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Where has gender gone? The big absence in Brazilian presidential elections 2014

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By **Louisa Acciari**.

One could expect that having two woman candidates (**Marina da Silva** and **Dilma Rousseff**) leading the polls might have brought gender equality to the centre of the Brazilian presidential elections debates – especially when one of them is the current President of Brazil, and the first-ever woman to hold that office.

Although **feminist scholars** have warned against **essentialist** arguments on representation, there is an expectation that women will be better represented by woman politicians in what could be conceived of as ‘women’s interests’, particularly on issues related to the right to choose, violence and discrimination in the labour market.



Marina Silva in 2010. Credit: **Talita Oliveira** CC BY 2.0.

However, when analysing the propositions and manifestos of the three main candidates (those with the highest chances of reaching the second round, according to polls), candidates’ positions on these issues were not easy to identify. The main national newspapers summarising their propositions highlighted education, health, economy, energy, environment, international affairs, but not gender equality.

As the second round vote between Dilma (the current president, left-wing party) or Aécio (centre-right man candidate, now backed by Marina who did not get through) nears on October 26th, the need for a feminist analysis appears even more pressing.

Abortion

None of the candidates has declared themselves in favour of legalising abortion. In Brazil abortion is only legal if the pregnancy resulted from rape; if it directly endangers the life of the pregnant woman; and since last year, if the foetus’ brain has no chance to develop. This recent change was considered as a very positive step by pro-choice organisations.

Dilma framed this issue in terms of **public health**, recalling that every year thousands of women die from the consequences of abortion practiced in non-hygienic and unsafe conditions. In 2013, she approved a **law** to provide new services to victims of rape including access to medical care, emergency contraception and counselling. She was strongly criticised by evangelical and

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Social media



conservative catholic media who accused her of legalising abortion, de facto. However, Dilma has not included the legalisation of abortion in her manifesto and has publicly said that she personally, was not in favour of this practice.

Aécio does not mention the word 'abortion' in his manifesto either, and focuses instead on the prevention of teenage pregnancies. Like Dilma, he prefers to **keep silent** on this issue, as favouring or appearing to favour pro-choice policies could be detrimental to his alliance with religious lobbies.

LGBT rights

Both Dilma and Aécio are in favour of the status quo regarding **gay marriage**. A decision by the Supreme Court of Justice recognised it as legal last year, but this was not translated into a law, therefore making this right very fragile.

While Aécio's proposals for LGBT people are quite vague (promoting more research and including LGBT activists more systemically in consultation processes), Dilma has at least stood publicly against homophobia. She proposes to recognise it as a crime and to have prevention programmes against hate crimes in schools. But this was only declared in an interview, and **not written** in her manifesto. It was nonetheless enough for her to be called '**defender of the gay cause**' by a religious conservative politician, as if this were outrageous.

LGBT activists have expressed their disappointment in both candidates, arguing that they are not offering enough. The principal Brazilian LGBT organisations have asked for the recognition of diverse gender identities, the full recognition of gay marriage with its inclusion in the Constitution, better access to health services and HIV prevention programmes.

Violence against women

Dilma has made the fight against **violence against women** (VAW) one of her main priorities. Domestic violence has been recognised as a crime in Brazil since 2006 (the law is called Maria da Penha in homage to an activist who was shot by her husband); and Dilma has promised in her manifesto to make it more effective. She proposes to build women's refuges in every state and to launch a new helpline for victims of violence.

Aécio wants states rather than the federal Government to be responsible for implementing prevention programmes, and he proposes to improve the protection of women and children victims of violence. He has also offered to provide better access to reconstructive plastic surgery for women whose bodies were severely damaged by acts of domestic violence.

Equal pay and women's representation in politics are totally absent from the debate. Aécio has a '**women**' section in his manifesto, where he mentions Brazil's poor ranking in terms of gender equality and affirms he wants to promote women's access to education, employment and politics. Dilma on the contrary, has only **one sentence** on gender equality, encompassed within the broader promotion of human rights. Her manifesto states that the promotion of human rights will continue until no one is discriminated against based on their "race, colour, belief, gender or sexual orientation".

'Big politics' vs. gender

In response to this year's **social protests**, the presidential debate has mostly focused on issues of corruption and renewal of democratic institutions. Candidates have also argued about social policies and the future of the famous **Bolsa Familia** implemented by Lula that took millions of Brazilians out of poverty. Other important themes included the consequences of the global economic crisis, national growth and inflation.

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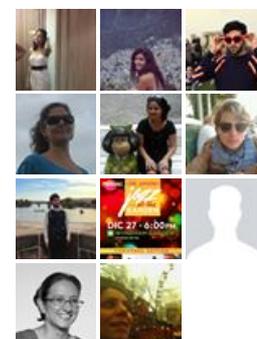
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Dilma Rousseff in 2010. Credit: [Fotos GOVBA CC BY 2.0](#).

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All these 'big politics' themes were debated in complete disconnection from a gender analysis. Not only were candidates' programmes on specific 'gender' issues such as abortion and LGBT rights a bit light, but they also fail to link these to the broader economic and political system. Poverty has a colour and a gender in Brazil – it is feminized, as is the informal sector and the most precarious jobs in the economy, such as domestic and care work.

If democracy is imperfect, it is not only because of corrupt practices but also because of the dramatic underrepresentation of Afro-Brazilians and women in the Parliament and Senate. In fact, only 8% of elected members of the Parliament are women and 8.5% self-identify as Afro-Brazilian (over 50% of the population is 'black' or 'mixed' according to the national census). When discussing the renewal of democratic life, politicians could certainly bring these inequalities into consideration.

Gender politics must not only be reduced to tokenistic VAW, ticking the 'women' box of candidates' manifestos. Gender is present everywhere, it is produced and reproduced by political and cultural institutions, it has economic consequences and affects society as a whole. Consideration of gender should be fully integrated into any politician's plan of governance.

In the meantime, we Brazilians still have a choice to make in a few days' time. I would personally advise voters to choose the candidate who has the most concrete and progressive propositions for gender equality, but also a candidate whose economic and social programmes do not overtly contradict feminist principles and politics. For example, promoting women's empowerment without tackling poverty, access to health, and democratic representation more broadly.

For this reason, I will vote for Dilma on Sunday, October 26th. And if you're eligible to vote in Brazil or interested in following the election outcome, you'll have to read more about candidates' takes on 'big politics' to determine whether a vote in their favour falls on the side of 'contradiction', transformation or somewhere in between.

About the Author

Louisa Acciari is a PhD student at the Gender Institute working on the mobilisations of domestic workers in Brazil. Her research interests include social movements; feminist and post-colonial theories; the intersections between gender, race and class; and Brazilian politics.

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