



# From the factory floor to

Researchers  
review the  
history of the  
struggles of  
Brazil's feminist  
movements

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For the last 100 years, the feminist struggle for equality and women's rights has impacted the Brazilian political scene. From strikes in 1917 to today's political pressure groups, women have had to fight hard to have some of their demands met. Recent surveys have deepened our understanding of different periods in that history. Some of those writings are found in the book *50 anos de feminismo: Argentina, Brasil, and Chile* [50 years of feminism: Argentina, Brazil, and Chile] (Edusp, 2017), which is the result of a project coordinated by sociologists Eva Blay, from the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP), and Lúcia Avelar, from the Center for Studies on Public Opinion at the University of Campinas (CESOP-Unicamp). The book helps readers understand the central role that feminist

organizations play in achieving legal and social protection for women. Looking only at the private realm, one sees essential victories, such as the elimination of a father's rights over his adult daughter and the criminalization of domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Despite this progress, Brazilian women are still underrepresented politically. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Brazil stands 154th in a ranking of 190 countries with regard to the female presence in their legislatures. Only one of every 10 seats in the 513-member Chamber of Representatives is held by women. In the Senate, that presence is 14% of the 81 elected members. On this issue, Brazil ranks below even Saudi Arabia, with its long history of restricting women's rights and freedoms. According to Lúcia Avelar, Brazil's feminist organizations serve as a sort of forum for extra-



# the floor of Congress

parliamentary representation of women; their activities are coordinated with small but active female delegations.

Political scientist Patrícia Rangel, a post-doctoral researcher at the Free University of Berlin in Germany and co-author of one of the articles in the abovementioned book, argues that this organized political maneuvering led to legal changes that ensured equal treatment under the law for both women and men, struck discriminatory terms from Brazil's legislation, and enabled women to legally serve as heads of families. Rangel says that the fruits of that work include the expansion of paid maternity leave (1988), the passage of the electoral quota law in 1995 (which requires that 30% of candidates be women), the availability of sterilization in public hospitals (1996), the regulation on the care available for legal abortions in the

Unified Health System (SUS) in 1998, and the Maria da Penha Act (2006) against domestic and intra-family violence.

Avelar says that even with its low rate of female representation in the legislature, Brazil stands out as a country with one of the best-organized feminist movements in the world. "This mobilization has achieved a high degree of coordination among networks that form a bridge between society and the State. Networks such as the Congress of Brazilian Women and the World March of Women are internationally known," she points out. She identified the turning point in the degree of this organization: "the gradual entry of women into higher education and the formation of feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs)."

Feminist victories in Brazil, especially with respect to activities in the public sphere, arrived

Protest March for Direct Elections Now! in downtown São Paulo in 1984 (*left*) and demonstrators during the World March of Women on the Anhanguera Highway (SP) in 2010

## Exiles from dictatorships in Brazil, Argentina and Chile made contact with feminist movements in Europe in the 1970s

with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “One big gain obtained from the government as of 2014 was the introduction of the Women’s Budget, which is unique among Latin American countries,” says Avelar. This is an item in the federal government’s budget that is used for actions that impact the quality of life of Brazilian women, including things such as health care, dealing with violence, and equality in the labor market. The effort to achieve this special mention in the budget was coordinated by the Center for Women’s Studies and Advisory Services (CFEMEA) to make it possible to monitor budgetary execution and ensure

that the appropriated funds are actually released for use in implementing government policies as defined in the Women’s Budget.

### RESISTING AND EXILED

Some components of the feminist organization in Brazil emerged from women’s opposition to the military dictatorship (1964-1985). The intensification of authoritarianism, which primarily began in 1968, produced waves of exiles who were opponents of the regime. Many women made contact with feminists in other countries,

especially in France. From there, Brazilians and other Latin Americans who had also become expatriates because of the military coups in Chile (1973) and Argentina (1976) produced publications that were intended to serve as a forum for feminist debates in exile.

Those groups have recently been studied by sociologist Maira Abreu, who has a PhD in social sciences from Unicamp and published the book *Feminism em exílio* [Feminism in exile] (Alameda, 2016). The author shows how those groups constituted an important presence in the Brazilian community in France and formed an arena for the dissemination of feminist thought. When they returned to their countries of origin, many exiles brought that experience back with them and, to some extent, were able to influence the debates going on in Latin American feminist circles. “We should not think of it as merely an importation of ideas,” Abreu warns, “but rather as an encounter among trends in feminist thinking that had been born in different realities.”

Despite the growth in their organization, women continue to have little involvement in political party structures. Lúcia Avelar points to the oligarchic nature of Brazilian parties and the centralization of power within them as the main causes of this exclusion. She believes that the parties on the Left currently offer somewhat better political opportunities for women. “In parties that have roots in social movements, internal disputes among different camps improve the status of women because those parties are usually open to the emergence of new factions,” she says. Patrícia Rangel notes that political parties do not seem to understand that the presence of women is synonymous with democracy. “This has negative effects for women in general, since it is the party officials at different levels who determine who obtains access to institutionalized politics; they play an important role in changing the political system,” says Rangel.

For many years, politicians’ failures to understand the roles of women left women relegated to the status of supporting players and subordinates in political parties and labor unions, arenas in which they could have expected, for the sake of ideological consistency, a defense of egalitarianism. “The idea of confronting the patriarchy usually took a back seat to the political priority, which was the criticism of capitalism,” Rangel says. Eva Blay points out that there had been a widespread belief that the modernization of society would produce equality between men and women. “That mechanistic view was questioned as people later realized that modernization itself had retained the same patriarchal patterns, clothing them in new garments and reassembling patterns of domination, violence against women,

Bertha Lutz in 1925: one of the founders of the Brazilian Federation for the Advancement of Women in 1922





The Rio de Janeiro newspaper *A Manhã* campaigned in favor of women's right to vote in 1926

and inequalities in the workplace, including in terms of pay,” Blay argues.

Those questions came from the feminists of the 1970s, but the first transformations promoted by Brazilian feminists have much older roots.

### LABORERS AND INTELLECTUALS

In the Brazil of the 1920s, women had no political rights and could not vote or seek elected office. To pursue an occupation outside the home, they needed their husbands’ authorization, and then they earned less than half what men were paid for performing the same duties. This situation did not begin to change until after workers began to protest, and organizations such as the Brazilian Federation for the Advancement of Women (FBPF), led by biologist Bertha Lutz (1894-1976), emerged.

The daughter of bacteriologist Adolfo Lutz (1855-1940), Bertha was born in São Paulo and studied in France, where she was influenced by the international explosion of feminism, which was centered on the campaign for universal suffrage. Founded in 1922, the FBPF is generally seen as evidence that feminism’s first steps in Brazil were taken only by women from economic and intellectually elite groups, that is, women who were disconnected from the reality of most female workers.

However, that was not exactly what happened. A study by historian Gláucia Fraccaro points to the importance of political actions by women from the working class and their indirect influence on feminist leaders and organizations in the 1930s. Fraccaro recently defended her thesis

entitled “Os direitos das mulheres: Organização social e legislação trabalhista no entreguerras brasileiro (1917-1937)” (*Women’s rights: Social organization and labor legislation in Brazil during the interwar period (1917-1937)*) at the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences at Unicamp.

Fraccaro argues that the lack of attention paid to the history of working women is one of the factors that helped confirm the general impression that Brazilian feminism originated in the upper classes. At the same time, the notion took root that the working class had been missing in action when the feminist movement was emerging. However, one of the sources of organized feminist activity in the pursuit of rights is found not in movements by women from the elite but in the protagonist role played by women laborers in the strike that brought São Paulo to a standstill 100 years ago.

The general strike of 1917 was a reaction to a decline in purchasing power, a deterioration in working conditions, and an increase in the exploitation of child labor in industry. As a response to World War I, the acceleration in the manufacture of exports weighed heavily on worker families, who were impoverished and exhausted by longer working hours. Women made up the largest share of the labor force in the textile industry and represented about one-third of the urban workforce. Furthermore, most of the minors exploited by industry were girls. “When male and female workers rose up in a series of strikes starting in 1917, the concept emerged that social rights are not neutral and should encompass the status of women,” Fraccaro says.

This struggle led to victories during the first Getúlio Vargas administration (1930-1945). During that period, the political actions of Bertha Lutz were indirectly influenced by demands from working women. “Women from the Brazilian Communist Party denounced in the press the lack of concern for female workers expressed by the FBPF,” Fraccaro recalls, “while the transnational network that the Federation had joined imposed an agenda that involved maternity leave, a prohibition against night work for women, and the right to vote.” The pressures exerted by these movements led Vargas to approve a decree in 1932 that responded to those demands, including through an equal pay law that was never enforced. ■

### Project

50 years of feminism (1965-2015): new paradigms, future challenges (No. 12/23065-8); Grant Mechanism Thematic Project; Principal Investigator Eva Alterman Blay (USP); Investment R\$273,280.93.

### Books

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