



An Imperative for Women's Political Leadership: Lessons from Brazil

BY VALENTINA SADER WITH ISABEL BERNHARD

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ISBN-13: 978-1-61977-269-4

COVER: A woman shows her ID at a polling station during the presidential election in Sao Sebastiao do Cuieiras, Brazil October 7, 2018. Source: REUTERS/Bruno Kelly

March 2023

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ADRIENNE ARSHT LATIN AMERICA CENTER

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Introduction

Since 1977, the United Nations has officially recognized International Women's Day and celebrated it yearly on March 8.¹ The relevance of the date, however, precedes the origins of the United Nations.

Today, women continue the fight for equitable representation. In politics and positions of power, the disparity is striking. Women represent 49.7 percent of the world population, yet only twenty-seven countries have a female leader as of February 2023.² Brazil, which elected its first and only woman president in 2011, has seen slow progress in ensuring greater

female participation in politics. Political violence against women, among other factors, is a deterring factor for women's political participation.

Addressing the core of this issue is vital to ensure greater and more equitable political participation, enrich the political debate, strengthen the legislative agenda, and further solidify a country's democratic ethos, even if other challenges to democracy remain. Brazil has a unique opportunity to double down on its efforts and tackle this issue now, ahead of municipal elections in 2024.



Women sit underneath the Brazilian flag while waiting to cast their votes at a polling station set up on a floating school on the Negro river, in the Catalao Community, Brazil October 2, 2022. Source: REUTERS/Bruno Kelly

¹ "International Women's Day," United Nations, last visited February 21, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/womens-day/background>.

² "Population, Female (Percent of Total Population)," World Bank, last updated 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS>; "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022," UN Women, Women Count, and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, last visited February 21, 2023, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2022-en_0.pdf.

The Case of Brazil: Political Violence as Deterring to Women's Political Participation

Recent elections in Brazil present a deeper concern with regard to women's ability to have a voice in the political debate, execute their political rights, and to enter elected office. In October 2022, women represented about 52.7 percent of the Brazilian electorate.³ In this latest electoral cycle, women were 33.3 percent of all political candidates, including four of twelve presidential candidates.⁴ In the lower house, for example, ninety-one women were elected out of 513 seats. Although this number represents an increase from 15 percent to 18 percent of female federal deputies since the last election, this is still a low number relative to the Brazilian population and other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, such as Mexico, where 50 percent of the lower house is female, and Colombia, with 27.8 percent of women representatives.⁵

Despite important efforts, Brazil must still adjust its legislation and reframe the incentives in the political sphere to allow for greater and more effective participation by women. It should begin by addressing political violence against women.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political violence is not a new phenomenon, nor it is exclusive to women.⁶ However, evolving analysis has identified differences between political violence generally and political violence against women. The latter is directed at women with the intent of restricting their political participation and active voice, while also generalizing women's participation as "wrong."⁷ In the Brazilian context, political violence against women is a "physical, psychological, economic, symbolic, or sexual aggression against women, with the purpose of preventing or restricting access to and exercise of public functions and/or inducing them to make decisions contrary to their will."⁸ As such, political violence against women plays an important role in deterring women's active participation in politics—and even more daunting for black, indigenous, or LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) women.

3 "Estatísticas do Eleitorado—Por Sexo e Faixa Etária," *Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*, last visited February 21, 2023, <https://www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/estatisticas/estatisticas-de-eleitorado/estatistica-do-eleitorado-por-sexo-e-faixa-etaria>.

4 Paloma Rodrigues, Marcelo Parreira, and Vinícius Cassela, "Número de Mulheres Candidatas é o Maior das Últimas Três Eleições Gerais," *Globo*, last updated August 16, 2022, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2022/eleicao-em-numeros/noticia/2022/08/16/numero-de-mulheres-candidatas-e-o-maior-das-ultimas-tres-eleicoes-gerais.ghtml>; Leonardo Rodrigues and Matheus Caselato, "Veja Quem São os Candidatos à Presidência para as Eleições 2022," *CNN Brasil*, last updated October 3, 2022, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/eleicoes-2022-veja-quem-sao-os-candidatos-a-presidencia-da-republica>.

5 Talita Amaral, "Especial Eleições 2022—Representatividade Feminina Ainda é Baixa na Câmara," *CNN Brasil*, last updated October 5, 2022, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/mulheres-aumentam-representacao-na-camara-mas-representatividade-ainda-e-baixa>; Mary Beth Sheridan, "Mexico's Bold Break with Machismo: Congress Is Now Half Female, and Gender Parity Is the Law," *Washington Post*, last updated September 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/07/mexico-women-gender-parity/>; "The New Colombian Congress Will Be Occupied by Almost 30 Percent by Women," *Infobae*, last updated March 17, 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/en/2022/03/17/the-new-colombian-congress-will-be-occupied-by-almost-30-by-women>.

6 Madeleine Albright, "A Hidden Reality: Violence Against Women in Politics," *CNN*, last updated March 8, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/07/opinions/madeleine-albright-protect-women-in-politics>.

7 Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Violence Against Women in Politics. A Defense of the Concept," *Política y Gobierno* 23, 2 (2016), 459–490, http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-20372016000200459&lng=es&tlng=en.

8 "Violência Política," *Ministério dos Direitos Humanos e da Cidadania*, last updated May 20, 2022, <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/assuntos/mais-mulheres-na-politica/violencia-politica>.



Women participate in a rally during Women's Day celebrations in Brasília, Brazil March 8, 2019. The sign reads: "Together".
Source: REUTERS/Adriano Machado

In May 2022, the Brazilian senate conducted representative surveys investigating male and female candidates' perceptions of political violence leading up to that October's election.⁹ The results demonstrated that 64 percent of respondents, both male and female, believed that male candidates benefitted more from Brazil's political environment, compared to 33 percent of respondents who believed the political environment favored female candidates. Eighteen percent of respondents reported personally experiencing gender-based discrimination, and, in a separate question, 13 percent of respondents believed that they were disqualified from certain political activities based on their gender.

This data paints a challenging picture for women's political participation in Brazil. It further underscores how political violence—or the threat of it—is understandably one deterring factor for women's political engagement in Brazil.

This gender-based political imbalance is not unique to Brazil, but rather embodied by Brazil. Many developed and developing countries have comparable statistics regarding societal acceptance toward female leadership and equality.¹⁰ Therefore, delving into the case of Brazil presents opportunities for transferrable lessons and policy implementation elsewhere.

9 "Pesquisa Mulheres na Política 2022," *Institucional DataSenado*, May 30, 2022, <https://www12.senado.leg.br/institucional/datasenado/publicacao/datasenado?id=pesquisa-mulheres-na-politica-2022>.

10 Richard Orange and Pamela Duncan, "And the Least Feminist Nation in the World Is... Denmark?" *Guardian*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/10/and-the-least-feminist-nation-in-the-world-is-denmark>.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Polarization marked Brazil's most recent elections, but political violence against women was a recurring theme. It was the main topic of Brazil's first presidential debate of 2022, allowing for greater debate over issues related to gender parity and engaging more women voters.¹¹ Yet Brazil has still seen an unfortunate number of cases of political violence against women. These target not only politicians (candidates, pre-candidates, or government officials), but also those engaged in the political debate, such as journalists, civil-society representatives, and thought leaders. Political violence against women does not take place exclusively around electoral processes and has taken multiple shapes and forms in Brazil.

● Sexual harassment and misogynistic narratives

Disagreements within the political realm cannot be an excuse for offensive and misogynistic behavior. However, this has been a recurring issue in Brazil. In 2022, a former congressional representative called Supreme Court Justice Carmén Lúcia a “prostitute,” while also using offensive language to refer to her in a social media video, because he disagreed with her vote on a court sentence.¹² In 2020, São Paulo state legislator, Isa Penna, was sexually harassed during a legislative session by a male colleague. In 2021, in an unprecedented decision, the São

Paulo state legislature suspended the male legislator for six months.¹³ He might still face criminal charges for sexual harassment. Even potential future first ladies faced hostile, and often false, messages.¹⁴

● Intimidation or physical threats

Perhaps the most obvious forms of political violence are intimidation and physical threats that take place either online or in the physical world. In 2018, Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman Marielle Franco, an outspoken opponent of militarized policing in under-resourced neighborhoods and a supporter of LGBTQI+ rights, was assassinated by two former police officials.¹⁵ A clear case of threats being carried out. Journalists have been increasingly under scrutiny, and women journalists exponentially so.¹⁶ Journalists Vera Magalhães and Patrícia Campos Mello have both been the target of disinformation, hate speech, and intimidation (including, legal threats) for criticizing political figures.¹⁷

● Gendered disinformation

Disinformation is a threat to democracy worldwide. But when it comes to online violence, disinformation is even more dangerous. A recent study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) shows that women journalists are the primary targets of online violence, and that disinformation

11 “Tema das Mulheres Dominou 1º Debate Presidencial; Veja Vídeo,” *Folha de São Paulo*, August 29, 2022, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/08/tema-das-mulheres-dominou-1o-debate-presidencial-veja-video.shtml>.

12 “Cármén Lúcia é Alvo de Ataques de Roberto Jefferson: ‘Prostituta,’ ‘Bruxa,’” *UOL*, last modified October 22, 2022, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2022/10/22/carmen-lucia-e-alvo-de-ataques-de-roberto-jefferson-prostituta-bruxa.htm>.

13 Vivian Reis, “Caso Isa Penna: Em Decisão Inédita, Alesp Suspende Deputado Fernando Cury por Seis Meses por Passar a Mão na Colega,” *Globo*, April 1, 2021, <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2021/04/01/caso-isa-penna-em-decisao-inedita-alesp-suspende-por-6-meses-mandato-do-deputado-fernando-cury-que-passou-a-mao-em-colega.ghtml>.

14 Lu Belin, “Macumbeira e Micheque: Nas Redes Sociais, Violência da Corrida Presidencial Sobre Também para Janja e Michelle,” *InternetLab*, last updated October 27, 2022, <https://internetlab.org.br/pt/noticias/macumbeira-e-micheque-nas-redes-sociais-violencia-da-corrida-presidencial-sobre-tambem-para-janja-e-michelle/>.

15 “Marielle Franco Murder: Suspect Shot Dead by Police,” *BBC News*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51439016>.

16 “Violência Grave Contra Jornalistas Aumentou 69,2 Percent em 2022,” *Abraji*, August 15, 2022, <https://abraji.org.br/noticias/violencia-grave-contra-jornalistas-aumentou-69-2-em-2022>. See also: “No Mundo, 49 Percent das Jornalistas já Passaram por Ataques de Gênero,” *Marie Claire*, last updated October 19, 2022, <https://revistamarieclaire.globo.com/Feminismo/Violencia-de-Genero/noticia/2022/10/no-mundo-49-das-jornalistas-ja-passaram-por-ataques-de-genero.html>.

17 “Hijo de Bolsonaro Condenado a Indemnizar a Periodista,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/es/hijo-de-bolsonaro-condenado-a-indemnizar-a-periodista/a-56307969>; “Jornalista é Alvo de Insultos de Bolsonaroistas Após Revelar Vídeo Divulgado por Bolsonaro,” *Folha de São Paulo*, last updated February 26, 2020, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/02/jornalista-e-alvo-de-insultos-de-bolsonaristas-apos-revelar-video-divulgado-por-bolsonaro.shtml>.



Brazilian congressional hopeful and transgender woman Duda Salabert walks with her bodyguards while leaving her campaign's headquarters, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil September 12, 2022. Source: REUTERS/Cristiane Mattos

purveys misogynistic narratives, harassment, and threats.¹⁸ And Brazil is not an exception; women are the main victims of threats, violent content, and insults posted on the Internet.¹⁹

● **Structural and systemic flaws**

This might sound simplistic, but the underlying problem with political violence against women is structural gender biases, which are reflected and engrained in the political system. These tend to maintain barriers to entry for

women and foster a behavioral pattern of non-inclusion of women in decision-making positions, including within political parties. Adjustments, however small, are important steps in addressing this issue. In the case of Brazil, affirmative action has been in place to balance these structural biases, but issues with equitable financing of female candidacies, for example, became an issue requiring further action. Tackling these structural flaws requires a whole-of-society approach that will lead to the most effective and long-lasting solutions.

¹⁸ Julie Posetti, et al., "The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists," UNESCO, April 8 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nabeelah-Shabbir/publication/352561848_The_Chilling_Global_trends_in_online_violence_against_women_journalists/links/60d07b5492851ca3acb83d2e/The-Chilling-Global-trends-in-online-violence-against-women-journalists.pdf.

¹⁹ "Para Especialistas, Mulheres São as Principais Vítimas na Divulgação de Informações Falsas na Internet," Câmara dos Deputados, November 26, 2019, <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/618014-para-especialistas-mulheres-sao-as-principais-vitimas-na-divulgacao-de-informacoes-falsas-na-internet>.

Existing Efforts to Curb Political Violence Against Women in Brazil

Although Brazil still has a long way to go in ensuring women's equitable and effective participation in politics, it has taken important steps in the last few years to address key barriers.

In 1998, Brazil's gender quota went into effect, aiming to ensure a 30-percent minimum of women candidates in proportional elections.²⁰ Adjustments to this legislation and a new Electoral Code went into effect in 2022, which establishes that 30 percent of the electoral-financing fund must be allocated to female candidates.²¹



To address political violence against women, Brazil passed legislation in 2021 that makes it a crime to harass, embarrass, humiliate, persecute, or threaten a candidate for an elective position or a holder of elective office.²² More recently, to address issues with disinformation around the electoral process, the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court (TSE, in Portuguese) also targeted political violence against women. The court established a system through which one could denounce instances of gendered disinformation and political violence against women.²³

Despite these and previous efforts to address political violence against women in Brazil, more needs to be done, especially as it relates to adjusting existing legislation to expand beyond electoral cycles and include other key political actors who are not necessarily elected officials.

A Whole-of-Society Approach for a More Representative and Resilient Democracy

From September to November 2022, the Atlantic Council held individual consultations and convened four discussions with Brazilian and international experts from civil-society organizations, the public and private sectors, academia, the press, and others to map out concrete ways in which Brazil could address political violence against women and further create the conditions for women's effective participation in politics. Below are actionable recommendations for next steps, including suggestions on electoral and civic legislation, as well as proposals for how the private sector, civil-society organizations, and the media could advance a more inclusive political debate.

Expand current legislation that protects women political leaders to be broader than elected officials. Brazilian legislation defines and criminalizes political violence

20 "Lei das Eleições—Lei nº 9.504, de 30 de Setembro de 1997," *Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*, last visited February 21, 2023, <https://www.tse.jus.br/legislacao/codigo-eleitoral/lei-das-eleicoes/lei-das-eleicoes-lei-nb0-9.504-de-30-de-setembro-de-1997>.

21 "Congresso Promulga Cota de 30 Percent do Fundo Eleitoral para Candidaturas Femininas," *Câmara dos Deputados*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/864409-congresso-promulga-cota-de-30-do-fundo-eleitoral-para-candidaturas-femininas>.

22 "Sancionada Lei de Combate à Violência Política Contra a Mulher," *Câmara dos Deputados*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/789925-sancionada-lei-de-combate-a-violencia-politica-contra-a-mulher/>.

23 "Sistema de Alerta de Desinformação Conta Agora Também com Canal Exclusivo para Denunciar Violência Política de Gênero," *Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*, last modified August 16, 2022, <https://www.tse.jus.br/comunicacao/noticias/2022/Agosto/sistema-de-alerta-de-desinformacao-counta-agora-tambem-com-canal-exclusivo-para-denunciar-violencia-politica-de-genero>.



People attend an event of reading pro-democracy manifestos, at the Faculty of Law headquarters at the Sao Paulo University, in downtown Sao Paulo, Brazil August 11, 2022. Banner in front reads "Dictatorship never again" Source: REUTERS/Amanda Perobelli

against women within the scope of the Electoral Code. Within this concept, Law 14.192/21 targets “elected officials, candidates for elective office, holders of public office, leaders of class councils, state-owned companies, and political representation entities.”²⁴ Given this definition, this law, however, fails to clearly protect pre-candidates. Legislation beyond the Electoral Code should also more clearly aim to protect other key political positions, such as political appointees and actors tangential to politics, like journalists and civil-society leaders. This refinement of and clarification to current legislation would protect the political environment beyond the official period of the electoral cycle, while also acknowledging the contributions of non-elected actors to the political debate.

Post-election: Incentivize gender equity in key positions.

Brazil's gender quotas are an important step toward gender parity in the legislature. However, parity must be a top consideration for determining positions of power, such as heads of commissions, leaders of political parties, or proponents of key legislative bills. Legislators should consider adjusting political-party laws and modifying the Code of Conduct of Congress to establish a threshold for the number of commissions within Congress and leadership positions within a political party that women hold. Having women in leadership positions within political parties can ignite a positive cycle of support - both politically and financially - to female candidates and those in office. Including women throughout the decision-making process, even within individual political parties, is a step in democratiz-

24 “Sancionada Lei de Combate à Violência Política Contra a Mulher.”

ing the political system while also creating a support network for women to deter political violence.

Raise further awareness about what political violence against women is, and the threat it poses to democracy, by better financing, monitoring, and enforcing existing efforts to report and punish it. Political violence against women has gained greater attention in the last few years in the multilateral space. The United Nations (UN) put out a guidance note on preventing violence against women in politics and on how the UN can support member states in their efforts.²⁵ The Organization of American States has advanced ways to mitigate such violence through the Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women from 2015 and the Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women in Political Life from 2017.²⁶ But more work needs to be done through a whole-of-society approach to address political violence against women. The public sector has the responsibility to define, identify, and name-and-shame such violence, as well as to provide resources on how to identify it, how to report it, and how to trace the trajectory of any complaint. Because much of the harassment takes place online, technology companies—and the private sector in general—have an important role to play in disseminating this information through adjusting algorithms and combatting disinformation on these subjects alongside civil-society actors, particularly the traditional media. A better-informed society will make better usage of existing reporting tools, such as those by social media platforms or the Superior Electoral Court.²⁷

Foster gender equity and critical thinking in universities.

To address the structural biases of the political system in the long run, education is critical. In Brazil, a citizen is obligated to vote from the ages of eighteen to seventy. However, the Brazilian educational system in many ways fails to educate its citizens to understand, analyze, and be critical of the political system, political proposals, and public policies. As such, special attention should be given to universities, as a welcoming point into one's political rights and duties. Although this is an oft-cited and infrequently fulfilled goal in countries beyond Brazil, universities must prioritize educating students beyond basic civ-

ics, and sculpt their critical thinking to analyze public policies and political discourse according to their values and beliefs. As such, universities can be a welcoming point for citizens to be exposed to democracy in practice. A strong curriculum on the functioning of the political system, along with an extensive awareness-raising campaign on inclusion and gender equity in politics, would serve to foster inclusiveness and help make current mechanisms of reporting on political violence against women more effective in the medium and long terms.

Formalize political trainings for women. Affirmative action, like gender quotas, is an important mechanism to ensuring women's entry into political life. However, to succeed, women must have significant political support prior to entering politics. Many civil-society organizations, such as *Elas no Poder*, *Instituto Alziras*, and *Instituto Vamos Juntas* already play an important supporting role in helping make women's candidacies more visible, effective, and attractive to financing, while also making them better prepared for public office.²⁸ Doubling down on capacity-building efforts to make women more competitive electorally, and also better prepared for political life, is essential to making gender quotas and similar measures less needed over time.

Conclusion

Following extremely contentious elections in Brazil, and as a new government is in office, this moment presents a unique window of opportunity to move forward commitments to curb and cease violence against women in politics.

The lessons from 2022 and the threat to democracy from January 8, 2023, combined with decades of discrimination against women—especially black, indigenous, and LGBTQI+ women—should be the incentive needed for Brazilian society to take concrete steps toward women's equitable and effective political participation. As the country prepares for municipal elections in 2024, now is the time to advance a more inclusive political system—and, by extension, to begin making Brazilian democracy more representative and even more resilient.

25 "Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics," UN Women, July 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf>.

26 "Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women," Organization of American States Inter-American Commission of Women October 15, 2015, <https://www.oas.org/es/mesecvi/docs/DeclaracionViolenciaPolitica-EN.pdf>; "Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life," Organization of American States, 2017, <https://www.oas.org/en/cim/docs/ViolenciaPolitica-LeyModelo-EN.pdf>.

27 "Meta Lança Guia de Combate à Violência Contra Mulheres na Política," Meta Brasil, July 8, 2022, <https://about.fb.com/br/news/2022/07/meta-lanca-guia-de-combate-a-violencia-contra-mulheres-na-politica/>; "Sistema de Alerta de Desinformação Conta Agora Também com Canal Exclusivo para Denunciar Violência Política de Gênero."

28 "Elas no Poder—Projetos," *Elas no Poder*, last visited February 21, 2023, <https://elasnopoder.org/projetos/>; "Instituto Vamos Juntas," *Instituto Vamos Juntas*, last visited February 21, 2023, <https://institutovamosjuntas.org>.

Acknowledgements

Many of the ideas in this issue brief are the product of four virtual roundtables organized by the Atlantic Council, which featured the participation of Brazilian and international experts from civil-society organizations, the public and private sectors, academia, the press, and others. We thank the many participants of these series of conversations, including those who gave permission to be publicly acknowledged below:

Larissa Alfino, president, Instituto Vamos Juntas; **Fábio Almeida Lopes**, co-founder and head of policy and public affairs, Legis Consultancy; **Sabrina Almeida**, researcher, Directorate of Public Policy Analysis, Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV DAPP); **Dr. Renata Amaral**, Adjunct Professor, Trade, Investment, and Development Program, American University; Founder, Women Inside Trade; **Ester Borges**, head of research, information, and politics, InternetLab; **Adriana D'Elia**, nonresident senior fellow, Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, Atlantic Council; **Luiza Duarte**, journalist and research fellow, American University; **Thiago Esteves**, head of government relations, CropLife; **Talita Fernandes**, freelance journalist and co-founder, Shumian; **Betilde Muñoz Pogossian**, director, Department of Social Inclusion, Organization of American States (OAS); **Tais Niffenegger**, safety policy manager, Latin America, Meta Brasil; **Margareth Kang**, Public Policy Manager, Meta; **Ana Cláudia Oliveira**,

research coordinator, National Observatory of Women in Politics, Brazilian Chamber of Deputies; **Heloisa Pait**, professor of sociology, São Paulo State University (UNESP); **Jennifer Piscopo**, associate professor of politics, Occidental College; **Laísa Rachter**, gender and diversity specialist, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); **Juliana Restrepo Sain**, assistant professor of political science, University of Florida; **Ana Cláudia Santano**, general coordinator, Transparência Eleitoral Brasil; **Paula Tavares**, senior legal and gender specialist, World Bank; **Clarice Tavares**, head of research and manager of Monitora 2022, InternetLab; and **Emília Vasconcelos**, head of mobilization, Centro de Liderança Pública (CLP).

This document is also a product of independent research and consultations carried out by the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center. A special thank you to **Minister Maria Cláudia Buchianeri Pinheiro** of Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court and **Dr. Renata Gil**, president of the Association of Brazilian Magistrates, for sharing their expertise and participating in these roundtables. **Talita Fernandez**, **Heloisa Pait**, **Paula Tavares**, and **Ana Cláudia Oliveira** provided invaluable support and key insights throughout this project. Thank you to **Jason Marczak**, senior director of the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, and **Maria Fernanda Bozmoski**, deputy director for programs, for their guidance. Finally, the Atlantic Council would like to thank **Humberto Collado**, **Alexandra Panzarelli**, **Beatriz Godoy**, and the International Republican Institute (IRI) for their partnership and generous support.

About the Authors



Valentina Sader is associate director and Brazil lead at the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, where she leads the center's work on Brazil, gender equality, and diversity, and manages its advisory council. She has authored and co-authored publications on Brazil's democracy and the

US-Brazil strategic partnership, and coordinated events with high-level policymakers, business leaders, and civil-society members in both Brazil and the United States. Valentina provides regular commentary in English and Portuguese on political and economic issues in Brazil to major media outlets. Prior to joining the Atlantic Council, Valentina worked at the Eurasia Group, the embassy of Brazil in Washington, DC, and the mission of Brazil to the Organization of American States (OAS). Valentina holds a bachelor's degree in international studies from American University. Originally from Brazil, Valentina is a native Portuguese speaker, fluent in English, and proficient in Spanish.



Isabel Bernhard is an assistant director at the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, where she supports the Brazil and China in Latin America portfolios. Her foreign policy analysis has appeared in the Diplomat, Global Americans, and China Observers, among other outlets. She holds a

master's degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Oxford and a bachelor's degree in Social Studies (political science) from Harvard University. A native English, Mandarin Chinese, and Taiwanese speaker, she is also fluent in Spanish and Portuguese.

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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org