal standard, with 1.31% in relation to the bills presented by women and 0.43% in relation to the bills presented by men; pending in the House or Senate, with 89.89% in relation to the bills presented by women and 90.80% in relation to the bills presented by men; filed, comprising 4.68% in relation to the bills presented by women and 5.02% in relation to the bills presented by men; withdrawn or returned, with 4.12% in relation to the bills presented by women and 3.75% in relation to the bills presented by men; and the total with 100% in each column.

The association between the indexing terms made it possible to identify 12 thematic areas, both in relation to men's and women's production. By categorizing which and how many bills corresponded to each of these areas, we were able to establish which thematic areas predominated in the legislative work of women and men, as shown in Table 2. The three areas in which women produced the most legislative material were, in order: (i) criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security; (ii) the economy, public finances and budget; (iii) human rights and minorities. The data shows that the performance of congresswomen is not limited to issues related to care politics, but that there is also legislative action in areas historically dominated by men, such as security, defense, economics and finance. The three areas in which men produced the most legislative material were, in order: (i) criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security; (ii) the economy, public finances and budget; (iii) industry, commerce and services. When we compared the most worked on themes, we could see that, although men and women were equally active in areas related to criminal law and the economy, the themes related to

⁸ Considering principals and alternates.

⁹ Considering the month of April 2018.

human rights and minorities were mostly linked to women's activities (while 16.51% of the women's bills dealt with this theme, only 6.54% of the men's bills dealt with the same thematic axis).

Table 2 – Distribution of legislative proposals presented by federal deputies according to theme, by gender of parliamentarian. Brazil, 2015 to 2017.

Thematic areas	Propositions by women	Propositions by men
Criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security	19.59%	18.80%
Economy, public finance and budgeting	16.82%	17.54%
Human and minority rights (children, adolescents, elderly, women, disabled, minority ethnic groups, etc.)	16.51%	6.54%
Education	6.72%	5.57%
Industry, trade and services	5.95%	8.62%
Labor and employment	5.69%	7.67%
Health	5.49%	1.73%
Aviation, transport, mobility, cities and urban development	4.77%	8.55%
Politics, parties and elections	3.79%	3.33%
Law and consumer protection	2.00%	2.24%
Tributes & commemorative dates	1.85%	1.28%
Others	10.82%	18.13%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Prepared by the author, with data from the House of Representatives (2018).

OBS.: The category "Others" covers index terms that can be linked to thematic areas that are quite diverse: changes to the House's Internal Rules, public bidding, communication, publicity, culture etc.

#PraTodoMundoVer (ForAllToSee) The table has three columns: the first presents the thematic areas into which the propositions presented fall; the second presents the percentage of terms that were identified in the amendments in relation to each area in the propositions presented by women and the third by men. The area of criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security is the first of these areas, since it contained the largest quantity of terms found in the legislative productions, namely 19.59% in the proposals presented by women and 18.80% in the proposals presented by men. Next comes, in order: the economy, public finance and budget, with 16.82% by women and 17.54% by men; Human and minority rights (children, adolescents, elderly, women, disabled, minority ethnicities etc.) with 16.51% by women and 6.54% by men; Education with 6.72% by women and 5.57% by men; Industry, commerce and services with 5.95% by women and 8.62% by men; Labor and employment, with 5.69% by women and 7.67% by men; Health with 5.49% by women and 1.73% by men; Transportation, mobility, cities and urban development with 4.77% by women and 8.55% by men; Politics, political parties and elections with 3.79% by women and 3.33% by men; Law and consumer protection with 2.00% by women and 2.24% by men; Tributes and commemorative dates with 1.85% by women and 1.28% by men; Other thematic areas with 10.82% by women and 18.13% by men.

To go a step further in the interpretation of what the area "Criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security" is, since it was the first in both benches (male and female), we decided to evaluate the nature of the propositions that comprised the area through the analysis of isolated terms. Table 3 shows the relevant index terms found within this area and the percentage of incidence in bills introduced by women and in bills introduced by men.

Table 3 – Distribution of legislative proposals presented by federal deputies according to theme "Criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security" according to incidence of keywords, by gender of parliamentarian. Brazil, 2015 to 2017

Terms from the Women's Bench proposal corpus	Incidence	Terms from the Men's Bench proposal corpus	Incidence
criminal code	10.70%	criminal code	13.80%
Crime	9.90%	crime	10.30%
Punishment	9.20%	punishment	8.50%

Victim	8.90%	code of criminal procedure	5.20%
Maria da Penha Law	8.10%	penalty	5.10%
violence against women	7.60%	victim	4.90%
criminal classification	5.80%	criminal classification	4.80%
Penalty	5.20%	penal execution law	3.80%
code of criminal procedure	5.20%	criminal aggravation	3.70%
Imprisonment	4.20%	legal classification	3.60%
criminal execution law	2.90%	imprisonment	3.50%
legal classification	2.60%	heinous crime	3.30%
criminal aggravation	2.60%	heinous crimes law	3.10%
urgent protective measure	2.60%	disarmament statute	2.90%
domestic violence	2.60%	firearm	2.90%
crime against sexual freedom	2.60%	inmate	2.20%
criminal establishment	2.40%	military fireman	2.20%
Aggressor	2.40%	military police officer	2.10%
bodily injury	2.40%	convicted prisoner	2.10%
heinous crimes law	2.10%	arrest	2.00%

Source: Prepared by the author, with data from the House of Representatives (2018).

#PratodoMundoVer (ForAllToSee) The table has four columns. The first shows the index terms most present in the legislative propositions of female authorship that were categorized in the area of criminal law, criminal procedure, defense and security. The second column indicates the incidence of the terms within each area. The next two columns provide the same information structure, but are related to the terms and their incidence in the legislative propositions made by men. The terms with the highest incidence among women were: criminal code (10.70%), crime (9.90%); punishment (9.20%); victim (8.90%); Maria da Penha law (8.10%); violence against women (7.60%); criminal classification (5.80%); penalty (5.20%); code of criminal procedure (5.20%); imprisonment (4.20%); criminal execution law (2.90%); legal classification (2.60%); criminal aggravation (2.60%); urgent protective measure (2.60%); domestic and family violence (2.60%); crime against sexual freedom (2.60%); criminal establishment (2.40%); aggressor (2.40%); bodily injury (2.40%); heinous crimes law (2.10%). The terms with the highest incidence among men were: criminal code (13.80%); crime (10.30%); punishment (8.50%); code of criminal procedure (5.20%); penalty (5.10%); victim (4.90%); criminal classification (4.80%); criminal execution law (3.80%); criminal aggravation (3.70%); legal classification (3.60%); imprisonment (3.50%); heinous crime (3.30%); heinous crimes law (3.10%); disarmament statute (2.90%); firearm (2.90%); prisoner (2.20%); military firefighter (2.20%); military policeman (2.10%); convicted prisoner (2.10%); detention (2.00%).

The analysis of the isolated terms indicates that the actions of congresswomen were more related to violence typically practiced against women, while the terms most used in the indexing of men's proposals are related to criminal law and violence in a broader and more generic way. This can be seen when one considers that the terms "Maria da Penha law," "violence against women," "domestic and family violence," "emergency protective measures," and "crime against sexual freedom" appeared only in proposals presented by women. Men, on the other hand, presented propositions related to the terms 'firearm,' 'military fireman,' 'military police officer,' 'gun carrying,' and 'disarmament statute,' which are expressions that do not appear in the legislative production made by women. The reading of these terms according to the gender of the authors gives us evidence of substantial and relevant differences in their legislative work.

We also analyzed the isolated terms from the thematic area "Economy, public finances and budget", since there was also similarity between the female and male benches in the percentage of projects presented. However, no noteworthy trend was found that would indicate a differentiation in the direction of the propositions made by men and women.

Thematic adherence to the agenda of the Articulation of Brazilian Women's National Plenary

Getting to know the agenda of Brazilian feminist movements is not an easy task. In principle, it is necessary to recognize that there is no unified agenda among them that could bring an organized and coordinated debate to the heart of the National Congress. Being a woman is not a homogenizing experience; therefore, neither are the agendas coming from these movements. However, as a strategy to observe how much the actions of the congresswomen reflect the desires of the various feminist groups in Brazil, we analyzed the report of the AMB plenary meeting, which took place between October 27 and 29, 2017, in Planaltina, Federal District – the only one that year. We

chose to work with the AMB report, which allows for an expansion of the diversity of ideas, given that this institution has consistently acted over time and gathers diverse collectives and women's groups.

AMB is a non-partisan feminist organization founded in 1994, which, among other objectives, aims to promote the self-organization of the women's movement in Brazil. Accordingly, every year it holds plenary meetings that bring together diverse groups in defense of women's rights in order to create a common agenda and make it public.

The 2017 plenary brought together 50 collectives representing various groups of women, such as Indigenous, rural, lesbian, Black and non-black.

In the analysis of the report produced after the meeting, it is clear how the Brazilian political moment, unstable and under a strong conservative trend, worried the representatives of the feminist collectives, who pointed to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff as a coup d'état, with misogynistic components that caused major setbacks in the achievements of women's rights obtained until then.

In this scenario, some agendas were presented to unify the struggle of the movements, which can be represented by the following actions: (i) confront the distorted discourse in relation to the so-called "gender ideology"; (ii) create the conditions for more women to be elected; (iii) establish intersectional struggles and agendas.

Regarding the first item, it was clear in the document that the political moment required fighting to avoid the loss of rights. This would first of all call for confronting the discourse, engendered in the National Congress itself, of fighting "gender ideology", a fallacy used by conservative groups and benches to misrepresent women's struggle and their attainment of rights. The debate related to "gender ideology" had led, according to the report, to two actions: the abolition of the word "gender" in legislative initiatives; and a strong push for the *Escola Sem Partido* (Non-Partisan School) movement, whose goal is to remove the debate on gender issues and the rights of women and the LGBTQIA+ population from elementary and high schools in the country. Therefore, it was a subject that had to be faced as a priority.

Secondly, political training for women was another major strategy identified, since this would be a way for more women to be prepared to run for electoral elections. It is possible to notice a concern in creating conditions for more women to occupy political positions, because only then would women be able to change the state of affairs that harms them. The intention that women occupy such spaces of power and decision-making derives, in particular, from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Declaration and Platform for Action from the IV World Conference on Women, and is corroborated by the AMB document as a goal yet to be achieved. There is recognition that descriptive representation is fundamental to the expansion and strengthening of the feminist agenda in the National Congress, so that feminism is not seen as exclusive to political parties of a certain ideological vision and that the encouragement of the election of women becomes an agenda that cuts across all parties.

The analysis of this point shows that the priority was to increase the number of women elected, without an in-depth debate about which political ideology they should belong to. This action is anchored in the idea that women share a certain social perspective, as argued by Young (1990; 2000), this being the main reason for defending that political institutions should descriptively represent the social body to which they are linked. This perception was, at the time, also common in the speeches of parliamentarians, when they claimed that it was inappropriate for Brazil to have 52% of the electorate made up of women and only 9.9% of women elected to the House of Representatives. However, the possibility that many of these women (including a large part of the female electorate) were conservative and not aligned with the more progressive agendas championed by the feminist movement was scarcely mentioned.

The third guideline identified was related to the importance of broadening the debate on women's rights from an intersectional perspective. In this sense, public policies created around this issue must recognize the profound differences that mark "being a woman" in Brazil. Therefore, racial, regional, social class, sexual orientation, and age-group issues, among others, need to be taken into consideration at the risk of never reaching women who are in a greater situation of vulnerability.

By comparing the three agendas most prevalent in the AMB plenary with the legislative initiatives of the congresswomen, we see that there was alignment between the agendas of the feminist movements and the congresswomen only with regard to actions related to the defense of human rights and minority rights, since this thematic area is the one that brought together the bills most closely related to intersectional policies. However, the debate is still far from addressing the demands made during the AMB Plenary. On the other hand, with regard to the struggle to confront gender ideology, neither the indexing terms nor the full analysis of the propositions led us to infer that this has been a subject worked on by congresswomen as a legislative initiative, that is, through the submission of proposals.

Nevertheless, concerning the importance of the increase in the number of women elected, although the indexing terms and the legislative proposals do not seem to indicate adherence between the initiatives of the congresswomen and the will of the feminist movements, it is important

to make a historical-contextual note that allows us to determine that this was the agenda of highest adherence among them.

This is because the political participation of women was the theme that most mobilized congresswomen in the period analyzed, not through the presentation of legislative bills, but because of the opportunity created by the debate on Political Reform and Electoral Reform that was underway between 2015 and 2017. As such, it was not necessary to present new bills when there were already others pending that dealt with the subject. According to standard legislative process, it is possible for congresswomen to act throughout the processing of proposals, participating in committees, coordinating additional amendments to the text, deleting articles, or even completely changing the text of a proposal through what is known as an "Alternate Bill." Hence, it is more productive to change or amend an existing bill than to start a new one, especially when a quick approval is desired.

In those years, congresswomen were fighting for the approval of a policy to reserve seats for women in parliament, as stated in PEC 134/2015 (House of Representatives, 2015), so that the incentive to elect women would no longer be solely based on the policy of electoral list quotas, which was showing signs of ineffectiveness. Even though they did not find a favorable environment for voting on the PEC, the women's benches in the House of Representatives and the Federal Senate mobilized around the chance to guarantee financial resources and broadcasting time for women's campaigns as early as the 2018 elections. Accordingly, through the actions of these benches, and a group of lawyers led by the former Minister of the Superior Electoral Court, Luciana Lóssio, the female parliamentarians legally achieved, in the first half of 2018, through Consultation 0600252-18 to the TSE (SUPERIOR ELECTORAL COURT, 2018), the mandatory allocation of at least 30% of the resources from the recently created Special Fund for Campaign Financing (FEFC) and at least 30% of the space each party is entitled to in the Free Election Broadcasting Time for women candidates.

In the same way that agendas such as the decriminalization of abortion and same-sex marriage have been able to advance only through the judicialization of politics – not just in Brazil, but as a trend in the backlash¹⁰ to gender policies resulting from the new wave of conservatism that swept through Latin America in the second decade of the 2000s (BIROLI; Mariana CAMINOTTI, 2020), we see that less "controversial" agendas, such as increasing female participation in politics, also encounter obstacles to advancement in the legislature when it comes to measures of immediate effect, which requires the actions of congresswomen to go beyond legal initiatives and leave the confines of parliament to escape the front line of the infamous war on "gender ideology" and achieve effective results. Consequently, although the legislative propositions did not demonstrate the adherence between the women's movements and the women parliamentarians in the agenda of increasing women's representation in politics, the context suggests that there was an alignment of both in relation to the importance of mobilization for more women to gain access to spaces of power and decision-making.

Finally, it is also possible to infer from the AMP report that women's collectives and feminist movements feel the need to be closer to the National Congress and to be able to participate more actively in the debate on public policies regarding women's rights. There is a recognition that these spheres follow parallel paths and, many times, although they have the same agenda, they think about it in different ways.

Final considerations

By way of conclusion, it is worth revisiting a few points. The first is that, although female participation in formal political spaces is low in Brazil, it is notable that elected women are the ones who pass the most laws and are the ones who most embrace causes related to human rights, in comparison to men. The second point is the identification that there has been a strong performance of congresswomen in issues related to criminal law and the economy, considered to be outside the spectrum of care politics.

With this research, we set out to observe the substantivity of the representation of congresswomen based on the demands of some Brazilian women's collectives, although we made it clear how complex it is to define the "agenda" of these movements. Even so, if we ask whether congresswomen welcome and fight for feminist causes in the National Congress, the answer to this question is "yes, although timidly". The main points of the agenda seem to converge, such as the agenda of female representation in politics and the issue of violence against women, but it is interesting that this confluence is not marked by a systematic debate.

Besides this, the women's bench is not a homogeneous group, and each representative must display a minimum of coherence with the party ideology and the interests of their electoral bases, which are often driven by conservative ideals in conflict with the more progressive feminist demands. On the other hand, the feminist collectives do not seem to have the impetus to make their agendas heard

¹⁰ The backlash effect refers to a negative reaction, such as rejection, for example, of public policies aimed at redressing the historical and social issues of vulnerable groups.

by congresswomen who do not have in their history of struggle an alignment with these movements. Therefore, the feminist movements in Brazil suffer, like so many other social movements, from the daily problem of confronting their own survival. The lack of resources impacts their ability to create common national agendas and raise them with their representatives systematically and permanently.

The research poses some questions in relation to the limits and possibilities of studies that seek to assess substantive variables in relation to political representation in democratic institutions, whose dynamics involve not only the presentation of propositions and documents, but also the drafting of statements, negotiations for textual changes in legislative propositions, participation in commissions, the allocation of budget amendments, and the constant dialogue with relevant institutions from the other branches of government and civil society. For this reason, the analysis carried out in this research, which had documented legislative initiatives as its *corpus*, should be supplemented with analyses related to non-documented performances as well as other variables of legislative performance.

In addition, for future research it is important to investigate which factors lead to greater approval of the bills presented by women, whether this is due to their political networking, the parties they are part of, the content and social relevance of the proposition, the political moment, or the fact that the National Congress carries out votes concentrated on symbolic dates, such as International Women's Day, Lilac August, Pink October and the 21 Days of Activism Campaign for the End of Violence against Women, which are dates in which the women's bench prepares a list of priority bills for voting, even if they have not yet gone through the thematic committees, speeding up their approval. The confirmation of this last hypothesis would not eliminate the credit of the women's bench for making sure that the issues of their interest are expedited, since the establishment and maintenance of this tradition of mass approval of bills on commemorative dates are also the result of constant coordination of the women's bench with the boards of the legislative houses – since there are many interest groups that act in parliament in search of these scarce spaces for accelerated approval in plenary. However, this is information to be taken into account in research that seeks a deeper understanding of this article's findings.

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Gerson Scheidweiler: Research design, theoretical investigation, empirical data analysis, and manuscript drafting.

Ana Cláudia Sousa Oliveira: Collection and analysis of the propositions and revision of the manuscript.

Janara Kalline Leal Lopes de Sousa: Collection and analysis of the thematic areas contained in the AMB report and the drafting of the conclusions.

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BACKGROUND

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