

# Bertha Maria Júlia Lutz

---

Lauritz Wilde

2024-05-12T08:13:18

Bertha Maria Júlia Lutz was an acknowledged scientist, a women's rights activist, a politician, and a diplomat. Mostly known for being one of four women to sign the United Nations Charter in 1945 and assuring the inclusion of the rights of women in its preamble, she also played a vital role in attaining women's suffrage in Brazil.

## Ololygon Berthae and Phantasmarana Lutzae

Bertha Lutz was born in 1894 in Sao Paulo to a British mother and a Brazilian father with Swiss origin, from whom she inherited her interest in the natural sciences. A degree in biology from the Sorbonne in 1918 and the post as secretary at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro in 1919 was the starting point of Lutz's lifelong career in herpetology, the study of frogs, and adjacent fields of biology. She was promoted several times at the National Museum and built a reputation as a world-renowned herpetologist, based on numerous publications of scientific studies.<sup>1)</sup> To honour her work, several species of frogs and lizards were named after her. Although she was still at the beginning of her fight for women's rights in 1919, the post at the National Museum already signalled feminist progress, as she was the second woman in Brazil to be appointed to a position in the public service. Lutz also received a law degree from the University of Rio de Janeiro in 1933, writing her thesis about the nationality of married women under private international law.<sup>2)</sup>

## The FBPF, Bertha Lutz's self-constructed gateway to her feminist activism

Influenced by the suffrage movements she witnessed in Europe, she founded the [Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress](#) (*Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino*, FBPF) in 1922. The fight for the right of women to vote and for a legal system that protects women from being subject to the same rules as men were a priority for the FBPF. Lutz and the FBPF initially pursued a difference-approach. They assumed that – due to the differences between men and women – real equality could only be achieved through the special treatment of women in certain areas.<sup>3)</sup> In this spirit, Lutz saw the Brazilian legal system as discriminatory against women. This is why she and the FBPF supported the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that restricted [women's night work](#) and promoted [maternity leave](#). Lutz became a leading figure in the women's rights movement in Brazil and spearheaded the FBPF, which was one of the most active women's rights organisations until the mid-1930s, when women's suffrage was introduced. In 1932, Lutz and several other women met with [Getúlio Vargas](#), who had carried out a [coup d'état in 1930](#) and was "interim president" at the time. The decree that followed their

intervention granted the right to vote, regardless of gender. However, it was still limited by literacy, which continued to mean significant restrictions for women.

Two years later, women's suffrage was also confirmed in the constitution of 1934, in whose drafting committee Lutz participated as a women's representative. After Lutz and the FBPF had achieved one of their main goals, their perspective changed in the early 1930s from a difference approach to an equality approach. Lutz had already spent several years in her professional environment, so she knew what unequal treatment could mean for a woman's career. "Her later push for equal pay, professional opportunities for women and married women's independent ability to pursue paid employment sprang directly from her professional activities."<sup>4)</sup> Her ideological shift led her to focus more on civil and economic rights of married women. In contrast to her stance in the 1920s, she now felt it was necessary to abolish all protectionist legislation and she rejected measures that defined women solely by their role as wives to their husbands and mothers to their children.<sup>5)</sup>

"I come more and more to the conclusion that no civilization is possible without women very decisively in public affairs."<sup>6)</sup>

In 1936, Lutz became a member of the National Congress of Brazil, the bicameral body of Brazilian legislature, which made her one of the very few Congresswomen. One of her first actions was to create a "Statute on Women" which established a committee to scrutinise all Brazilian laws to ensure that they did not discriminate against women. But her first appearance in official electoral politics was short-lived, as Vargas, whose presidential term was to end in 1938, carried out another [coup d'état in 1937](#). He dissolved the legislature and promulgated a new constitution that placed all governmental power in his hands. During Vargas' [New State](#), Lutz scaled back her demands for women's suffrage and withdrew from most of her administrative positions in feminist organisations. Instead, she focussed on her scientific work and pursued her desire to archive and publish the scientific work of her recently deceased father, [Adolfo Lutz](#). As she was fluent in English, French and German in addition to her native Portuguese, she was certainly a promising choice for diplomacy. Her activist restraint was perhaps another reason why Vargas appointed her as advisor to the Brazilian delegation at the conference of the ILO in 1944.<sup>7)</sup>

## The Conference of San Francisco

Only one year later, Vargas included her in the Brazilian delegation to the San Francisco conference, which brought together 50 allied nations to review the [Dumbarton Oaks Agreement](#) and create a post-war international organisation. Lutz was one of six women delegates at the conference and one of four women to sign the Charter of the United Nations (UNC). Despite disagreements among the women about the importance of including women's rights, Lutz and other feminists such as [Minerva Bernadino](#), [Amalia de Castillo Ledón](#) and [Jessie Street](#) succeeded in including women's rights in the preamble of the founding treaty. They

also managed to insert a clause on the equal participation of women in the United Nations Organisation (Article 8 UNC).<sup>8)</sup>

Moreover, when the establishment of a commission on human rights within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was proposed, Lutz, supported by other delegations, suggested the establishment of an independent commission to deal specifically with women's rights. It was felt that women's concerns would be lost in a commission responsible for a wide range of issues. Although a Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was rejected at the San Francisco conference, Lutz laid the foundations for its subsequent realisation. In 1945, a sub-commission of the Commission on Human Rights (the predecessor of the Human Rights Council) was set up. But as early as 1946, at the second session of ECOSOC, an independent commission was set up at the instigation of [Bodil Begtrup](#), the first president of the sub-commission. The CSW then met for the first time in 1947.<sup>9)</sup>



Source: Library of Congress, National Photo Company Collection, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016839665/>.

## The decades following World War II

After the San Francisco conference, Lutz continued to preoccupy herself with Brazilian electoral politics and women's rights at national and international level, always continuing her scientific career. Shortly after the conference, Vargas was deposed in a *coup d'état*, which opened the door for women's rights to be fought for again in parliament. Lutz and other FBPF feminists founded an independent electoral commission that lobbied Congress for women's rights to reform the Civil Code, increase the number of women in public office, push for equal pay, and improve maternal and infant care.<sup>10)</sup> Although Lutz fought for voting rights, she held a low opinion of the Brazilian voting populace. She feared communist indoctrination and believed that most Brazilians, especially non-whites, were not prepared to exercise their right to vote.<sup>11)</sup>

In 1951, Lutz was appointed by Vargas, who was the democratically elected president since 1950, as Brazil's representative to the [Inter-American Commission of Women \(IACW\)](#), a post she held until her death. In the years from 1953 to 1957 she even served as vice president of the commission. In the 1950s and 1960s, the IACW broadened its understanding of gender equality to include social and economic rights and development. Lutz fought this development by trying to keep to a narrow understanding of women's rights activism. In this sense, she also opposed the expansion of the understanding of discrimination against women at the CSW conference in 1952. She was part of the Brazilian delegation and made her position clear that the CSW had "one task only: that was to eliminate discrimination against women as women."<sup>12)</sup> Lutz was not open for an intersectional approach, neither concerning women of colour, nor concerning working-class women.<sup>13)</sup>

## IWY Conference, 1975

In 1975, the year before Lutz' death, she attended the [World Conference on Women](#) as one of Brazil's plenipotentiaries for the [military dictatorship](#) that governed Brazil at the time. The conference took place within the framework of the [International Women's Year \(IWY\)](#) proclaimed by the United Nations and formed the starting point of the [United Nations Decade for Women](#). There, too, Lutz advocated pure equality feminism. She wanted the conference to focus exclusively on the topic of gender equality and not, as proposed by other delegations, on topics that are only indirectly related to gender, such as peace and development. During the conference, non-governmental activists protesting against the dictatorship of [Augusto Pinochet](#) in Chile and wishing to draw the attention of the international community to the coup against the previous elected president [Salvador Allende](#) were able to voice their concerns. Lutz echoed the assessment of Chile's official representative that Pinochet would restore order in Chile, following her dogma that feminist activism is completely separate from non-feminist politics.

Lutz's behaviour at the conference sums up her approach very well: unwavering advocacy for equal rights for ([white](#)) women despite the repressive regimes around her. Due to her strategic alliances, she never faced any repression and was even supported by those in power. This enabled her to stand up and fight for over sixty years in an almost exclusively authoritarian Brazil. In May 2023, Bertha Lutz's legacy became part of [UNESCO's Memory of the World](#).

## Further Readings

- June E. Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850-1940* (Duke University Press 1990)
- Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (University of North Carolina Press 2019)
- Susan K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil 1914-1940* (University of North Carolina Press 1996)
- Sueann Caulfield and Christiana Schettini, [Gender and Sexuality in Brazil since Independence](#) (2017), Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Latin American History

## References

- A selection of scientific (and political) publications by Bertha Lutz can be found in the literature review in Lisa Maria Schulte and Dennis Rödder, *Adolpho (1855-1940) und Bertha Lutz (1884-1976) – Leben und Werke* in Axel Kwet and Manfred Niekisch (eds.), *Amphibien und Reptilien der Neotropis. Entdeckungen deutschsprachiger Forscher in Mittel- und Südamerika* (Basilisken Press 2016).
- Bertha Lutz, *A nacionalidade da mulher casada perante o direito internacional privado* (Pongetti 1933).
- For a good overview on the different approaches to feminism cf. Nancy Levit, *Feminism for Men: Legal Ideology and the Construction of Maleness* (1996), 43 *UCLA Law Review* 1037, 1041 ff.
- Cassia Roth and Ellen Dubois, *Feminism, Frogs and Fascism: The Transnational Activism of Brazil's Bertha Lutz* (2020), 32 *Gender & History* 208, 212.
- Katherine M. Marino, *Transnational Pan-American Feminism: The Friendship of Bertha Lutz and Mary Wilhelmine Williams, 1926–1944* (2014), 26 *Journal of Women's History*, 63, 74.
- Lutz to Williams, March 1, 1938, *Mary Wilhelmine Williams Papers*, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University, Stanford, California.
- Cassia Roth and Ellen Dubois, *Feminism, Frogs and Fascism: The Transnational Activism of Brazil's Bertha Lutz* (2020), 32 *Gender & History* 208, 211.
- Torild Skard, *Getting Our History Right: How Were the Equal Rights of Women and Men Included in the Charter of the United Nations?* (2008), 35 *Forum for Development Studies* 37, 47 ff.
- Hilkkä Pietilä, *The Unfinished Story of Women and the United Nations* (2007), *NGLS Development Dossier* 9 ff.

- Cassia Roth and Ellen Dubois, *Feminism, Frogs and Fascism: The Transnational Activism of Brazil's Bertha Lutz* (2020), 32 *Gender & History* 208, 214.
  - CSW, 6th Sess., 106th mtg., UN Doc. E/CN.6/SR.106 (May 21, 1952) 11 f.
  - Cassia Roth and Ellen Dubois, *Feminism, Frogs and Fascism: The Transnational Activism of Brazil's Bertha Lutz* (2020), 32 *Gender & History* 208, 216.
- 

