

Pro-Choice is Pro-Life: Framing Abortion Social Movements in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Pro-Choice is Pro-Life: Framing Abortion Social Movements in Brazil
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Latin America grapples with stark inequality and stringent abortion policies, with only five out of thirty-three countries permitting elective abortions. Brazil faces challenges due to its conservative climate and stark economic inequalities, hindering the pro-choice movement since the 1970s. Despite historic activism and a brief window for legal reform in 2012 and 2018, progress remains elusive. Criminalizing abortion in Brazil has not deterred people from seeking to terminate their pregnancy, but rather jeopardizes their lives. Brazil's reproductive healthcare reveals systemic issues: a misogynistic approach, limited contraceptive choices, and commercialized childbirth. Maternal mortality, particularly affecting marginalized groups, persists, challenging the notion that anti-abortion legislation protects women and gender minorities. This research aims to explore the apparent stagnation of the pro-choice movement in Brazil. Focusing on political opportunity structure theory, the study seeks to understand the strengths and constraints within the movement. Why hasn't the pro-choice movement succeeded in legalizing elective abortions, and how can it improve? The research delves into civil society networks, feminist activists' strategies, and potential collaborations among activists and organizations. It will critically assess the impact of Brazil's healthcare system inequalities on reproductive rights, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the challenges faced by the pro-choice movement is crucial in the current context, as neighboring countries (Argentina and Colombia) recently legalized abortion following the pro-choice social movement dubbed "The Green Wave" (La Marea Verde). Furthermore, Brazil experienced a shift in political leadership and is facing mounting pressure from health practitioners, thus requiring a closer examination of pro-choice mobilizations. The study aims to contribute valuable insights that may inform strategies not only for Brazil but also for pro-choice movements globally, where the fight for reproductive rights remains a persistent and urgent issue.

A América Latina enfrenta uma desigualdade gritante e políticas de aborto rigorosas, com apenas cinco dos trinta e três países permitindo abortos eletivos. O Brasil enfrenta desafios devido ao seu clima conservador e desigualdades econômicas, dificultando o movimento pró-escolha desde a década de 1970. Apesar do ativismo histórico e de uma breve janela para reforma legal em 2012 e 2018, o progresso continua ilusório. A criminalização do aborto no Brasil não impediu as pessoas de tentarem interromper a gravidez, mas colocou suas vidas em risco. A saúde reprodutiva do Brasil revela problemas sistêmicos: uma abordagem misógina, escolhas limitadas de contraceptivos e parto comercializado. A mortalidade materna, afetando particularmente grupos marginalizados, persiste, desafiando a noção de que a legislação antiaborto protege

mulheres e minorias de gênero. Esta pesquisa visa explorar a aparente estagnação do movimento pró-escolha no Brasil. Com foco na teoria da estrutura de oportunidade política, o estudo busca entender os pontos fortes e as restrições dentro do movimento. Por que o movimento pró-escolha não conseguiu legalizar abortos eletivos e como ele pode melhorar? A pesquisa se aprofunda em redes da sociedade civil, estratégias de ativistas feministas e potenciais colaborações entre ativistas e organizações. Ela avaliará criticamente o impacto das desigualdades do sistema de saúde do Brasil nos direitos reprodutivos, exacerbadas pela pandemia da COVID-19. Entender os desafios enfrentados pelo movimento pró-escolha é crucial no contexto atual, já que países vizinhos (Argentina e Colômbia) recentemente legalizaram o aborto após o movimento social pró-escolha apelidado de “A Onda Verde” (La Marea Verde). Além disso, o Brasil passou por uma mudança na liderança política e está enfrentando crescente pressão de profissionais de saúde, exigindo, portanto, um exame mais detalhado das mobilizações pró-escolha. O estudo visa contribuir com insights valiosos que podem informar estratégias não apenas para o Brasil, mas também para movimentos pró-escolha globalmente, onde a luta pelos direitos reprodutivos continua sendo uma questão persistente e urgente.

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Dedication

I dedicate these pages to encouragement, inspiration, and perseverance, which manifested themselves in the following people: my grandfather, Dr. José Florêncio Rodrigues Junior, whom despite his religious beliefs as a Baptist pastor, always encouraged me to pursue a higher education and to research what is dear to me. My grandmother, Dra. Lair Guerra de Macedo Rodrigues, who was the director of the National STD/AIDS Program of the Brazilian Ministry of Health and inspired me by instilling in me the importance of body autonomy and advocacy for sexual health and reproductive rights. Finally, the pro-choice activists who are fighting for our reproductive rights, who gave me the perseverance to see this project through.

Dedico estas páginas ao encorajamento, inspiração e perseverança, que se manifestaram nas seguintes pessoas: meu avô, Dr. José Florêncio Rodrigues Junior, que apesar de suas crenças religiosas como pastor batista, sempre me incentivou a buscar uma educação superior e a pesquisar o que me é importante para mim. Minha avó, Dra. Lair Guerra de Macedo Rodrigues, que foi diretora do Programa Nacional de DST/AIDS do Ministério da Saúde do Brasil e me inspirou ao inculcar em mim a importância da autonomia do corpo e da defesa da saúde sexual e dos direitos reprodutivos. Finalmente, os ativistas pró-escolha que estão lutando por nossos direitos reprodutivos, que me deram a perseverança para levar este projeto até o fim.

Preface

Growing up in Brazil, any mention of abortion would attract dirty looks- it was something only irresponsible, amoral women would do. I have always questioned this belief and was likened to a murderer whenever I was overly vocal about it. Living in Canada for the past decade has warped my sense of societal acceptance of abortion- perhaps because it is legal here, rarely have I witnessed strong anti-choice sentiments. In fact, when Roe v Wade was overturned in the United States in 2022, I saw activists band together to either defend their rights, regain them, or help others access it. I assumed that the pro-choice sentiment was in the majority, that we were finally breaking through this invisible barrier. I assumed incorrectly. The research for this thesis, which made me revisit my country both literally and figuratively, has reminded me that there is still so much work to be done when it comes to fighting for body autonomy. There are misconceptions that must be corrected, misinformation that must be stopped from spreading, and most importantly, equality in sexual health and reproductive rights that must be implemented. The battle may be far from being over, but it is worth fighting for.

Crescendo no Brasil, qualquer menção ao aborto atraía olhares feios — era algo que apenas mulheres irresponsáveis e amorais fariam. Sempre questioneei essa presunção e fui comparada a uma assassina quando eu falava demais sobre isso. Morar no Canadá na última década distorceu meu senso de aceitação social do aborto — talvez porque seja legal aqui, raramente testemunhei fortes sentimentos anti-escolha. Quando Roe v Wade foi anulado nos Estados Unidos em 2022, vi ativistas se unindo para defender seus direitos, recuperá-los ou ajudar outras pessoas a acessá-los. Presumi que o sentimento pró-escolha era majoritário, que finalmente estávamos rompendo essa barreira invisível. Presumi incorretamente. A pesquisa para esta tese, que me fez visitar meu país tanto literal quanto figurativamente, me lembrou que ainda há muito trabalho a ser feito quando se trata de lutar pela autonomia do corpo. Há equívocos que devem ser corrigidos, desinformação que deve ser impedida de se espalhar e, mais importante, igualdade em saúde sexual e direitos reprodutivos que deve ser implementada. A batalha pode estar longe de terminar, mas vale a pena lutar por ela.

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Introduction

Latin America, one of the most unequal regions of the world, is home to some of the strictest abortion policies globally. While a few countries permit abortion under specific circumstances, others, such as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Suriname, offer no explicit exceptions (Boyle et al., 2015). Despite over 30 years of campaigns for women's sexual and reproductive rights (Berer 2017), only five countries—Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Guyana, and Uruguay—permit elective abortions (Boyle et al., 2015), with Argentina and Colombia joining only recently. In Brazil, despite some progressive advances in areas such as same-sex marriage and transgender rights, abortion remains highly restricted.

This research employs a comparative case study to examine the pro-choice movements in Argentina and Brazil, focusing on the strategies and outcomes of these movements within their respective socio-political contexts. Argentina's feminist social movements have deep roots in the activism of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, whose legacy continues to influence contemporary efforts for reproductive rights. The green scarf symbol, inspired by the white scarves of the Madres, connects past and present struggles, creating a powerful narrative of justice and bodily autonomy (Tella 2022). Argentina's pro-choice movement is distinguished by its inclusivity, bringing together a diverse coalition of feminist groups, poor people's movements, Indigenous communities, and other grassroots organizations. The movement's strategic use of public education, coalition-building, and a multi-track approach, which combines short-term actions like self-medicated abortions with long-term legislative advocacy, has proven effective in overcoming entrenched socio-political barriers (Fernandez Anderson and Ruibal 2020). In contrast, the pro-choice movement in Brazil has predominantly focused on short-term solutions, such as the distribution of abortion-inducing pills. While such short-term solutions are necessary, they may undermine the push for broader legislative change—why legalize abortion if people are taking matters into their own hands?

This research seeks to understand why the Brazilian movement has not scaled beyond these immediate goals and explores how adopting strategies from the Argentine case could enhance its effectiveness in securing reproductive rights. In doing so, I focus on the social movements advocating for reproductive rights in Brazil and seek to unravel the puzzle of why Brazil, despite its progressive stances on other social issues and the legalization of abortion in neighboring countries, has not adopted more liberal abortion legislation. Understanding the role of social movements is critical in addressing this puzzle, as it is the actions, strategies, and resilience of social movements that can drive significant change, as witnessed in Argentina. By examining the approaches taken by pro-choice activists in Brazil, this research will explore how these movements have navigated the complex socio-political landscape, what challenges they have encountered, and why these efforts have not yet resulted in the legalization of elective abortion. Additionally, the study will consider how these movements might adapt or reframe their strategies to achieve greater success in the future.

To understand the dynamics of these movements, this research is grounded in Political Opportunity Structure (POS) or Political Process Theory (PPT), which seeks to explain the emergence and success of social movements by focusing on political context, structural opportunities, coalitions, political repression, and resource mobilization (Tilly 1978). This research, however, also critiques the limitations of these theories- particularly their deterministic nature and lack of emphasis on culture and socioeconomic inequality (Goodwin and Jasper 1999), which are critical in the Latin American context given the high levels of socioeconomic inequality in the region (Karl 2000). High levels of inequality, for instance, can lead to social and economic exclusion, limiting marginalized groups' access to political institutions and sparking movements advocating for social justice and equal rights.

Research Question

Therefore, this research aims to identify the strengths and constraints in the Brazilian pro-choice movement by answering the following question: Why has the Brazilian pro-choice movement not succeeded in its fight to legalize elective abortions, and how can it improve?

This research will explore what is unique about Brazil's stance on abortion access by focusing on the strategies, challenges, and interactions of social movements within the broader political and legislative context. Given that the role of civil society networks and feminist activists is central to this study, the effectiveness of their methods will be assessed, along with potential avenues for improvement. Exploring how these groups operate both independently and collaboratively will deepen the understanding of why the pro-choice movement in Brazil has struggled to achieve its goals, despite a favorable political shift in 2022 with the election of President Lula of the Worker's Party, a progressive, left-wing party.

Context

Reproductive rights, or the lack thereof, disproportionately affect marginalized racial minorities, gender minorities, and the urban poor (Berer 2017) and are often viewed as a moral and religious issue rather than a medical issue: "Few public policies are as divisive and deep-rooted as abortion policy. No other put the State and religious bodies in such acute conflict [...] when that organized power is reinforced by strong social stigma, very few politicians and fewer professionals show the courage to lead a charge for fairness and justice." (Nunes 2012, 60).

A pregnant person seeking to terminate an unwanted pregnancy may resort to progressively more dangerous methods, such as "the use of herbal abortifacients to the insertion of catheters or metal sounds into the uterus" (Paxman et al 1993, 208). Brazil now finds itself at a tipping point: its neighbouring countries Argentina, Colombia, and Uruguay have legalized elective abortion, Brazilian policymakers face pressures from activists and health practitioners following the Zika epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic to legalize abortion, and the country recently underwent a change in political leadership-

swinging from the far right to the progressive left. Given the epidemic of deaths caused by clandestine abortions in Latin America, the momentum of *La Marea Verde* (the green wave)¹, and the continuous fight for better reproductive rights, it is crucial to observe the strategies of pro-choice mobilizations to understand if and how their methods are applicable to other countries.

Since the 1980s, Brazil's pro-choice movement has encountered substantial obstacles in its advocacy, primarily due to the country's deeply ingrained conservative political and religious environment. Nevertheless, activists and organizations within the movement have persistently devised and implemented various strategies to garner support for reproductive rights and the pursuit of safe, legal abortion access. In 2004, under the Worker's Party (PT) administration, the government called for the formation of a commission to review the penal code. This was later abandoned as it got caught up in the "complexities of a full-blown corruption crisis linked to the Pope's visit to Brazil" (Correa 2010, 111). The only recent change to the 1940 penal code was in 2012, when abortion was decriminalized in the case of anencephaly². Prior to this amendment to the penal code, "3000 lawsuits between 1989 and 2007 have resulted in the authorization of the interruption of pregnancies in the case of anomalies that are incompatible with life outside the womb. Most of these suits come from poor women, users of the public health system" (Diniz 2007). Before 2012, the debate to include anencephaly in the permitted cases of legal abortion extended beyond medical circles into legal and legislative arenas, with discussions on amending the penal code to redefine such medical interventions not as abortions but as "therapeutic anticipations of birth", (Diniz 2007) thereby sidestepping the legal and moral controversies about abortion.

The need for this change was further heightened during the 2016 Zika epidemic³: "The Zika suit reached the Supreme Court in 2016 but was not heard until 2020, when it was dismissed on procedural grounds" (Elias 2021, 84). In addition to the suit being dismissed, feminist activists and NGOs could not come to a consensus on the bill (ADI 5581), as it sparked controversy on disability and was referred to as a 'eugenic' practice (Elias 2021).

¹ "The "Marea Verde," or Green Wave, women's movement has helped deliver groundbreaking reforms and progress on reproductive health and rights in Latin America. It got its name in 2018, after more than a million activists, many wearing green scarves, occupied the streets of Argentina to support the legalization of abortion" (Casas, Ximena. 2021. The New York Times).

² Anencephaly is the absence of a major portion of the brain, skull, and scalp that occurs during embryonic development. It is a cephalic disorder that results from a neural tube defect that occurs when the rostral (head) end of the neural tube fails to close, usually between the 23rd and 26th day following conception (The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) 2022).

³ According to the World Health Organization, "Zika virus infection during pregnancy is a cause of congenital brain abnormalities, [such as] microcephaly. Microcephaly affects the fetus by impeding proper brain development during the pregnancy" (Monteiro 2018, 103).

Articles 124 & 126

Articles 124 and 126 of the Brazilian Penal Code, established in 1940, address crimes against people, particularly focusing on abortion and bodily harm. The law criminalizes abortion unless it's necessary to save the person's life or in cases of rape, with their or their legal guardian's consent. The penalties vary: a person who performs or consents to their own abortion can face one to three years in prison, while someone who performs an abortion without the person's consent could face three to ten years. If the clandestine abortion causes serious injury or death, the penalties are stricter, as it considers different levels of injury and assigns prison terms based on the severity of the harm. Certain factors, like the emotional state of the person who caused harm or the relationship between the parties involved could influence the penalties. (Brazilian Legislative Chamber 2023).

APDF442/2017

Following the Zika epidemic in 2016, in August of 2018, the Brazilian Supreme Court conducted a public hearing to discuss ADPF 442/2017, a legal challenge to the constitutionality of the 1940 Penal Code articles that criminalize abortion. ADPF 442, signed by lawyers from Anis - Institute of Bioethics and by PSOL (Socialism and Liberty Party), requests the “decriminalization of voluntary abortion within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, considering criminalization unconstitutional, meaning it goes against the Brazilian Constitution. Specifically, the action questions articles 124 and 126 of the Penal Code, which, in practice, criminalize abortion” (Nem Presa Nem Morta 2023).

This hearing emerged against a backdrop of ongoing debates over reproductive rights in Brazil, marked by strong opposition from conservative and religious groups and advocacy from feminist and human rights organizations. Advocates for decriminalization argued that the existing laws disproportionately harm marginalized populations, particularly poor, young, and black women, and fail to address the public health crises arising from unsafe abortions. They presented a range of arguments emphasizing the adverse health, legal, and social consequences of criminalization. Opponents, including diverse religious representatives, countered with moral and biological arguments, positing that life begins at conception and should be legally protected from that point (Corrêa 2018).

The public hearing on ADPF 442/2017 served not only as a forum for legal arguments, but also as a reflection of the ongoing societal debates and the polarization affecting Brazilian politics. Corrêa (2018) outlines that the political polarization in Brazil had been intensifying, particularly following the conservative wave that swept through the country after 2016. Corrêa notes the presence of evangelical pastors and other religious leaders who framed their opposition to abortion not only under religious terms, but also through scientific arguments- reflecting a strategic adaptation to the secular context of the court. For instance, an anti-abortion advocate made a striking comparison between human eggs and endangered sea turtle eggs, arguing for consistent legal protection across species: “...if there are legal norms that criminalize the destruction of the eggs of tropical birds and turtles, why cannot the eggs of men be similarly protected?” (Corrêa 2018, 20).

Moreover, the 2018 presidential elections added another layer of urgency and complexity to the debates- abortion became a campaign topic, with anti-abortion slogans being used to mobilize conservative voters. Corrêa also highlights how feminist and human rights activists are countering this by mobilizing data and legal arguments, striving to shift the narrative towards women's health and constitutional rights. The abortion debate in Brazil now extends beyond traditional political arenas, impacting broader societal attitudes and the public discourse around rights, health, and gender equality in the country. The public hearing of ADPF 442 had therefore evolved from a legal proceeding into a battle being fought across the nation over the direction of its social and legal policies: "It is also to be noted that, in the case of many Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, this enlarged role of the high courts is a principally the legacy of the wide democratic transformations that have taken place since the 1980's" (Corrêa 2018, 24).

In Brazil, the Supreme Court (STF) has been legitimized as the "guarantor and interpreter of constitutional premises via Article 102 of the 1988 Constitution" (Corrêa 2018, 3). This scenario summarizes the challenges faced by activists and legal experts as they navigate a highly charged political environment where the outcomes of legal debates could have far-reaching implications for women's rights and public health. Currently, under the Brazilian legislation, a woman or pregnant person can be sentenced to a prison term of up to three years (Article 124) for having an abortion, and anyone who assists in the abortion (e.g.: a healthcare professional, friend, or family member) can be sentenced to a term of up to four years (Nem Presa Nem Morta 2023).

On September 15th, 2023, Chief Justice Rosa Weber initiated the deliberation process and voted in favor of the motion to decriminalize abortion. The remaining justices will vote once the court resumes session in person, with the date yet to be scheduled. (Lauletta and Banfi 2023). Weber rejected Jorge Messia's⁴ argument that abortion is a topic that should be voted on by elective representatives. Rather, Weber advocated that since Brazil is a constitutional democracy, "the STF has the power both to determine the constitutionality of laws passed by Congress, and to ensure that the rights of minorities are respected" (Lauletta and Banfi 2023, 2). Justice Rosa Weber's vote argues for the decriminalization of abortion based on constitutional grounds, emphasizing the importance of respecting and enhancing women's rights and health within the broader context of social justice. Her vote rules abortion criminalization as unconstitutional in the first trimester and defends abortion in the first trimester as a constitutional right.

Justice Weber's pro-choice approach, while desiring the same outcome, differs from the approach of the *Marea Verde* (Green Tide) pro-choice movement in Latin America. Weber's argument for decriminalizing abortion in Brazil is centered in an individual rights-based approach, which emphasizes the rights of individuals, advocating for each person's ability to exercise their rights without interference- essentially, it prioritizes individual freedoms and protections under the law (Morgan 2015). The individual rights-based approach underlines personal autonomy against improper interference from the state and focuses on civil and political rights under a legal framework. The *Marea Verde*'s approach, conversely, is grounded on collective rights. As its name suggests, this approach prioritizes the rights of groups or collectives, often

⁴ Brazilian federal attorney general

emphasizing the well-being of the community over the individual (Morgan 2015). Rather than framing itself in the legal sphere like the individual rights-based approach does, collective rights focus on economic, social, and cultural rights and underscore the importance of protecting vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Healthcare, Abortion, & Activism

Criminalizing abortion does not prevent pregnancies from being terminated- in fact, it endangers people's lives (Prandini Assis and Erdman, 2022). In Brazil, approximately 800,000⁵ women undergo abortions every year, of which 200,000 turn to the Unified Health System (SUS) to treat the complications from poorly performed clandestine procedures ([Camara dos Deputados 2014](#)). Clandestine abortions are the fifth leading cause of maternal deaths in Brazil: "according to a study published in 2013, one in five women over the age of 40 has had at least one abortion in her lifetime. Today, there are 37 million women in this age group, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). Thus, it is estimated that 7.4 million Brazilian women have had at least one abortion" ([Camara dos Deputados 2014](#)).

Brazilian women and gender minorities have found strategic ways to resist restrictive abortion policies, such as seeking out medical advice online and obtaining international aid: "[Women on Waves](#), a Dutch-based organization provided women with online consultations and then mailed the drugs to induce a medical abortion. The increase in the rate of requests (of abortion-inducing drugs) in 2017 ranged from 38 percent to 108 percent in Brazil. Brazilian authorities are now intercepting all deliveries to Brazilian women, the group said." (Monteiro 2018, 101). Following this interception, feminists continued to protest both online and offline in 2015, dubbed the 'feminist spring' (Feltran 2020). Brazilian activists felt as though then-president, Dilma Rousseff, had not championed the rights of women and gender minorities by adopting more inclusive reproductive rights. Much like in Argentina, it was curious to witness a country governed by a female president (Férrandez-Kirchner in Argentina and Rousseff in Brazil), who had to cast aside her own personal beliefs on abortion so as not to lose political following and support (Correa 2010).

Brazil's stagnation on reproductive rights is puzzling, as its progressive laws on same-sex marriage, transgender rights and sexual education greatly juxtapose the overt presence of the Catholic Church (Barsted 1992). Feminist activism has a historic presence in Brazil, as feminist protesters engaged in resistance against the military dictatorship (Blofield 2008, Elias 2021) and protest Brazil's high rates of femicide and violence against gender minorities (Martins-Filho et al 2017). Moreover, Brazil's Zika epidemic sparked further debates on reproductive rights in the country as clandestine abortions skyrocketed due to pregnant people being infected by the virus, therefore emphasizing the importance of legalizing abortion (Monteiro 2018).

Apart from religious blocs that have integrated into political parties and a wave of far-right conservative politicians who impose exclusionary policies such as gender ideology, the literature on sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil also exposes the deeply

⁵ Numbers gathered by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), however, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that the number abortions could exceed one million women.

misogynistic and capitalist approach to feminine medical care. In addition to ignoring women's accounts, healthcare in Brazil fails to address the medical concerns of trans and nonbinary people. Diniz et al (2012) highlight equity, or lack thereof, in women's and gender minorities' health services in Brazil- and their findings unmask a system that has historically been detrimental to women's and gender minorities' reproductive health. Gender inequity in the Brazilian healthcare system is rampant: female sterilization has remained the most popular method among women with low income and less education- "women who are poorer, less educated, black, single, older and with a higher number of children also had a higher prevalence of unwanted births" (Diniz et al 2012, 96).

The maternal mortality rate in Brazil has not reduced in comparison to neighbouring countries, with most deaths occurring amongst Black, low-income, young, and single women (Diniz et al 2012, 98) who, uncoincidentally, are the ones who are targeted and deeply affected by anti-abortion legislation. Not only do women and gender minorities face inequality in accessing healthcare, particularly reproductive healthcare, childbirth has been largely commercialized, especially in private healthcare networks. Childbearers are often coerced to undergo a cesarian birth, despite their wishes to give birth naturally, as cesarian births can be scheduled during weekdays and working hours- or whenever the doctor is available (Diniz et al 2012).

Women and gender minorities also lack access to informed decisions when it comes to their options on contraceptive methods: "High medicalization and 'surgification' of reproductive events [were implemented] in the early 1980s. Surgical sterilization, in the 1980s and 1990s, was the main method of contraception, provided with little to no regulation, with peaks in electoral campaigns, and often justified by elective cesarians" (Diniz and Cabral 2021, 3177). Before 2021, married women required consent from their husbands to undergo a sterilization procedure (Projeto de Lei do Senado n° 107, 2018), and before 2002, it was illegal to advertise contraceptive methods such as the pill and the intrauterine device (IUD). This means that it was not until the twenty-first century that childbearers were presented with a variety of choices when it comes to contraceptive methods- especially those in low-income urban peripheries and rural areas who lacked the educational and financial resources to make an informed decision.

Therefore, women and other childbearing people not only possess limited control over their bodily autonomy, but also lack the freedom of choice to decide which contraceptive method works best for them (Gebara 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic only intensified the inequality in Brazil's healthcare system: "Violence against women has increased during this period and many victims are now confined to their homes with their abuser(s) [...] Brazil leads the world in the number of maternal deaths due to COVID-19" (Diniz et al 2021, 162).

Besides addressing the inequalities in Brazil's healthcare system, my contribution to the literature will mainly analyze the roles of civil society networks, feminist activists' methods, and whether activists and civil society organizations work collaboratively to champion reproductive health, as well as assess how the Brazilian pro-choice movement can improve.

Concepts & Definitions

This research proposal uses language that is inclusive in its terminology. While most pregnant people are women, pregnancy is not a uniquely feminine experience (and vice versa, there are women who cannot get pregnant). Aside from referencing laws and civil society organizations that are specifically geared towards women, I will refer to participants of the Brazilian pro-choice movement as feminists and gender minorities. Other definitions to consider in the vernacular of this research are the differences between reproductive health and sexual rights (Correa 2005) and pro-life versus anti-choice (Gebara 1995). Correa uses reproductive health and sexual rights interchangeably and recognizes that this may be radical as 'sexual rights' implies liberation and may be perceived by certain societies as devious. Sexual health and rights gathered momentum during the AIDS pandemic, in which gender and sexual minorities were ostracized. Thus, emerged social movements in the defence of sexuality liberation in the 1980s and 1990s, and other social movements such as #NiUnaMenos used similar tactics to highlight the importance of consent and safe sexual practices.

Given that reproduction and sex are typically linked, it is difficult to divorce the two when studying reproductive health and the social movements that promote them. Therefore, this research also utilizes reproductive health and sexual rights interchangeably as an umbrella term that incorporates abortion, contraceptive methods, access to perinatal health services, sexual abuse, domestic and gender-based violence, and childbirth. Furthermore, abortion laws are understood under two levels: conditional and elective. Conditional abortions are allowed under specific circumstances- in Brazil's case, abortion is only legal if the fetus is anencephalic, if the person was raped, or if the pregnancy possesses a threat to the person's life. Elective abortions, on the other hand, are permitted up to the twenty-fourth week of gestation, at the pregnant person's discretion and choice.

Choice, as Gebara outlines, is a synonym for freedom: "It is hard to speak about "choices," much less to assume that women have or can have "free choice." Most often poor women have no choice, and they certainly are not free-at least according to the liberal definition of freedom. They do not regularly exercise choice. They are forced to live in poverty, to eat whatever they can obtain, to work at whatever they can find. Most of them never use the word freedom. They speak readily of slavery [...]. Our [Brazilian] constitution defines abortion as a crime. There are absolutely no laws to support women's efforts to live with dignity, but there are laws to punish women when they try to survive" (Gebara 1995, 130).

The opposite of pro-choice is not pro-life, but rather anti-choice. **Pro-choice is pro-life**, as it advocates for bodily autonomy, dignity, freedom, health, and the life of the pregnant person. Therefore, when referring to social movements that are against the legalization of elective abortions, this research will label them as anti-choice movements.

Argument

The abortion debate in Brazil, much like in Argentina and Colombia, is fraught with controversy and adversity. In 2018, the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) introduced bill ADPF 442, aimed at legalizing abortion within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy (Monge 2018). However, the bill faced strong opposition from conservative and religious groups, and in the politically charged atmosphere of an election year, it failed to pass. This outcome underscores the significant influence of conservative politicians and religious blocs on the pro-choice movement in Brazil. However, focusing solely on these visible barriers overlooks a deeper, more insidious challenge that constrains the movement's progress: socioeconomic inequality.

The current pro-choice movement in Brazil, while active and vocal, predominantly appeals to white, university-educated, middle-class women. This demographic focus has led to a movement that lacks the inclusive framing necessary to engage gender minorities, Black and Indigenous women, and those living in poverty (McReynolds-Pérez 2023). By failing to address the intersectional realities of these marginalized groups, the movement undermines its potential for broader support and effective mobilization.

In contrast, Argentina's pro-choice movement offers a critical lesson in the importance of inclusivity. By actively engaging diverse groups, including working-class women, gender minorities, and Indigenous communities (Nations et al., 1997), Argentina's movement built a robust and widespread support base. This inclusivity not only strengthened the movement but also made it resilient against conservative opposition.

Drawing from the success of Argentina's pro-choice movement as a comparative case study and broader social movement literature, it becomes evident that key factors for securing widespread support and legislative success include strategic framing that addresses the intersectional needs of marginalized women and gender minorities, as well as the ability to unite diverse groups under a common cause. I hypothesize that the absence of these factors in Brazil's pro-choice movement significantly hampers its progress. This research will demonstrate this hypothesis by incorporating these elements—strategic framing for inclusivity and coalition-building across diverse groups—Brazil's movement could enhance its effectiveness in advocating for equal reproductive rights. Without this inclusivity, the movement risks perpetuating a cycle where, as the saying goes, “as ricas abortam e as pobres morrem” (the rich abort and the poor die).

Literature Review

The extensive body of literature concerning reproductive and maternal health in Brazil encompasses a wide range of topics, often drawing comparisons with neighboring countries like Uruguay, Argentina, and Colombia to shed light on abortion policies. One notable aspect that has received limited attention in this discourse is the intricate relationship between the threatened status of sexual and reproductive health in Brazil, as highlighted by Erdman et al. in their 2018 study, and the influence of feminist social movements, as discussed by Branco de Castro Ferreira in 2015. These two critical dimensions have rarely been intertwined in the existing literature. Consequently, my research delves into Argentina's extensive body of literature on feminist pro-choice movements, examining their strategies of contention, communication, and dissemination, as these aspects are frequently referenced in Brazilian literature. My aim is to apply the insights gleaned from Argentina to the Brazilian context, to elucidate why the pro-choice movement in Brazil has thus far been unsuccessful in its campaign to legalize elective abortions, and to propose potential avenues for improvement.

Perhaps the most glaring disparity between the Argentine and Brazilian pro-choice movements, despite sharing the same overarching goal, lies in their approaches to inclusion and equality. Argentina's pro-choice movement thrives at the grassroots level, welcoming women and gender minorities from diverse economic backgrounds, as it embodies a broad spectrum of voices, transcending economic boundaries, and provides a platform for individuals from all walks of life (McReynolds-Pérez 2023). In stark contrast, the Brazilian pro-choice movement appears to cater primarily to white, upper-middle-class women, inadvertently- or purposefully- excluding or failing to adequately represent Black and Indigenous women, gender minorities, as well as both rural and urban populations living in poverty (Nations et al 1997).

While the Argentine movement is designed to be accessible to all, promoting inclusivity as its fundamental principle, the Brazilian counterpart, though striving for the same outcome, has struggled to break free from its associations with an elite minority. For instance, [Anis Institute of Bioethics](#), one of the civil society organizations within the pro-choice movement that led the debate on decriminalizing abortion during the 2018 hearing of ADPF 442, has strong ties to the University of Brasilia (UnB). Other organizations, while praising the work that Anis has done, often criticized it for being overly formal and academic given its relationship to one of the country's most prestigious universities: "Anis is very formalized and represents, at least in the academic context, a very significant thing in the feminist movement. But what about the woman who lives in Roraima⁶, who is a mother of five? Perhaps she knows the Instagram page [Mae Arrependida](#) (regretful mother) in a more consistent way through social media because she never went to university. She's not a feminist activist because she's a Brazilian woman, from Brazilian civil society, but without any specific credentials", shared Juliana, one of the pro-choice activists I interviewed.

⁶ State in Northern Brazil

Consequently, my contribution to the literature on feminist pro-choice social movements in Brazil seeks to bridge this divide, offering insights into how these movements function within the country and how they can better contribute to the fight to legalize abortion. By addressing the critical issue of socioeconomic inequality and striving to make their cause accessible to all segments of society, the Brazilian pro-choice movement can hope to emulate the successes of its Argentine counterpart and create a more inclusive and effective platform for advocating reproductive rights.

Argentina

Argentina's feminist social movements have roots deeply embedded in the activism of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, a group of mothers who advocated for their disappeared children during the military dictatorship of the late 20th century. This historical context has greatly influenced the contemporary feminist movements, providing both inspiration and a powerful symbolic foundation. The green scarf, which symbolizes reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, is directly inspired by the white scarves worn by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, creating a visual and ideological link between past and present struggles for justice (Tella 2022).

The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo's method of public demonstration and advocacy during the dictatorship laid the groundwork for the feminist movements that followed. Participants engaged in *encuentros*, or meetings, where they campaigned for various human rights, including gender equality and reproductive rights. These *encuentros* brought together a diverse array of participants, including feminist poor people's movements, indigenous groups, labor unions, political parties, neighborhood assemblies, rural women's groups, homemakers' organizations, and student associations (Tella 2022). This inclusivity helped form a resilient collective identity and established a strong organizational base for future movements, such as Ni Una Menos.

Ni Una Menos, a feminist collective established in 2015, is a decentralized grassroots movement that focuses on *escraches* (public shaming of abusers) and memorialization to combat gender-based violence and advocate for women's rights (Popescu 2021). Ni Una Menos has effectively created a sense of belonging and unity among participants from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and personal backgrounds, elements that are crucial to the success of movements as they foster commitment, unity, and the enduring power to effect change (Tilly 1978). By recognizing and confronting the challenges posed by inequality, these movements have forged a resilient collective identity and a potent platform for advocating women's rights and social justice in Argentina, which demonstrates the transformative power of collective action in the face of systemic inequality.

A key form of resistance within Argentine pro-choice movements is self-medicated abortions (SMAs). Groups such as *Lesbianas y Feministas por la Descriminalización del Aborto* (Lesbians and Feminists for the Decriminalization of Abortion) operate Safe Abortion Information Hotlines (SAIHs), providing safe, confidential, and anonymous information on how to administer SMAs, typically using the drug misoprostol. This activism challenges the medico-legal paradigm and expands access to abortion, emphasizing that "pills have legs" and can travel discreetly, passed hand-to-hand (Prandini Assis and Erdman 2022).

Unlike the pro-choice social movements in Brazil, which focus predominantly on short-term goals, Argentina's pro-choice movements engage in multifaceted strategies that include immediate support through SMAs and long-term legislative advocacy. Researchers such as Fernandez Anderson and Ruibal (2020), Drovetta (2015), McReynolds-Pérez (2023), Tella (2022), and Prandini Assis and Erdman (2022) highlight the importance of confidential networking and solidarity among women and gender minorities- efforts that are essential for building a resilient movement capable of achieving significant social change.

Argentina's feminist movement initially found its roots in the late 1980s, led primarily by middle-class college students. However, a pivotal moment emerged during Argentina's economic crisis in 2001, when the movement strategically shifted to centralize the issues faced by poor women (Sutton and Borland 2013). This strategic shift allowed the movement to transcend class boundaries and engage with the everyday struggles of marginalized communities. The movement's steadfast advocacy for the legalization of abortion, a key demand dating back to the late 1980s, became a lifeline for those most vulnerable to economic hardship, notably poor women and gender minorities with limited access to reproductive health resources (McReynolds-Pérez 2023). By championing abortion rights, the movement not only aimed to decriminalize a medical procedure but also to ensure equal access to healthcare. This approach recognized that reproductive health, including pregnancy, perinatal care, and abortion, is a universal concern irrespective of economic backgrounds. The movement's inclusive stance coincided with a broader shift in grassroots political activism in Argentina, where various innovative forms of activism gained prominence (Bergolla 2023, Ruibal and Fernandez Anderson 2021). These included *piquetero* (roadblock) protest groups, neighborhood assemblies, worker cooperatives, and barter clubs.

The collaborative alliance between the feminist and grassroots movements created a powerful coalition capable of addressing issues of inequality comprehensively and effectively. The abortion rights movement in Argentina has employed various strategies to challenge existing legal barriers and advance reproductive rights, as examined by Ruibal and Fernandez Anderson (2021). In their research, the authors highlight the importance of public education and awareness campaigns to challenge the stigma surrounding abortion and promote a more informed and empathetic understanding of reproductive rights. Campaigns have involved media engagement, workshops, community outreach programs, and the dissemination of accurate information about abortion.

Furthermore, coalition-building has been a crucial strategy: by forming alliances with women's rights organizations, feminist groups, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders, the movement has amplified its voice and advocated for policy changes. Through these diverse strategies, activists tested the limits of the law, challenged legal hegemonic interpretations, and reinterpreted what is permissible within the scope of access to reproductive rights. This multi-track approach involves short-term goals to make abortion accessible through SMAs and SAIHs, medium-term strategies to ensure safe and attainable access to legal abortions, and long-term goals pushing for radical reform on abortion legislation (Fernandez Anderson and Ruibal 2020).

The link between abortion accessibility and inequality in Argentina is evident in the country's historical approach to reproductive rights- prior to the legalization of elective abortions, Argentina primarily offered conditional abortions, a system that disproportionately favored middle and upper-middle-class women (Bergolla 2023). These conditional abortions often necessitated state intervention, such as presenting a case to a criminal court for approval. This process was realistically accessible only to those who could afford attorneys and take time off work to attend trials: middle and upper-middle-class women had alternative options, such as paying a doctor for a clandestine abortion or traveling to Uruguay, where elective abortions have been legal since 2012. Ensuring that conditional abortions were attainable to anyone helped mitigate the myths and taboo surrounding the procedure- it also worked to de-stigmatize the practice of abortion and challenge notions of it being a crime that leaves people who terminated their pregnancies with regret and anguish (Erdman et al 2018).

In contrast, the literature on Brazilian pro-choice social movements currently emphasizes short-term goals. While providing information and pills to those who need them is necessary, it is a patch-work solution, as focusing solely on short-term solutions can hinder the movement; if people practice self-medicated abortions, the state may have little-to-no incentive to legalize the practice (Fernandez Anderson and Ruibal 2020). Additionally, SMAs can only be performed up to eleven weeks of gestation and are not 100% effective, with success rates between 85-95% (Planned Parenthood 2023). Keeping abortion in private spaces contributes to the stigma surrounding the procedure and prevents elective abortions from being accessible to the public, thus preventing pregnant individuals from seeking medical treatment for complications due to fear of persecution, guilt, and shame. Thus, this research aims to uncover why the Brazilian pro-choice social movement has not yet scaled past its short-term solutions and to seeks recommendations on how this could be achieved based on the Argentine movement's strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Political Opportunity Structure Theory

The feminist pro-choice movement in Latin America, known as the Green Wave, is defined by its pro-choice stance, feminist concerns on bodily autonomy, and the symbolic use of green. In Brazil specifically, the movement takes advantage of ADPF 442, the hearing that seeks to legalize abortions up to twelve weeks of gestation, having gained political attention and tension in 2018 and once more in 2023. This movement fits well within the frameworks of Political Opportunity Structure (POS) or Political Process Theory (PPT), as this theory seeks to explain the emergence of social movements by focusing on political context, structural opportunities, coalitions, political repression, and resource mobilization (Tilly 1978). Meyer and Minkoff (2004) aim to refine the conceptualization of political opportunity structures, critiquing existing frameworks for lacking precision and failing to capture the dynamic nature of political opportunities. They argue that both formal and informal institutions and interactions among political actors are crucial, alongside state openness, levels of repression, political allies, and institutional arrangements. Thus, political opportunities should be understood as multi-dimensional, encompassing identities within specific historical and cultural contexts.

Definitions of "political opportunities" vary, with contributors such as Snow et al (2014), McCarthy, McAdam et al (1996), Tarrow (1994), Tilly (1978), offering dimensions to the concept. McAdam et al (1996) outline four points: (1) the relative openness or closure of the political system; (2) the stability or instability of elite alignments; (3) the presence or absence of elite allies; and (4) the state's capacity and propensity for repression. However, other factors such as state legitimacy and the international environment also play significant roles (Goodwin and Jasper 1999), and Meyer (2004) highlights that activists' prospects for advancing claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent, with movements as coalitions synthesizing different visions of political opportunities.

Culture and socioeconomic inequality, while crucial contributors to political opportunities, are often overlooked by POS and its specialists. Economic inequality influences political system openness, social stability, and the potential for elite allies and state repression: high levels of inequality can lead to social and economic exclusion, limiting marginalized groups' access to political institutions and sparking movements advocating for social justice and equal rights. Economic inequality can also cause instability by widening the gap between the elite and lower classes, leading to resistance against existing elite alignments. Conversely, it may also bring about elite allies sympathetic to the cause. Inequality can create tensions between the state and marginalized groups, with the state potentially using repression against movements advocating for equality and social justice.

PPT offers an analysis of collective behavior, emphasizing the intentionality and rationality of protesters. Activists do not choose goals, strategies, and tactics in a vacuum; rather, the political context sets the grievances around which activists mobilize, advantaging some claims and disadvantaging others (Meyer 1999). Scholars like Tarrow (1994) assert that a movement is successful when it changes polity; while the definition of success is not unanimous, distinguishing between collective and effective action is crucial. Argentina's pro-choice movement, for instance, has acted effectively, providing a model for investigating how Brazil's pro-choice movement can transition from collective to effective action.

POS Structures Shaping Pro-Choice Movements in Brazil

In the article "Social movements and constitutional politics in Latin America: reconfiguring alliances, framings and legal opportunities in the judicialization of abortion rights in Brazil", Alba Ruibal (2015) effectively places the Brazilian pro-choice movement within the framework of political opportunity structure (POS). Ruibal demonstrates how Brazilian feminist organizations used strategic litigation and framing to influence the Supreme Court's decision on abortion rights, which illustrates how movements take advantage of available opportunities within the political and legal system to drive change. The Supreme Court's decision to hold public hearings and accept *amicus curiae*⁷ briefs from organizations like ANIS shows how judicial engagement with social movements can create openings for them to present their cases and arguments, thereby affecting legal outcomes.

Ruibal's analysis shows how feminist organizations strategically adjusted their approach by moderating their demands and reframing abortion in cases of anencephaly as a "therapeutic anticipation of birth." This rebrand was aimed at gaining broader acceptance by aligning with public values and constitutional principles. Siegel's public value condition⁸ underscores this point, showing that movements must frame their demands in ways that resonate with societal norms and values to increase their chances of judicial and public acceptance. Strategic framing is a key aspect of POS, wherein movements must navigate and adapt to the existing political and cultural landscape to achieve their objectives. The influence of political leaders and the broader political climate, such as the conservative policies of the Bolsonaro administration, also plays a significant role in shaping the opportunities and constraints faced by social movements. POS emphasizes the importance of the political context, and Ruibal's analysis shows how the feminist movement navigated these political dynamics to push for legal reforms. The strategic litigation and careful framing of legal arguments, as highlighted by Ruibal, are essential tactics for exploiting political opportunities and overcoming barriers within the political system.

⁷ Latin for "friend of the court." one (such as a professional person or organization) that is not a party to a particular litigation but that is permitted by the court to advise it in respect to some matter of law that directly affects the case in question (Merriam-Webster 2024)

⁸ Siegel, R. (2004, June). The juris generative role of social movements in United States Constitutional Law. Presented at SELA, Oaxaca, Mexico

Critique

PPT faces criticism for being overly deterministic and not considering the social construction of opportunities (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). The criticisms on political opportunity structure however, are not limited to the framework's deterministic position or emphasis on structure. PPT has widely been criticized for conceptual stretching, structural bias, and failing to acknowledge culture as an influencer of opportunity: "Unfortunately, structural biases have led "mobilizing structures" to be specified so broadly that the political process model becomes trivial, if not (once again) tautological, whereas "cultural framing" has been specified so narrowly that it fails to capture some of the most important ways that culture matters for social movements" (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 44). Furthermore, political opportunity structures do not have the analytical capacity to understand the variety of feminist movements within a globalized context, as feminist social movements particularly shifted their focus from protest to engagement with the state (Maignashca 2011).

The concept of inequality is particularly relevant when examining the pro-choice social movement in Latin America through the lens of PPT and the integration of cultural factors. Ruibal and Fernandez Anderson's (2021) study, "Legal obstacles and social changes: strategies of the abortion rights movement in Argentina," effectively utilized PPT, which considers not only opportunity and structure but also culture, as a robust framework for analyzing this movement. PPT, when applied in this context, offers a comprehensive understanding of how social movements operate within a complex socio-political landscape. Meyer and Staggenborg's (2012) theoretical framework, as incorporated in the study, emphasizes critical elements like demands, arenas, tactics, and the scale of decision-making within a social movement. However, the significance of inequality becomes apparent when we consider how these elements interact with identity and culture, as noted by Polleta (2004). The demands and tactics of a pro-choice movement differ significantly from those of an anti-choice movement, despite both operating within similar political opportunities. In this context, inequality manifests itself in various ways, from disparities in access to healthcare services to differing cultural norms and identities.

For instance, when examining the demands of a pro-choice movement, economic and social disparities can play a pivotal role. In societies marked by economic inequality, access to safe and legal abortion services may be limited for marginalized groups, while more privileged individuals may have easier access. Similarly, cultural factors, which are deeply intertwined with identity, can either facilitate or impede progress in the pro-choice movement. The influence of traditional cultural norms and religious beliefs can create barriers for advocates of reproductive rights, particularly in regions where these norms are deeply ingrained.

By incorporating culture into the analysis alongside opportunity and structure, PPT provides a robust framework to understand the dynamics of the pro-choice social movement in Latin America, as it enables researchers to recognize and address the complex ways in which inequality, both economic and cultural, shapes the strategies and challenges faced by the movement. This integrated approach allows for a more nuanced

understanding of how social movements navigate and respond to various forms of inequality within their respective contexts, ultimately contributing to more effective advocacy and social change. In this research, I will incorporate socioeconomic inequality as a variable in my analysis of the civil society organizations' operations and methods of mobilization. Seeing as several civil society organizations formed as a response to changes in legislation, I expect to find CSOs operating within the context of POS- taking advantage of political openings but lacking the element of socioeconomic inclusion.

Methodology

This study utilized an interview-based, qualitative research methodology focused on feminist and reproductive rights organizations. These organizations, [Rede Pela Humanização do Parto e do Nascimento](#) (ReHuNa: Network for the Humanization of Childbirth), [Nem Presa Nem Morta](#) (NPNM: Neither Imprisoned Nor Dead), [Católicas Pelo Direito de Decidir](#) (CDD: Catholics for the Right to Choose), [Frente Evangélica Pela Legalização do Aborto](#) (FEPLA: Evangelical Front for the Legalization of Abortion), [Milhas Pela Vida Das Mulheres](#) (Miles for Women's Lives), and [Coletivo Feminista de Sexualidade e Saúde](#) (Feminist Collective on Sexuality and Health) provided deep insights into both the internal and external dynamics shaping pro-choice advocacy in Brazil. Through a series of structured interviews, the study explores the organizations' founding, mission, and goals within the context of advocating for women's reproductive rights. Interview questions addressed the organization's structure, engagement strategies with activists, leaders, and members, and its main sources of funding and partnerships. Additionally, the research delves into specific pro-choice initiatives and campaigns the organizations have been involved in, examining the strategies employed to advance these agendas and the milestones achieved.

Furthermore, the methodology encompasses questions about collaborations with other civil society organizations, interactions with policymakers and grassroots engagement practices. Challenges faced, including opposition from anti-choice groups, and the impact of the legal and political landscape in Brazil on their work were also significant areas of inquiry. After transcribing and analyzing the interviews, I coded the responses from each CSO to find patterns, which generated into the themes explored in the research findings. Moreover, the study considers how issues of intersectionality and inclusivity are addressed within the movement and organization. It explores public messaging, future directions, ethical considerations, and personal stories and experiences that highlight the human element of the pro-choice movement. This interview method sparked meaningful discussions on reproductive rights, helping to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and effects of pro-choice advocacy in Brazil.

POS & Pro-Choice Civil Society Organizations

Out of the six civil society organizations interviewed, half were founded as early as 2017: FEPLA, Operation Miles for Women's Lives (Milhas), and Neither Imprisoned Nor Dead (NPNM) all emerged within the complex political landscape shaped by ADPF 442

in Brazil, illustrating various facets of engagement within the lens of Political Process Theory (PPT). Yet, alongside their unique responses to the legal and social challenges posed by ADPF 442, these organizations underscore the crucial role of culture within social movements, a dimension often overlooked within traditional PPT frameworks.

FEPLA's establishment reflects a reactive response to ADPF 442, which ignited debates on women's rights and bodily autonomy. Positioned within the evangelical community, FEPLA represents a distinctive voice advocating for feminist values within a traditionally conservative religious context. By engaging in political discourse and activism, FEPLA challenges the dominant narrative within evangelical circles and amplifies the voices of evangelical women supporting reproductive rights. FEPLA's work shows how these women, often overlooked by mainstream feminist movements, have found a way to voice their struggles and demand control over their bodies. Their emergence underscores the multi-dimensional nature of political opportunities, where social movements navigate ideological divides and mobilize diverse constituencies. Moreover, FEPLA's recognition of the cultural nuances within evangelicalism highlights the importance of understanding how cultural identities intersect with political activism.

Operation Miles for Women's Lives (Milhas) embodies grassroots activism in response to the restrictive legal framework surrounding reproductive rights in Brazil. Triggered by Minister Rosa Weber's refusal to approve an abortion during the ADPF 442 hearing, Milhas leveraged social media to gather momentum and mobilize resources for people seeking reproductive healthcare abroad. Their swift response highlights the role of digital activism in shaping political opportunities, as they tapped into public outrage to establish a decentralized network of support. Milhas' work demonstrates how social movements capitalize on moments of contention to foster solidarity and challenge systemic barriers to rights and justice.

NPNM's formation conveys a strategic coalition of feminist organizations to influence the discourse surrounding ADPF 442 and abortion decriminalization in Brazil. Recognizing the importance of communication and public engagement, NPNM adopted a multifaceted approach, blending human rights advocacy with digital mobilization. By organizing festivals for women's and gender minorities' lives and leveraging online platforms, NPNM aims to disseminate feminist perspectives and counter religiously driven narratives dominating the public discourse. Their initiative highlights the intersectionality of political opportunities, as they navigate cultural norms and ideological resistance to advance reproductive rights.

Católicas Pelo Direito de Decidir (CDD)
Catholics for the Right to Choose
Adriana⁹

Catholics for the Right to Choose, Adriana recounted, emerged in 1994 alongside Catholics for the Right to Choose Argentina amidst a highly religious context. “Democracy in Brazil was established with significant influences from the Catholic Church and the Vatican’s participation”, she explained. This religious influence over the state ballooned into challenges to equate women’s sexual and reproductive rights to human rights. It is within this context that Catholics for the Right to Choose was founded, with the goal of constructing new arguments for religious people, “so that faith can be experienced in a lighter and fairer way, not simply as oppression to individuals”, Adriana stated hopefully. CDD views the Catholic Church as a patriarchal institution and is a wholly capitalist, hierarchical, and colonizing institution. The Church, per CDD’s view, uses all these structures to oppress people, especially women. Thus, the CDD organization emerged to reflect on this context, to question not the Catholic faith, but rather its hierarchy. CDD also questions how canonical law has been interpreted and its norms and rules read and was founded with the objective that all women could have the freedom to practice their faith or not, and that they would have knowledge, autonomy, and awareness of the oppressions that these traditional religious structures have subjected them to. CDD believes that they can build a stronger structure and democracy, where “we live with more freedom, with more possibilities to plan our own lives”. Oftentimes, members of the CDD are criticized for “not being real Catholics”, as their religion notoriously prohibits and condemns abortions: “once I was also conducting an interview, and at the end, she turned to me and said, ‘Can I ask you a very serious question? Feel free not to answer. Are you actually Catholic?’” Adriana chuckled and continued: “and what I told her I am, but that I come from a popular Catholicism, which is this path. I like to talk about the hierarchy. Catholicism is hegemonic, not homogeneous. It has various strands. And I, for example, come from a popular Catholicism. It’s a pity that it is usually not respected. It’s not that it isn’t respected, but that it doesn’t depend on the hierarchy”, she explained. Adriana noted, for instance, that in her home state of Piauí, there are various popular saints, and the population doesn’t need the Vatican to canonize these people, they are already revered. In 2018, CDD was sued and pressured into dropping “Catholics” from the title of their organization- it was through their consistent narrative and strong theological arguments that they were able to push back and keep their name. Not only was CDD founded to fill in this gap between the different strands of Catholicism, it also originated from a feminist theological perspective.

⁹ Pseudonym used at the participant’s request.

Varying theological perspectives often birth different interpretations of the Bible. For example, it is often repeated that the Bible prohibits and is against abortion. “But the Bible does not talk about abortion”, Adriana remarked. It [the Bible] only mentions abortion in three instances, and none of them are to condemn abortion. “On the contrary” she said, “it shows that abortion was legalized and is part of the life of those communities. In Exodus, it is stated that if there is a fight between two men, and one assaults a pregnant woman and she loses the fetus, this man will pay a fine”. I looked at her rather puzzled, not understanding the anecdote. She proceeded: “we are talking about a time when the law of retaliation prevailed. It was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. So, if that fetus was considered a person, the man would have to pay with his life and not with a fine”. Another instance where abortion is mentioned in the Bible, she recounted, is related to adultery. If the husband suspects his wife cheated on him, the priest would perform a ritual with the woman in which she would drink the tea of an abortive herb. If the woman lost the fetus, it was because she was guilty of adultery. If she did not lose the child, it meant she was not guilty. Finally, the last instance in which abortion is mentioned is used as an expression by the apostle Paul when he felt rejected. Adriana adds, “so there are certain narratives at play, and the Bible never condemns abortion. The Church condemns abortion”.

Under a feminist, non-hierarchical theological perspective, abortion cannot be considered as a dogma, as something immutable within the context of Catholicism. It is precisely for this reason that the CDD understands that the decision to interrupt a pregnancy or not can be interpreted within the hegemonic theology or by the law of probabilism. “So, in the face of probabilism, you cannot say that one decision is right, and another is wrong. Everyone has the freedom to decide what is best for themselves”, she affirmed. Several other organizations share the same sentiment, as CDD is part of larger pro-choice network¹⁰ within Brazil and Latin America. CDD also collaborates with other civil society organizations of different faiths, such as the Evangelical Front for the Legalization of Abortion (FEPLA), who uncannily paraphrased the exact three different cases in which the Bible mentions abortion that Adriana had outlined. Members of the CDD also operate outside the lines of religion: “we have recently developed a project together with the Feminist Collective on Sexuality and Health where we train health professionals and beyond technical, health, and legal knowledge. We also work on the issue of theological argumentation. Right now, we are developing one on Christian ethics and professional ethics, right? So, we are always not only politically active but also through the effective development of our work around projects”.

¹⁰ The National Front for the Legalization of Abortion and the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Catholics, which is present in ten different countries.

Frente Evangélica Pela Legalização do Aborto (FEPLA)
Evangelical Front for the Legalization of Abortion
Mônica & Flora

Similarly to Catholics for the Right to Choose, the Evangelical Front for the Legalization of Abortion (FEPLA) interprets Christianity from a non-hegemonic perspective: “we really want to shine a light, give a voice to those people who weren't in the mainstream media, we have a proposal for other narratives. So, we always point out that there are women of faith who defend the secular state and see the legalization of abortion as an urgent agenda”, shared Mônica. “And we have this as our main focus,” Flora chimed in, “to be able to identify that abortion is an issue that needs to be humanized.” FEPLA also holds the belief that the “traditional” way to read and interpret the Bible is patriarchal and misogynistic, and that their voice in the matter is not only important for amplifying the discourse surrounding abortion, but to also welcome more women into the Evangelical faith. While Brazil is the largest Catholic country in the world, its evangelical population is ever-growing: “today Brazil has more Roman Catholics than any other country in the world – an estimated 123 million. But the share of Brazil’s overall population that identifies as Catholic has been dropping steadily in recent decades, while the percentage of Brazilians who belong to Protestant churches has been rising” (Pew Research Center 2013).

Therefore, FEPLA originated as a response to [ADPF 442 in 2018](#) so they could represent a different side to the evangelical faith, one that supports “women’s rights and their bodily autonomy”, Flora remarked. When questioned about the work that overlaps with that of CDD’s, Flora added: “there are two fronts of struggle of debate: one front is for legalization and the other is the feminist front. So, there is one side that is the political side. On the other hand, are groups of evangelical women. The Catholic group is the only other group that addresses the same two agendas. Our difference is that we are newer and represent evangelical women”.

Coletivo Feminista de Sexualidade e Saúde (CFSS) Feminist Collective of Sexuality and Health

Leticia

The Feminist Collective on Health and Sexuality emerged over forty years ago—before the creation of the Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde, SUS¹¹). The initial intention of the collective was to bring “a feminist perspective of health, a feminist vision and the assurance of women's rights”, Leticia described. This feminist perspective is centered on autonomy and gendered issues, such as gender-based violence. Upon the establishment of the SUS, CFSS participated in the health movement so that reproductive health services would be included in the Federal Constitution. “When we talk about women's health, it is impossible to not talk about reproductive rights, which must be considered in a broader sense. Within that discourse, we don't just think about the issue of abortion, but we inevitably end up discussing the possibility of terminating a pregnancy”, stated Leticia.

CFSS thus focuses on harm reduction—beyond acting within the social movement, they work for the decriminalization and legalization of abortion and how it could be implemented in policies. CFSS works with lawyers, anthropologists, doctors, social workers, and therapists to guide “women, girls, and people who can get pregnant. Now, we adapt the language a bit more, as we understand that abortion is not a purely women's issue”, she corrected herself. “So, we have always done this work of guiding and harm reduction, according to the best recommendations of the World Health Organization, with the goal of preventing people from putting themselves at risk”. Abortion, as Leticia explains, is an extremely safe procedure. It is fourteen times safer than childbirth¹², and yet it is the fourth cause of maternal mortality in Brazil. Today, CFSS is composed of a multidisciplinary team: they have doctors, midwives, gynecologists, and family doctors. From this multidisciplinary action, CFSS continues to do the reception of unwanted pregnancies from the perspective of harm reduction: “When a person with an unwanted pregnancy comes to us, what guidance can we give them? Do they know how to identify a cause for a legal, conditional abortion? Do we know who to refer to? When we identify a case of access to legal abortion, we can prevent that person from putting themselves at risk and that this is legally possible”, Leticia explained.

CFSS focuses heavily on communication, whether it is their means or their audience: “it can be both to sensitize the general population, as well as to sensitize the health professionals who are working on the front lines. I think social criminalization, at least when we look at the process in Argentina and at least as it is described by the movements we are in contact with, precedes the movement towards decriminalization and to some extent legalization in that country”, Leticia explained. In CFSS's view, we cannot think about advancing towards decriminalization if abortion remains a taboo topic,

¹¹ The SUS, or Sistema Único de Saúde, is Brazil's publicly funded health system. Established in 1988 following the Brazilian Constitution, SUS aims to provide comprehensive, universal, and free healthcare to all citizens and residents of Brazil ([Columbia Mailman School of Public Health 2024](#)).

¹² A [2012 study by Elizabeth Raymond and David Grimes](#) cited that “Researchers found that women were about 14 times more likely to die during or after giving birth to a live baby than to die from complications of an abortion”. However, this study's findings have been contested over the years.

and we cannot make access to legal abortion effective if we do not reduce the stigma and social criminalization people experience. Aside from communication, strategic litigation, and monitoring the advancements of ADPF 442, CFSS follows emblematic cases of denied access to legal, conditional abortions and empowers people with knowledge and resources to access them.

Nem Presa Nem Morta (NPNM) Neither Imprisoned Nor Dead

Laura

Neither Imprisoned Nor Dead (NPNM) emerged as a collective of different feminist organizations that nowadays share the executive coordination of the campaign *Nem Presa Nem Morta* in blogs and activism. NPNM organized a strategy to influence the debate about ADPF 442 in 2018- the proposal of this initiative was to bring a feminist, human rights, and health-based arguments for the decriminalization of abortion and to influence public opinion. “It emerged as a communication strategy and collective at the time with a very strong focus on reaching people who were not organized and who would learn about it [abortion decriminalization] from the internet. And since the debate is usually conducted in Brazil as a matter of opinion or through religious arguments, we wanted to use the arguments that feminist human rights organizations presented”, Laura shared. When the campaign was launched, NPNM wanted to publicize the ADPF 442 hearing and chose to hold festivals for women's lives as a mobilization strategy. They promoted this campaign through various pro-choice organizations' profiles on social networks: “the strategy behind the mobilization was to hold a festival in Brasília, parallel to the hearing at the Supreme Federal Court. There were festivals in more than twenty cities. We held many activities in Brasília, artistic, cultural sessions, and held spaces for children's activities. There was information about the decriminalization of abortion and safe spaces for members of the movement to hold meetings”, she recalled. NPNM, an NGO, branded itself as a communication strategy and gained prominence within the pro-choice movement, especially in digital communication. More recently, in 2022, NPNM obtained its first resource to structure the organization and establish a communication team. Since 2018, NPNM has continued to work in the field of strategic communication to change laws, not solely through ADPF 442, but also through campaigns to prevent legislative setbacks and to defend the right to legal abortions as outlined in the 1940 penal code. This pull to defend current abortion rights and push to amplify them is experienced by all the organizations I have spoken to. They are in a constant state of resistance, be it resisting the bureaucracy and red tape that prevents people from accessing legal, conditional abortions, resisting politicians who wish to remove these rights all together, and resisting the social criminalization of abortion. “Recently, we filed, alongside the Feminist Collective, a complaint to the United Nation for violations of the right to legal abortion in Brazil. So, there is this perspective of using communication to change abortion laws in Brazil, but also to transform the public debate with a focus on people who somehow”, Laura affirmed.

Milhas Pela Vida das Mulheres (Milhas)

Miles for Women's Lives

Juliana

Operation Miles for Women's Lives, dubbed *Milhas*, is a non-profit organization of a private, associative nature. It aims to be a space for reflection and action in favor of the conquest, guarantee, and acquisition of rights and knowledge about sexual health and reproductive rights of Brazilian women. Its history dates back to 2017 with the news of Minister Rosa Weber's refusal to approve of an abortion for Rebeca Mendes during the hearing of ADPF 442 ([Brazilian Communist Party 2018](#)). Shortly after this refusal, an article surfaced about women traveling to Colombia to access their rights. In Brazil, clandestine clinics were being shut down and persecuted, especially after Bolsonaro was elected president. Juliana, the founder of *Milhas*, alongside Rebeca, tweeted about accumulating airline miles to send women to Colombia to get abortions, and it sparked an instant debate with "more than 5,000 women within thirty minutes following the post", Juliana exclaimed. It took a few months to prepare a legal defense and structure to the operation, but ultimately *Milhas* was officially launched, receiving resources from individual donors and using these resources to enable access to rights for women who contacted them. Juliana coordinates the operation, primarily via WhatsApp, but claims that it is not a one-woman show: "I was never alone because I was never able to guarantee the existence, practice, and necessary resources for it. It has always been the result of a network of mutual help composed of many faces". The *Milhas* network now has more than 25,000 women whose donations range between just cents of a dollar to others who collaborate directly with the operation and offer percentages of their earnings from selling art and merchandise. People who subscribe to monthly donations, both in and outside of Brazil, give substantially to the cause towards the end of the tax year. *Milhas* heavily relies on "artivism", in which artists offer a work in a limited print run, or a limited time, with the proceeds going to the cause. "We also work with doctors and lawyers to provide reliable information", Juliana added, "so it's not a solitary quixotism".

Juliana shared anecdotes about Operation *Milhas* and how it opened her eyes to the inequality of access to reproductive healthcare: "the story about the Havaianas sandals, which for me is the demarcation of the size of the problem we faced, the unprecedented nature we faced. We bought a ticket for a woman from Rio Grande do Norte, whom I had only known through social media and WhatsApp, to go to Bogotá for an abortion. She travelled in Havaianas sandals (flip-flops) to a country where at the time of the year was seven degrees Celsius", she recounted, still in disbelief. Beyond the medical and objective issue, the discovery of what *Milhas* was doing in practice revealed the lack of education, access, and understanding of sexual and reproductive healthcare to women and pregnant people in more vulnerable parts of the country- it was unfathomable to a woman in Rio Grande do Norte that it would be cold in Colombia. Had she even known it would be cold, she would likely not have the appropriate attire to pack and keep herself warm. "I went to Colombia before the pandemic because I said I need to know what these women go through. I need to make this journey they make. But I'm part of these collectives that do what we started doing one day in Argentina or elsewhere, which is happening now. We did this during Bolsonaro's time, right under his nose, telling

him to go away. So, we explored a jungle that today has become a prairie”, she stated. Following the “Havaianas incident”, Juliana ensured that Milhas offered not only the flight and accommodation, but also travel essentials, such as closed-toed shoes. Milhas also help people understand the legal jargon that would grant them access to permitted abortions. Many pregnant people would seek Milhas for help in cases where abortion was legal (such as rape or threat to the pregnant person’s life), but not accessible due to anti-choice group’s oppositions and bureaucratic red tape: “we were creating this medical school to help these women, to understand the situations we were facing, the risks, possibilities, and necessary practices we needed to avoid bigger problems. Anyway, everything was done very unprecedentedly, and maybe our last unprecedented thing is discovering that progressivism is not everything regarding women's rights. Today, we are realizing how much easier it was to face Bolsonaro than it is now to face Lula. This is still an unprecedented issue”, Juliana confessed. This “unprecedented issue” is an example of how political opportunity structure (in this case, a change in the presidential administration) can shape civil society organizations: Milhas had to learn to adapt its reaction and communication to be better received by the public under Lula’s government.

Rede Pela Humanização do Parto e do Nascimento (ReHuNa) Network for the Humanization of Childbirth

Paloma

Founded thirty years ago, ReHuNa is a network of healthcare professionals that advocates for better practices in healthcare, particularly Maternal and Child Health, as well as reproductive rights. According to these healthcare professionals, who range from doctors, nurses, doulas, and midwives, Brazil has a historical problem that started in the 1980s and 1990s related to the lack of evidence-based practices. In most of the maternal and child healthcare, such as childbirth and birth assistance, there is an excess of unnecessary interventions, “especially those that have more impact on the health of women and newborns, like the excess of cesarian sections without a medical need”, Paloma explained. Doctors, nurses, and other health professionals were present during ReHuNa’s first meeting, “which is a bit unusual in the history of women’s movements related to sexual and reproductive health, right? Because often these movements in this area come from women, from the patients”, Paloma said. ReHuNa’s initial movement, on the other hand, was a mobilization of health professionals who already had a feminist perspective and a desire to humanize childbirth, their actions and intents were centered on women. Over the years, ReHuNa transformed into an NGO, and organized the first International Conference on Childbirth and Birth in Fortaleza with the help of some international organizations. Shortly after, the Fortaleza Charter was born alongside the Latin American Network for the Humanization of Childbirth and Birth.

Civil Society Organizations & Political Opportunity Structure

The civil society organizations interviewed demonstrate a strategic engagement with the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) in Brazil, each leveraging their unique position within the socio-political landscape to advocate for reproductive rights and gender equality. Católicas Pelo Direito de Decidir (CDD) emerged in response to the powerful influence of the Catholic Church, strategically rethinking religious hierarchies and canonical law to challenge patriarchal structures and emphasize women’s autonomy. Similarly, Frente Evangélica Pela Legalização do Aborto (FEPLA) leverages the growing evangelical demographic to humanize the abortion debate within faith communities, strategically using religious identity to foster political and social change. The Coletivo Feminista de Sexualidade e Saúde (CFSS) intersects public health and feminist activism by addressing legal and medical complexities of abortion, reducing stigma, and advocating for harm reduction within Brazil’s health system. Nem Presa Nem Morta (NPNM) utilizes strategic communication and public mobilization to influence the legal debate on abortion, emphasizing the importance of narrative and framing within social movements. Milhas Pela Vida das Mulheres (Milhas) demonstrates the use of transnational networks and grassroots resource mobilization to find loopholes in legal restrictions, highlighting the stark inequalities in access to reproductive healthcare across Brazil. Finally, Rede Pela Humanização do Parto e do Nascimento (ReHuNa) focuses on

professional advocacy within the medical community, challenging established norms and promoting evidence-based practices in maternal and child health. Together, these organizations illustrate how diverse civil society actors navigate and exploit the political and cultural landscape to advance reproductive rights in Brazil.

These core themes illustrate how the Brazilian pro-choice movement, as part of the broader Green Wave in Latin America, navigates political opportunities to advance reproductive rights. By strategically framing their demands, building coalitions across religious and professional lines, and leveraging transnational networks, these organizations challenge both the formal political structures and the cultural norms that underpin Brazil's restrictive abortion laws. POS shows how these movements respond to the opportunities and constraints presented by Brazil's political and legal systems.

Research Findings

Bolsonaro vs Lula administration

Aside from ADPF 54, which decriminalized abortions involving anencephalic fetuses ([STF 2016](#)), and the Femicide Law, which indicates the exact punishments for different acts of femicide ([Harvard International Review](#)), few advancements were made within the scope of sexual health and reproductive rights (SHRH), despite thirteen years of a leftist, progressive government under the PT¹³. Pro-choice activists and community members admitted, rather deflatingly, that the six years of right-wing conservative governments¹⁴ caused extreme burnout, as the movement was forced to resist against regression of the existing reproductive health laws instead of being able to fight to amplify them.

Some activists, those with the glass half-full, see this as a conquest rather than an impasse: “I think another achievement was at least reducing the extent of the setback that we ended up having under the Bolsonaro government. I think we did indeed experience setbacks. It's impossible not to recognize that. But I believe it could have been worse if it weren't for the resistance of organizations, women, and all the people who are acting in the feminist movement from this perspective”, shared Leticia of the CFSS.

In parallel, other activists shared that gaining traction under the current Lula government has proven to be more difficult, as criticisms of the president's inactions towards reproductive rights are often met with hostility: “He's (Lula) been refusing to acknowledge that my voice matters, which is the voice of most of the Brazilian population, most of the Brazilian electorate. I've been threatened by Bolsonaro supporters in the past and have been called a baby killer by them. But nowadays, when I criticize Lula, I am called a Bolsonaro supporter by Lula supporters. And I think that is worse”, shared Juliana of Milhas.

Progressive, left-leaning presidents cannot alone deter conservative bills from being introduced: under Lula's government, PL-1904/2024 was authored and motioned by Congressman Sóstenes Cavalcante of the PL Party, the same political party as former President Jair Bolsonaro. The introduction of PL-1904/2024 underscores the significant impact of socioeconomic inequality on the abortion debate in Brazil, as it seeks to reduce the maximum gestational age for legal abortions from twenty-four weeks to twenty weeks ([Revista Forum 2024](#)). This bill exacerbates the disparities faced by marginalized women and gender minorities from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as they are less likely to have timely access to SRHR medical services (Gonçalves Barbosa et al 2022), making it harder for them to meet stricter gestational limits. This creates a disproportionate burden on poorer women, further entrenching socioeconomic inequality within the reproductive rights landscape. Women and gender minorities living in poverty, especially those who are homeless and engage in sex work, face extreme vulnerability and higher rates of violence, including physical and sexual assaults (Gonçalves Barbosa et al 2022). With

¹³ Partido dos Trabalhadores, Workers Party (eight years under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, 2002-2010 and six years under Dilma Rousseff, 2010-2016).

¹⁴ 2016-2018 under Michel Temer of the MDB Party (Brazilian Democratic Movement) and 2018-2022 under Jair Bolsonaro of the PSL Party (Social Liberal Party) and later, the PL Party (Liberal Party)

limited access to health services such as cervical cancer screening, STI testing, and contraception, vulnerable pregnant people's- particularly children's- last resort may be taken away from should PL 1904/24 be approved ([Associate Press 2024](#)).

All the participants of the civil society organizations I interviewed, particularly Adriana of the CDD, emphasized that PL 1904/24 would disproportionately target children: "there is no gestational limit in the original 1940 penal code. This is to protect children. No woman suddenly changes her mind and gets an abortion when she is nearly six months pregnant. It's not an easy thing to go through", Adriana explains, "it's not like taking misoprostol, it's quite invasive. A ten-year-old girl who has not been educated about her menstrual cycle will only know she is pregnant when her stomach is big, and if the PL [1904/24] passes, it is that ten-year-old girl who will suffer."

Cavalcante was able to motion this bill based on a misinterpretation of a technical note that was introduced to the Ministry of Health under Bolsonaro's administration. The technical note suspended the determination of the maximum deadline for legal abortions in the event of rape and stated that what would now apply was the 1940 Penal Code, which does not establish a time limit for performing abortions under the conditions provided for in the legislation ([Correio Braziliense 2024](#)). Despite no gestational age limits outlined in 1940 criminal code, Cavalcante interpreted this as an imbalance of power: "it has been publicized that, since the Penal Code does not establish maximum gestational age limits for the interruption of pregnancy, abortion could be performed at any gestational age, even when the unborn child is already viable is a clear message to the Supreme Court, which has been usurping the powers of the legislative branch." ([Gazeta do Povo 2024](#)).

Evangelical and conservative caucuses of the Chamber of Congresspeople attempted to approve an urgent request on June 5th, 2024, to vote on bill PL 1904/24, which prohibits abortion in cases of fetal viability. PL 1904/2024 intensified mobilization in anti-choice groups and conservation parties: "a doctor who performs an abortion after the fifth month of pregnancy will be punished with the same penalties as the crime of homicide. It is a crucial moment for us to advance in the protection of life!" wrote Congressman Nikolas Ferreira (PL-MG), one of the co-authors of the bill ([Gazeta do Povo 2024](#)). On June 12th 2024, the bill was approved with urgency by the Legislative Chamber ([CNN Brasil 2024](#)), this time accompanied by a solemn session that took place in the Chamber's plenary to honour the *Movimento Pró-Vida do Brasil*¹⁵, a group with a religious bias that works against abortion ([Correio Braziliense 2024](#)). Bill 1904 was pre-approved through an emergency vote in the Chamber of Deputies, which allows it to be formally presented to the Chamber without the typical review by a Commission. If the Chamber of Deputies approves the bill, it must also be approved by the Senate and sanctioned by the President. However, President Lula has the option to veto the bill. ([CNN Brasil 2024](#)).

"This bill stipulates harsher penalties for the crime of abortion performed after 22 weeks of gestation, when fetal viability is presumed, equating its penalties to those of the crime of homicide. We need everyone's mobilization to ensure that the crime of

¹⁵ "Brazilian Pro-Life Movement", an evangelical anti-choice group in Brazil.

abortion is punished more severely in Brazil!"
-Chris Tonietto (PL-RJ), on PL 1904/2024

Many health professionals are now afraid to perform more advanced procedures due to this confusion and legal insecurity ([Folha de São Paulo 2024](#)). Legal grey zones and social criminalization prevent legal abortions from being established and normalize violence: “it’s very alarming how the conservative wing can influence a government elected to defend democracy. Not complying with one of the precepts that this democracy should be strengthened. It is very frightening to us how our issues are always inflated at these moments because it wasn’t about advancing anything, it was just about enforcing the 1940 law”, Adriana informed me.

Social Criminalization & Limited Access to Legal Abortions

Another barrier to the advancement of Brazil’s pro-choice movement is the culture’s social criminalization. Social criminalization, as described by the participants of the civil society organizations I interviewed, is the cultural process of criminalizing an action, regardless of its legal status. In the case of abortion in Brazil, social criminalization can range from victim-blaming a survivor of sexual assault who seeks to terminate their pregnancy to more escalated, organized anti-choice protests. An example of such protest occurred in 2020, when a ten-year-old girl had to travel nearly 1,500 kilometers to Recife for a legal abortion due to a contentious legal dispute that led to a hospital in her home state denying treatment. Upon arriving at the hospital, far-right anti-abortion activists and politicians were blocking the entrance, hurling abuse at the hospital staff and the child while attempting to prevent their entry ([The Guardian 2020](#)).

The issue of social criminalization was echoed by all organizations interviewed, with all participants having stated that one of the hardest parts of their resistance lies in “taking abortion out of the closet”, or making it less of a taboo: “Because in Brazil, what has been happening? We don’t have legal abortion. We cannot access what has been permitted for 84 years since the 1940 Penal Code. It doesn’t exist in Brazil”, said Adriana of CDD. The process of social decriminalization also involves ensuring that the permissions and legislation in Brazil are respected. However, social criminalization creates barriers, even to accessing this right. Due to cases that are barred not only by the judicial system but also by social criminalization, many children continue with their pregnancies, giving up on aborting due to appeals or the judiciary’s delay, Leticia informed me. This issue is further compounded by socioeconomic inequality, which exacerbates the challenges faced by marginalized groups in accessing legal abortions: “Almost 40% of the women who had a legally authorized abortion in Brazil between January 2021 and February 2022 underwent the procedure outside the municipality where they lived” (G1 Globo 2022). According to a survey conducted by G1 with data from the Unified Health System (SUS), “the distance represents one of the various difficulties Brazilian women face in obtaining an abortion in the country. In 2022, the Ministry of Health published a booklet stating that “there is no ‘legal’ abortion” and advocated that permitted cases in Brazil be subjected to a “police investigation” (G1 Globo 2022).

Socioeconomic inequality plays a significant role in limiting access to legal abortions, as it affects the ability of poorer people to travel long distances to obtain these services. People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often cannot afford the travel costs or take time off work, making legal abortions inaccessible despite being technically available (G1 Globo 2022). This inequality is closely linked with social criminalization, as marginalized people- children in particular- are more likely to face social stigma and legal obstacles, further deterring them from seeking abortions ([G1 Globo 2024](#)). Data support the Brazilian Ministry of Health's analysis, revealing that most women who undergo unsafe abortions and are subsequently hospitalized are young and economically disadvantaged: "black women are three times more likely to die from unsafe abortions than other women [...] maternal deaths predominantly occur among women from lower social classes with limited education and low wages, particularly affecting black women" (Cisne et al 2018).

"They [Brazilian society] are horrified by abortion but not by violence in homes. It is very concerning to us [CDD] when the Ministry of Women, for example, launches the Brazil Without Misogyny initiative. They don't understand that denying legal abortion to children, girls, and abused women perpetuates misogyny. We can't think about gender equality in ten years in Brazil if we still believe this is normal, when we allow and step back from enforcing the law."

- Adriana, CDD

In the quote above, Adriana highlights the hypocrisy of a society that is "horrified by abortion" while remaining indifferent to domestic violence, suggesting that this selective moral outrage perpetuates misogyny. By critiquing government initiatives like the "Brazil Without Misogyny" campaign for failing to address the needs of vulnerable groups, Adriana reinforces the argument that the reproductive rights in Brazil are hampered by a lack of intersectionality and inclusivity. By denying legal abortion to vulnerable groups, the system perpetuates misogyny by forcing women and gender minorities into a rock and a hard place: their options are limited to imprisonment for obtaining an abortion, death or serious injury from receiving a clandestine abortion, or forced motherhood and oftentimes, confined to an abusive relationship (Nem Presa Nem Morta 2023).

Mobilization & Engagement

Social media is heavily ingrained in the everyday activism of the civil society organizations I spoke with. It is via social media, primarily Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), where activists and militants engage in debate, share information, update their followers on ongoing bills, and create infographics. Civil society organizations, NGOs, public figures, and private citizens can all engage with the posts, offering comments, options to share on different platforms, participate in polls and send to friends and family. Activists take advantage of Instagram's "Collaborative Post" feature, which allows several profiles to share the same post: "A Collab post between two accounts means: All account

names will appear on the header of the post. The post will be shared with the followers of all collaborators. The post will live on all profile grids. The views, likes, and comments will be shared by all accounts” (Buffer 2024). This feature boosts visibility and interaction as it essentially multiplies the audience reached.



In the images above, [Pela Vida Das Mulheres](#)¹⁶ shares an infographic with three other organizations informing the readers which congresspersons are responsible for the “Child Pregnancy Bill” (PL 1904/2024). Neither Imprisoned nor Dead (right) shares one of the slogans of the pro-choice movement in Brazil, *Criança Não É Mãe* (A Child is not a Mother) with five other organizations. The post reads: “Tomorrow, the Chamber could approve the bill that would change the law of abortion in Brazil, **making the procedure a crime of homicide in determined cases. Pressure NOW to avoid this bill from being passed!**” (@nempresanemorta. “Criança não é mãe.” *Instagram*, June 11, 2024)

The role of social media in contemporary social movements is undoubtedly pivotal and has its many benefits. Among them, as highlighted by Müller and Hübner (2014), social media allows dissidents and protestors to bond despite their differing backgrounds, widens a movement’s reach by deactivating social boundaries, accelerates the time it takes to reach new people to join the movement, and provides anonymity. Other authors such as Lim (2012), Shirky (2011), and Tarrow (2011) all speak to how social media has facilitated the trans nationalization of contention. It is undoubtedly an advantageous tool, particularly within the context of POS, as it is the fastest way to deliver information and gather momentum during political change. In Brazil’s pro-choice movement, for example, civil society organizations are using the opening of ADPF 442/2017 to broaden the access

¹⁶ *Pela Vida das Mulheres* is a separate pro-choice organization from *Milhas Pela Vida das Mulheres*.

to elective abortions by consistently making the hearing relevant and ensuring that it is not forgotten. Conversely, they are also using social media to combat ongoing bills that are attempting to roll back abortion laws, such as PL 1904/2024. In the images below, Pela Vida das Mulheres makes a call to action to its followers, requesting them to participate in a cyber-protest and flood “X” with tweets directed to congresspeople.

The post reads: “The Child Pregnancy Bill (Projeto de Lei 1.904/24) will be voted on TODAY. The nefarious bill seeks to remove dignity and annul women’s, pregnant people, and children’s rights, making abortions over 22 weeks illegal. This way, it attempts to alter the Brazilian Penal Code and impedes access to safe and legal abortions in Brazil. We cannot stay quiet while parliamentarians try to approve a law that equates abortions to homicide and restricts the right to abortions in the case of rape. This bill is a direct attack on women’s, pregnant people, and children’s rights, particularly those who have been victims of violence. Abortion is not homicide; it is a RIGHT. The National Front Against the Criminalization of Women and for the Legalization of Abortion calls on all people, movements, organizations, collectives and others to a “TWITTER-OFF”. Join us in this twitter-off and demonstrate your indignation!” (@pelavidadasmulheres. “Chamado para Ação.” *Instagram*, June 11, 2024). The same post provides a time and space (in this case, a virtual space) for contention, and even provides examples of tweets and hashtags to be used so that the framing and messaging is consistent.



  L
pelavidadasmulheres Chamado para Ação: Vamos Ocupar as Redes em Defesa das Mulheres e Crianças!

!! O PL da Gravidez infantil (Projeto de Lei 1.904/24) está para ser votado HOJE.

X O projeto nefasto pretende tirar a dignidade e anular direitos de mulheres, pessoas que gestam e meninas, tornando ilegal abortos com mais de 22 semanas. Dessa forma, tenta alterar o Código Penal brasileiro e impedir o acesso ao aborto legal e seguro no Brasil.

Não podemos ficar calados enquanto parlamentares tentam aprovar um projeto de lei que equipara o aborto a homicídio e restringe o direito ao aborto em casos de estupro. Esse projeto é um ataque direto aos direitos das mulheres, meninas e pessoas que gestam, especialmente aquelas que já foram vítimas de violência.

▶ Aborto não é homicídio, é DIREITO!

👏 A Frente Nacional Contra a Criminalização das Mulheres e pela Legalização do Aborto chama todas as pessoas, movimentos, organizações, coletividades e afins para um TWITTAÇO.

👏 Junte-se a nós neste twittaço e mostre sua indignação!

📅 Data: 11/06/2024

🕒 Hora: 12h

📍 Onde: X (antigo Twitter)

Como participar:

- 1- Prepare suas mensagens de apoio usando a hashtag #CriançaNãoÉMãe.
- 2- Marque os parlamentares que apoiam esse projeto e exija que reconsiderem suas posições.
- 3- Compartilhe histórias, dados e argumentos que mostrem o impacto negativo dessa proposta de lei.

Aqui estão alguns exemplos de tweets que você pode usar:

@ParlamentarNome, não ignore o sofrimento das vítimas de estupro! Equiparar aborto a homicídio só traz mais dor. Proteja nossas crianças e mulheres! #CriançaNãoÉMãe

Civil society organizations' dependency on social media also comes with its drawbacks: in addition to navigating shadowbans¹⁷, censorship, and algorithms that favor marketing and products, it can also enhance slacktivism and bandwagoning within protests and social movements, as outlined by Lim: "Some youth joined the group for its political message, but most, clicked "join" because it was trendy" (Lim 2012, 240). "Clicking is easy"- meaning that many participants in a virtual social movement might be in fact passive participants or bandwagoning. In other words, "Does a simple "copy/paste/send" act constitute activism at its finest?" (McCafferty 2011, 18). McCafferty raises the issue of 'weak ties' relationships that are created by social media: "traditionally, highly effective movements evolved from within parties built upon "strong tie" personal connections, such as those among classmates and church members" (19). Social media creates a sense of anticipation for the movement but may fail to establish strong ties that bound people to the cause, which Tarrow labels as indirect diffusion: "new forms of contention or participation in existing forms can spread through *non-relational means* among people who have few or no social ties. (...) Today it is more likely to spread through radio and television, print, and forms of electronic communication such as the Internet". (Tarrow 2011). Nevertheless, through indirect diffusion, social media can establish frame amplification (Lim 2012), which fortifies a movement's identity, which is the case of the pro-choice movement in Brazil. Unfortunately, the Brazilian pro-choice movement's overreliance on social media fails to include those without access to it.

In fact, the only two civil society organizations interviewed that engage with people "on the ground" are CDD and CFSS—all other organizations claimed that they solely engage with participants and supporters via social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and blog spaces. The Feminist Health Collective (CFSS) hosts educational panels on abortion and what the procedure entails, and the Catholics for the Right to Choose (CDD) engages in community activism in various corners of the country. Present in sixteen states, CDD's primary target population is in the Brazilian Northeast, uncoincidentally the country's most vulnerable region, where access to reproductive and sexual health and information surrounding the topics is limited at best. This region's socioeconomic inequalities profoundly impact the effectiveness of social movements, as limited access to resources and education hampers widespread engagement and awareness (Magno et al 2022).

In Ceará, a state in the northeast, local activists created a "boombox of reproductive justice and religion" in which they hold sessions that run for fifteen days each month: "she [volunteer] goes to the Bolsa Família program lines, and each day, she presents a different topic on reproductive justice to engage the people there. She sets up a speaker and brings materials to discuss with those in line," Adriana shared proudly. In certain cases, people—men especially—approached activists and admitted that they did not know they had been raped and had learned it through CDD's onsite educational booths. Other people had approached activists and told them they had no idea that

¹⁷ "An Instagram shadowban is an unofficial ban that restricts an account's visibility (in users' feeds, Stories, Explore pages etc.), negatively affecting reach. It can happen when an account posts sensitive content or enters a gray area of the platform's [Community Guidelines](#). What makes it different from a regular ban is that users are not notified when their account is shadowbanned" ([Hootsuite 2024](#)).

abortion was legal in Brazil under special circumstances. This feedback highlights the critical role of direct engagement in addressing knowledge gaps exacerbated by socioeconomic inequalities. Following these interactions, activists developed social monitoring with health professionals and young people, where nearly 300 people participated in an engaging questionnaire on reproductive rights and access to birth control.

The chasm between online and in-person engagement underscores the intersection of reproductive justice and socioeconomic inequality, illustrating that the limited success of these movements is deeply intertwined with the pervasive lack of resources and education in the most vulnerable regions. While the number of households with internet in Brazil reached 90% - or 65.6 million houses ([Governo do Brasil 2022](#)), not everyone may be tech-savvy enough to know what a “Twitter-off” entails, as internet slang and media literacy are constantly evolving- oftentimes at a rate that only younger generations can keep up with (Vacalares et al 2023). A World Bank study in 2024 found that while internet access is on the rise in Brazil, the distribution is uneven. Wealthier states such as Santa Catarina, Minas Gerais and São Paulo have witnessed an increase in internet speed, performance, and access while poorer states like Acre, Amazonas and Maranhão “lag significantly” (The World Bank 2024). The internet access disparity is also present within cities, where wealthier neighbourhoods have better access: “*favelas* (working-class neighborhoods that often have informal, high-density housing) generally exhibit lower internet speeds compared to the rest of the city; a disparity that increased over the years” ([The World Bank 2024](#)). Media literacy, known as “the ability to critically analyze stories presented in the mass media and to determine their accuracy or credibility” (Oxford Languages 2024), is a crucial tool required to participate in online discourse and mobilizations, as it helps individuals understand biases, verify the accuracy of the information, and how to leverage the information for their cause ([National Association for Media Literacy Education 2024](#)). While media literacy is on the rise in Brazil, championed by government-led projects and initiatives such as the Brazilian Media Education Strategy ([AMLA 2024](#)), social media and communication platforms are often hubs of “fake news” and misinformation, as witnessed in the 2018 presidential elections. In a sample of 11,957 viral messages shared across 296 WhatsApp group chats during the campaign period, “around 42% of right-wing content was identified as false by fact-checkers” ([The Guardian 2019](#)).

Navigating censorship is also a blocker: social media platforms often obscure posts that include words such as “rape”, “abortion”, “sexual assault” and “sex” ([The Cut 2022](#)). Organizations find a loophole to this censorship and use emojis or different words as placeholders for censored words, which is a use of familect¹⁸. Laura from NPNM shared that they use the rue plant emoji¹⁹ as symbol for abortion, since it is an abortifacient herb (Brittanica 2024). While this is a clever work around, those who lack knowledge on abortifacients or herbology will likely misinterpret the message. When mobilization and strategizing is done solely in the cyber sphere, it indeliberately

¹⁸ “A familect is a set of invented words or phrases with meanings understood within members of a family or other small intimate group”.(Hymes 2021)

¹⁹ 

discriminates against marginalized populations. Those who are illiterate, unfamiliar with the familect, or do not have the resources to engage in a cyber protest are left out of the conversation and uninformed. Regional disparities are highlighted in IBGE data, showing that the illiteracy rate in the Northeast (14.2%) is double the national average (IBGE 2022). Since literacy is a municipal responsibility, it depends on the resources available for educational investment: the poorer the municipality, the lower the literacy rates are.

CSO's Approaches to Intersectionality & Inclusion

This section examines how certain civil society organizations, despite their efforts, may unintentionally exclude these groups due to their engagement strategies and organizational structures. In addition to unintentionally excluding people from the pro-choice narrative by prioritizing engagement via social media, certain civil society organizations interviewed also unwittingly exclude gender minorities or people without religious affiliations. When asked about inclusion and intersectionality in the Brazilian pro-choice movement, I received fluctuating responses on what each organization can do to improve inclusion.

CDD, for instance, does not discriminate based on gender identity and promotes the participation of trans and nonbinary people within the movement and its narrative: "Our social media manager is a man, as is the lawyer who handles our campaigns. So, really, it's not a hindrance. Of course, our final priorities are to work with women, with trans men, with Black women more. We understand the importance of male voices in this debate," Adriana shared with me.

"Do they have to be Catholic?" I asked, to which she replied, "Yes, they must be Catholic. Our position and our faith are challenged enough as it is given our position on abortion. So, to keep the narrative consistent, our members must identify as Catholic," she informed me. While Adriana admitted that she does not know how this exclusivity impacts the pro-choice movement in the long-term, she affirmed the importance of CDD maintaining their legitimacy as a Catholic organization. This strategic choice to require members to be Catholic reflects the unique social and cultural context of Brazil, where religion plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and policy (Zilla 2020). Based on the interview with Adriana, it is understood that by aligning with a Catholic identity, CDD may find it easier to navigate and influence the predominantly Catholic Brazilian society, which can lend legitimacy and moral authority to their advocacy, ultimately making their pro-choice stance more palatable to a religious audience. However, this strategy also raises concerns about perpetuating existing inequalities and marginalization within the movement: while it might make sense in the short term to align with the dominant religious framework, it inadvertently excludes non-religious individuals and those of different faiths. This exclusion can limit the movement's inclusivity and undermine its broader goals of social justice and equality. Balancing the need for strategic alignment with the imperative of intersectional inclusivity remains a complex challenge for organizations like CDD as they strive to broaden their impact.

FEPLA takes a similar approach to CDD's; their members must identify as Evangelicals and practice the religion. However, when it comes to involving people who are not cisgender women, their stance changes compared to CDD's and reveals a less inclusive network: "There is a framework of themes that are debated in this area of gender, and it is a debate that we do not delve into as a group. Because I also think it is not necessarily relevant to what we want to bring and to the group we prioritize for dialogue. It is a debate that we follow through other pro-legalization and pro-choice groups, and we try to stay updated based on what they are accumulating in terms of debate. Not necessarily debating among ourselves, but since we have a lot of connections and ties with these groups through the National Front, we stay more updated through them," Flora disclosed to me.

Juliana from Milhas also shares this sentiment. When I asked her about why she named the operation Miles for Women's Lives and not simply "Miles for Lives," she said that women were her primary concern and are the ones that require the most attention. While she would never turn away a trans man seeking help to get an abortion, she believes that her solidarity and partnership should be reserved for cis women: "I defend myself, I protect myself within my generational existence. Being an older person and not having gotten used to swimming in this context early. To think we must change the name [of Milhas], I thought we didn't have to change the name. Why? It's something to which I attach a lot of importance. There's a risk I might fall into the error of using the feminine and the risk of thinking that biologically a woman is a woman. And that is what interests me in feminism."

CFSS and NMNP are placed on the other side of the spectrum of inclusion: they consistently use neutral language, such as "pregnant people," and write with gender-neutral spelling to avoid Portuguese's gendered language (e.g.: todxs/todes as opposed to todos or todas, meaning "everyone"). Paloma from ReHuNa confessed that intersectionality and inclusion is something she had to personally fight for to be included within the organization's agenda and recognizes that much more needs to be done beyond using inclusive language and terminology:

"Personally, there is an issue that touches me a lot: social justice issues are important to me. I brought this discussion to the meeting. I have been working since 2021 on a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission. And then I invited some people, including people who are part of activism related to gender issues. So, for trans people, we have been in a lot of dialogue with an NGO called Em Prática, the Brazilian Institute of Trans Masculinities. And we have also sought to address the issue of combating misinformation, bringing the issue of education, dissemination of evidence, and scientific dissemination. And it is also not simple, because we deal with many layers, especially within the humanization and childbirth movement. I think that within the feminist movement, which we are all inevitably part of, in relation to reproductive health issues, there is a history where cis women, and white women from a certain social class, have been leaders in this movement for several decades. And this dialogue with Black feminism, with other feminisms, with trans feminism, etc., is a relatively recent process, I think, historically."

From this context of selective inclusion in certain civil society organizations, it is understood that the intersection of socioeconomic inequality and political opportunity structure creates a complex landscape for the pro-choice movement in Brazil. Marginalized groups, such as gender minorities and non-religious individuals, face systemic barriers both within the movement and in the broader socio-political context. The movement's internal dynamics, as described by the interviewees, mirror these broader societal inequalities and political constraints, highlighting the need for more inclusive and intersectional approaches to advocacy and activism. Organizations that fail to address these issues risk perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to dismantle, while those striving for greater inclusivity face significant challenges in navigating Brazil's conservative and religiously influenced political landscape.

Future Directions

When asked about future directions and hopes for the pro-choice movement in Brazil, the overwhelming response I received was that of realistic optimism. ReHuNa launched a project called the Broad Front for the Defense of Sexual and Reproductive Rights, which focuses on the protection of humanized professionals and those assisting in legal abortions in Brazil. In the highly conservative and retrograde context of Brazil's medical professional councils, persecution against these professionals is driven by both society and professional codes, manifesting at administrative, institutional, and sometimes judicial levels. This situation escalated under the previous government, as conservative and retrograde sectors grew more empowered, leading to increased persecution. In response to this context, the project aims to develop strategies to protect these professionals because access to sexual and reproductive rights for women and pregnant individuals can only be achieved if there are available services and professionals. If these professionals are persecuted and prevented from offering their assistance, access to these rights is effectively denied. Recognizing this need, the project seeks to mitigate this persecution as much as possible, aiming to ensure Brazil has professionals and services like the Sofia Feldman Maternity Hospital, which provides “a truly humanized care”. Many services, including legal abortion services in São Paulo, are being shut down as conservative governments and societal sectors exploit legal loopholes ([CNN Brasil 2024](#)). The project seeks strategies to prevent such occurrences in Brazil, with a major focus on advancing the intersectional process and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, fostering more productive dialogues.

FEPLA and CDD affirmed that continuing to foster public debate on this topic is crucial. By looking at Argentina, significant changes can be seen when the entire population is mobilized to think about the issue. Sporadic and isolated efforts will not change either the legal system or public policies that address this matter with seriousness, quality, and care. Therefore, public discourse on this topic must be encouraged. The future evolution of the pro-choice movement is envisioned as a massive force that aims to socially decriminalize abortion, making it a common topic among all women, girls, and those capable of gestating. The goal is to ease this conversation, multiply these narratives, and find effective solutions for different audiences. Bringing

other movements closer to the pro-choice cause, perhaps seeing the green scarf symbol everywhere and leading to a significant green wave, is part of this vision. The process in Argentina, with widespread street occupation driven by diverse individuals united for a single cause, serves as an inspiration. “The dream is to secure such engagement, achieving social decriminalization to the point where thousands take to the streets for this singular issue”, shared Laura.

Milhas believes that significant progress has been made, evidenced by the representation of the feminist movement in Brazil on September 28, 2023, focusing on decriminalizing and legalizing abortion ([Amnesty International 2023](#)). However, according to Juliana, this progress is not enough to claim full and honest engagement. “The future will likely face increasing extremist rhetoric within society, with abortion becoming a central issue”, she stated. While certain advancements are being made, there is also a struggle to push this agenda within the Executive Branch; the legislative and executive branches are critical in this context, with the need to avoid the resurgence of authoritarianism in Brazil. Activists reiterated that ensuring that a less extremist government assumes power is crucial, as another Bolsonaro-like administration would be extremely challenging. The strategy should focus on resisting extremist forces rather than merely entering the political arena, contesting both the Executive Branch and public opinion, as the former is influenced by societal sentiments.

Despite the challenges, a more creative, cohesive, and strengthened pro-choice movement is envisioned for the future. The Feminist Collective views that rapid decriminalization and legalization may not be achieved, but the movement will grow stronger, adapting its strategies as needed. Significant progress through the Legislature is not foreseen given the current political climate, although potentially, the Supreme Federal Court (STF) might take steps in the (not so near) future. For now, the focus should be on implementing policies within the Executive Branch and preventing regressions in the Legislative and Judicial branches. “Avoiding setbacks while striving for gradual progress is crucial”, Juliana beamed.

Conclusion

The pro-choice movement in Brazil faces significant challenges rooted in socioeconomic inequality, such as a lack of access to reproductive healthcare, a misogynist healthcare system, and lack of education on sexual health and reproductive rights (SHRH). Despite over a decade under a progressive government (2003-2016), advancements in SHRH remain limited, particularly for marginalized groups such as gender minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Activists often find themselves defending existing rights against conservative setbacks, which drains their capacity to push for progressive change. The hostile environment, fueled by religious and political extremes, further restricts the space for reform: conservative bills like PL-1904/2024, introduced even during progressive governance, highlight the structural barriers and legal ambiguities used to roll back SHRH policies. This creates fear and uncertainty among healthcare providers, exacerbated by the Ministry of Health's stance against legal abortions, advocating police investigations in permitted cases. The social criminalization of abortion, where it remains a deeply taboo subject, leads to societal judgment and ostracization of people who seek these reproductive health services. This societal pressure influences the judicial process, leading to delays and obstructions that force pregnant people to continue unwanted pregnancies, thus perpetuating cycles of inequality.

The intersection of socioeconomic inequality, conservative political structures, and social criminalization creates a complex web of barriers that prevent the pro-choice movement from advancing. Economic disparities limit access to abortion services, conservative politics enforce restrictive policies, and societal stigma discourages women and pregnant people from seeking abortions, regardless of whether it is legally accessible to them. Addressing these challenges requires efforts to reduce socioeconomic disparities, reform conservative policies, and combat social stigma to make meaningful progress towards gender equality and reproductive rights in Brazil.

Social media offers a platform for activists to transcend traditional barriers of socioeconomic inequality—through platforms like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), activists can reach a broader audience without the significant financial and physical resources traditionally required for mass communication. However, the overreliance on social media also exacerbates existing inequalities: not everyone has access to the internet, smartphones, or the digital literacy needed to engage online effectively. This digital divide means that marginalized populations—those in poverty, with lower levels of education, or in remote areas—are often excluded from these online movements.

The future of the pro-choice movement in Brazil is envisioned as one of realistic optimism, driven by a commitment to protecting reproductive health professionals, fostering public debate, resisting extremist forces, and striving for gradual progress. The movement's ability to address socioeconomic inequality and navigate the political opportunity structure will be crucial for achieving its goals: by embracing inclusive and intersectional strategies, the pro-choice movement can work towards a more equitable and just society, where reproductive rights are accessible to all.

Afterword

Since the conclusion of this research, congresspeople have approved to move PL 1904/24 into urgency on June 12th, 2024. Should the urgent request be approved, the bill can be voted on directly by the House floor, without the need to go through thematic committees ([CNN Brasil 2024](#)). If the Chamber of Deputies approves the bill, it must also be approved by the Senate and sanctioned by the President, who has the option to veto the bill. Effectively, should Bill 1904 pass, it would mean that anyone who gets an abortion past twenty-two weeks of gestation, as well as doctors who perform them, may be committed with homicide charges and face a prison sentence of up to twenty years.

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