



## WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN BRAZIL

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**RESUMO:** As mulheres no Brasil ganharam um tremendo impulso na participação política desde a transição para a democracia. A participação política aumentou não só em termos do aumento da participação das mulheres no voto, mas também em cargos políticos oficiais no Congresso e em ministérios executivos. Até agora, a entrada das mulheres na política brasileira tem sido examinada de uma forma ampla que destaca a participação das mulheres nos movimentos sociais e as características amplas da sua participação em instituições dominadas por homens. A introdução de leis que dizem respeito à protecção dos direitos das mulheres tem sido uma das questões centrais que as mulheres têm conseguido avançar, embora tenha certamente havido obstáculos à sua implementação. No entanto, defendo que é importante analisar com mais profundidade as realizações das mulheres eleitas, tanto no que diz respeito aos problemas pessoais que enfrentaram nas carreiras que escolheram (particularmente a discriminação e até que ponto têm de provar que são trabalhadoras e pessoas inteligentes) e com respeito aos obstáculos profissionais durante o seu mandato.

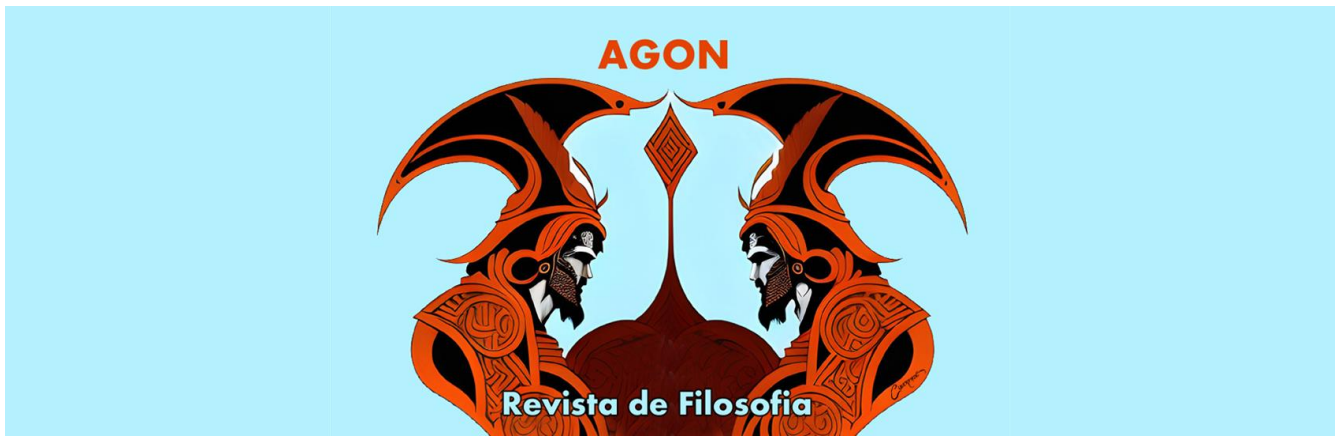
**Palavras-chave:** Mulheres; Brasil; Política;

**ABSTRACT:** Women in Brazil have gained a tremendous impetus in political participation since the transition to democracy. Political participation increased not only in terms of increased women's participation in voting, but also in official political positions in Congress and in executive ministries. Up until now, the entrance of women into Brazilian politics has been examined in a broad manner that highlights women's participation in social movements and the broad characteristics of their participation in institutions dominated by men. The introduction of laws that pertain to the protection of women's rights has been one of the central issues that women have been able to advance, although there have certainly been obstacles to their implementation. However, I argue that it is important to look in more depth at the achievements of elected women both with respect to the personal problems they have confronted in their chosen careers (particularly the discrimination and the extent to which they have to prove that they are hardworking and smart people) and with respect to the professional obstacles during their tenures in office.

**Keywords:** Women; Brazil; Policy;

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## FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO PARTY POLITICS

During the dictatorship era throughout Latin America, the women's movement became perhaps the greatest focus of political resistance, particularly in the opposition to the practices of torture, disappearances, murder, and other horrible human rights violations on the part of police and military officials who looked to curb leftist political influence. Throughout the region, women's groups such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, or the Arpillera movement in Chile confronted risky situations in order to denounce the abuses of the military governments. Through their protest actions, they called international attention to the situation in their countries, even in the context of great repression. Through their contacts with governmental and non-governmental organizations abroad, they raised money and awareness that were crucial in igniting international pressures on these governments to stop the violations (Loveman 1998). In Brazil, the Women's Movement for Amnesty, formed in 1975, became one of the strongest organizers of civil society opposition to the military government (Hahner 1982,87).

The protests against human rights also took part within a context of economic problems that affected women at the very foundation of their beings, the need to survive and to provide for their children and families. By the mid 1970s, the great inequality in the development program of the government meant that the popular sectors were suffering. The neoliberal socioeconomic transformations spurred by the military government in the 1980s affected women in very direct ways, since they were one of the hardest hit sectors. Hahner (1982, 83) argues that the bulk of nation-wide industrial jobs, even the ones requiring less skills, went to men, while most employed women remained in the lowest-paying textile and clothing industry. The austerity and unemployment that accompanied the structural

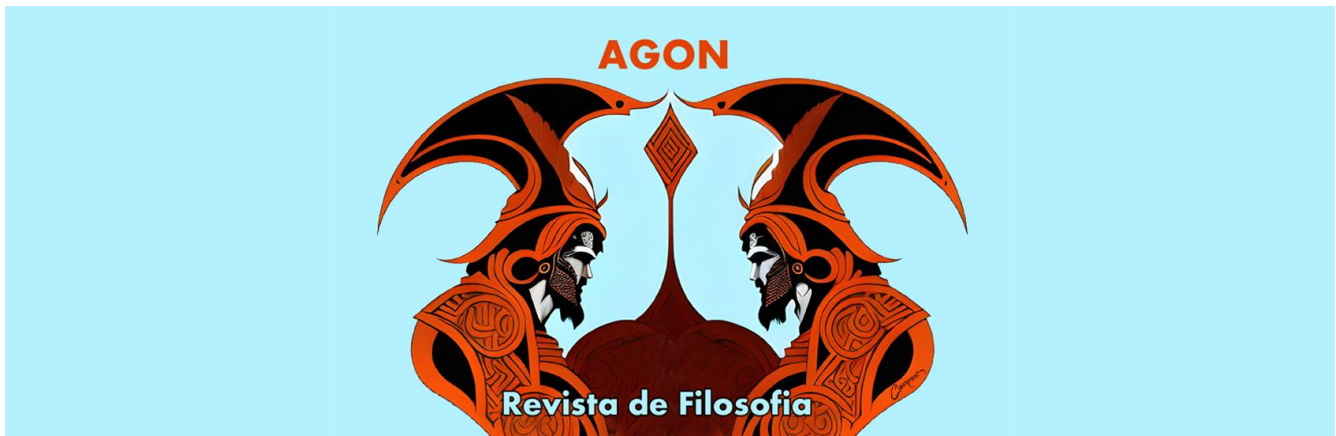


adjustment programs imposed by the governments in response to pressures from international financial institutions resulted in deteriorating living conditions particularly in the poor sectors of large urban centers.<sup>2</sup> In the popular neighborhoods, women's unemployment soared to high levels and many had to turn to informal work, usually selling trinkets in the street in order to survive. Additionally, they had to deal with the variety of problems they confronted in daily life, like deficiencies in water and sewage treatment, the lack of adequate and cheap transportation, daycare, hospitals, the high cost of living, and other urban services critical for women. Women's groups began to form in the favelas, spurred by the grassroots style of Catholicism endorsed by the liberation theology movement (Drogus and Stewart- Gambino 2005).

This mobilization represented something extraordinary, both in terms of the push for greater gender equality and for the empowerment of women themselves. In a patriarchal and traditionally Catholic society accustomed to perceiving women in their traditional role as mothers and housewives, the voicing of women and gendered issues outside the home was a novel accomplishment. In particular, the fact that these women were from the poorer sectors of society represented a strong challenge to the political, economic, and (in some cases) racial discrimination to which they had been accustomed. Although women had gained the right to vote in 1932, the advent of Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo rendered this political right null, since elections were banned (Hahner 1982, 85). However, many of the rights slowly being obtained by women (the right to a profession without the approval of the husband in 1962, the right not to be discriminated in employment decisions in 1968; divorce rights in 1977) were

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<sup>2</sup> The adjustment programs were adopted by the military government towards the end of the military period in response to the failing of import substitution industrialization and the consequent indebtedness in which the government found itself due to the financing of major nationalistic projects with money from international lending institutions and the IMF.

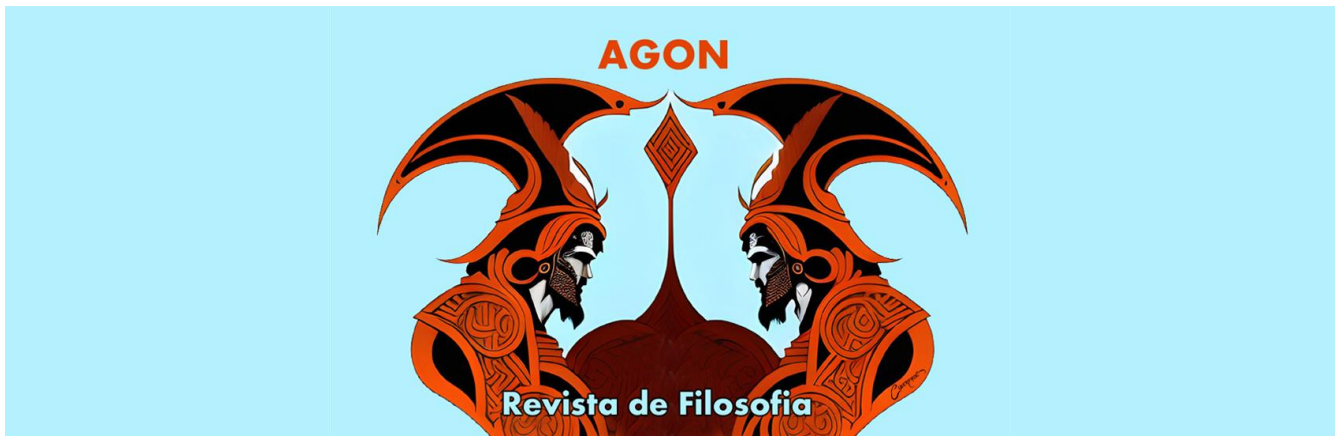


a consequence of activism by upper-middle class women who had participated in the suffrage movement in the 1930s (Hahner 1982, 85). Activism, however, had up until that point been largely restricted to the upper echelons of society. The women's movements during the dictatorship years in Brazil focused their struggle on achieving more egalitarian forms of social relations at all levels. Although the act of protesting implied a challenge to the patriarchal system which kept women in a subordinate position, as well as a push for gender rights that would legally equate women with men with respect to jobs and protection against personal safety, there were divisions within the women's movement. Not all the women took a proactive, feminist, position of wanting to transform their traditional roles<sup>3</sup>; many women rejected this approach in favor of one that embraced the femininity in their social roles and struggled for more traditional issues such as cost of living, and the creation of daycare centers that could facilitate women's employment (Alvarez 1990; Beckwith 2000). Feminist positions scared women who did not desire to transform gendered views. Thus, although gendered-specific issues were definitely included in the issues espoused by social movements, other immediate issues (such as class inequality, racial relations, etc) were often prioritized over gender inequality.

After the period of intense increase in women's participation in social movements that centered on economic survival, gender equality, and human rights issues in the 1960-1980s, the Brazilian women's movement experienced a decline, as did most social movements after the transition (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Drogus and Stewart- Gambino 2005). Once political parties took the lead in negotiating with the military government for political liberalization and impacted democratization, many women's organizations, even those within

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<sup>3</sup> Many important and enduring feminist movements were formed in the 1970s, including Nos, Mulheres, Brasil Mulher, and the Centro da Mulher Brasileira (see Hahner 1982).



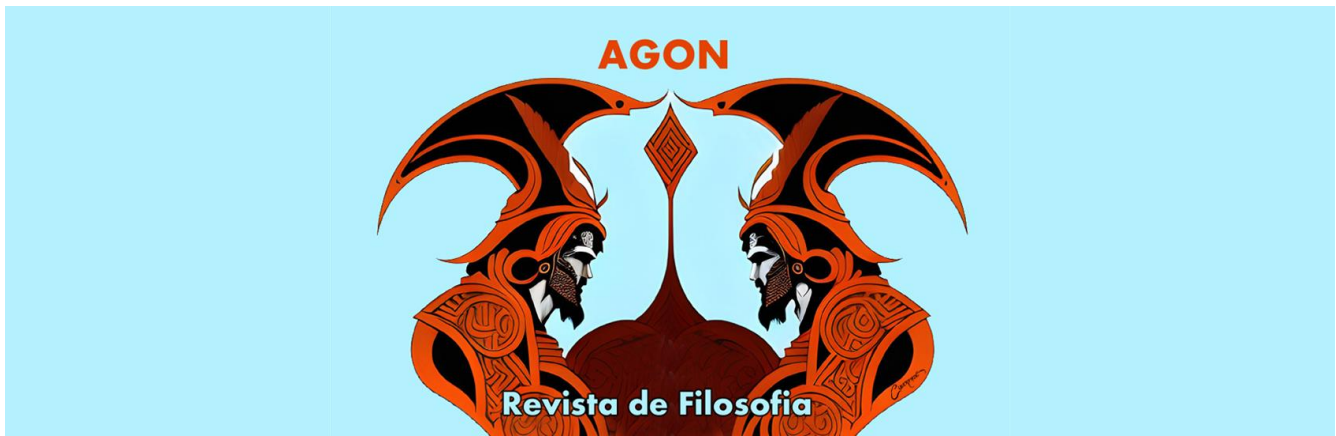
6

ecclesial base communities, began to disband. Partly, this was because the main objective, the return of democracy, had been fulfilled and now it was up to political actors to take it from there. Once the euphoria with democracy was fulfilled, however, and women perceived that the economic problems were enduring, women's movements somewhat disappeared within the myriad of small movements and local activism. Part of the problem was that organizations that were growing in strength, such as labor unions, subsumed many of women's issues under the labor rights and protections they were seeking in general, so as to not allow for the targeted government to get distracted with women's issues (Hahner 1982, 87).

## **WOMEN INSIDE POLITICS**

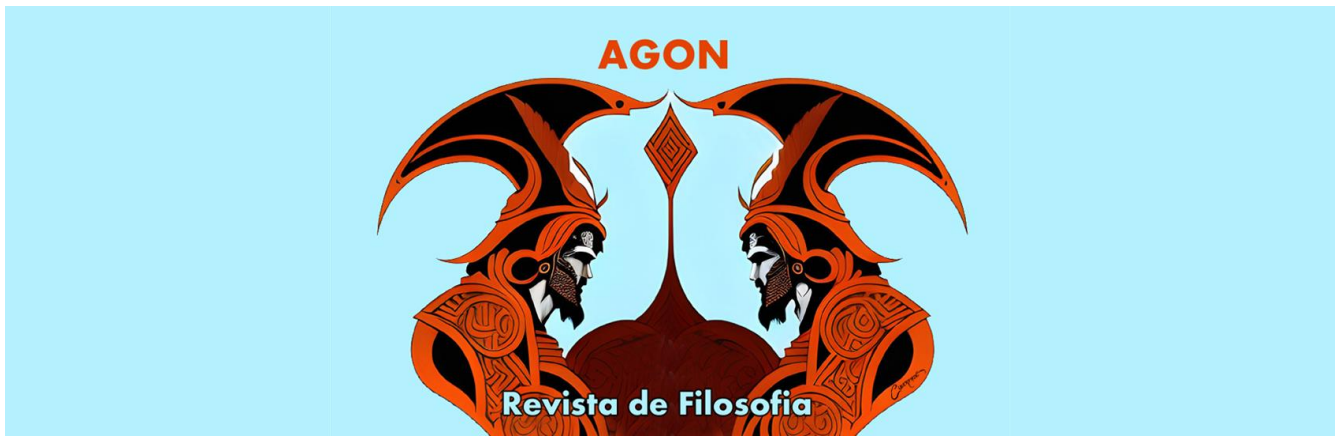
Nevertheless, women have slowly made their entrance into Brazilian politics. A handful of charismatic women have come to public office either by elections or by appointment in high-level positions in social and economic ministries. One of the most influential figures in the 1980s economic scene was Fernando Collor's Finance Minister Zélia Cardoso de Melo. The presence of women in Senate and Chamber of Deputies seats has been increasing since the mid 1980s. In the Chamber of Deputies, only eight women (out of 513 total legislators) were elected, while that number increased to 26 women in 1986, 29 in 1990, 32 in 1994 and 29 in 1998 (Avelar 2001, 58). In the 1999-2003 Senate, five senators were women, out of a total of 81 senators (Avelar 2001, 56). One of the most significant factors in elections since the transition to democracy has been the tremendous increase in the number of women candidates. While the 1982 elections included only 58 women in the ballots, the number of candidates increased to 352 in the 1998 elections. An important factor behind this substantial increase was the gender quota laws introduced in 1996 (Htun and Power 2006).





Despite the presence of women in the legislature, the reentrance of women's issues in the agenda of political leaders cannot be automatically assumed. Because of their primary identity as women, wives, and mothers, it is generally assumed that when women come to power they will tend to promote more legislation centered on gender equality, and pay more attention to education, health, poverty (Htun and Power 2006). However, there is a variety of reasons why this might not occur. For one, there may be a variety of legislative impediments to the espousing of women's rights, especially if these rights concern contentious topics such as the right to abortion, and equal pay for women in professional jobs. The substantial majority of male legislators can react against these rights, as in the case of Chile during the 1990s (Franceschet 2006).

Surprisingly, there are indications that this may not be happening in Brazil, since Htun and Power's attitudinal survey of the Brazilian Congress (2006) found that women's issues are well accepted among progressive male parliamentarians in the 1999- 2003 legislature. In particular, a majority of progressive party representatives declare themselves to be supportive of legislation that regulates labor market guidelines for women and the relaxation of restrictive abortion laws. Htun and Power (2006) suggest that association with progressive parties may spur more of a momentum to women- centered topics than the formation of a women's (only) caucus in Congress. Studies have found little variation in attitudes toward progressive policies between men and women. Many times, however, these attitudes are not directly translated into policy, since there are usually attempts by conservative legislators to block the legislation from being discussed in the Congressional floor, and thus the legislation languishes for years without even being voted on (Htun and Power 2006). Another impediment to elected women's proclivity to address gendered issues more efficiently is the fact that many of the elected women never make it to high positions in the legislative



commissions pertaining to women's issues or even education (Avelar 2001, 57). Nevertheless, there have been some policy successes, particularly in cross-partisan issues such as personal protection. For instance, women politicians have succeeded in introducing legislation classifying rape as a crime against the person, rather than against honesty or custom (Htun and Power 2006). The personal characteristics of elected women officials also have to be examined in order to better understand the level of legislative success. Many women elected to office have conservative political views, belong to conservative parties, or represent conservative regions (Avelar 2001, 57). Women representatives from the northern region of Brazil will have different views about the importance of gender rights than women elected in the southern, more industrialized states such as São Paulo. In addition, the level of education of women legislators may also be a factor affecting their views about how far to push for gender equality. I argue that it does exist the possibility of one woman emerging as a potential Presidential candidate that has no links to being a role model in Brazilian society. Her name is Dilma Rousseff and she identifies with the type of populism government President Lula embraces. She fought the dictatorship in Brazil and even participated in the first kidnapping of an Ambassador in Brazil. She robbed banks, confronted political figures but is a victim of political torture that will make Brazilians sympathize with her cause.

Unity of people can bring down any system, especially inspired by poverty and oppression. In the case of women in Brazilian politics, a unity will be formed if a male figure sponsors it and nobody more qualified than President Luís Ignácio Lula da Silva did. How many women will take to make a women President in Brazil? I argue that even if a woman is elected to be the President she will resemble the type of government President Lula sponsors. The voters need a role model, someone who can bring down the patriarchal system or find a balance between orders. Will that be Marina Silva or Dilma Rousseff? In American political



9

culture for instance, Richard Ellis constructs a well- documented argument that challenges the common idea that American political thought has been dominated by the cult of individualism and not unity. Although America was intentionally founded on precepts that were different from what existed in Europe, Ellis emphasizes that Lockean liberalism (with its focus on liberal rights) was not the only basis for the construction of political culture. Instead, American political culture has been an amalgamation of different rival political ideas, namely individualism, egalitarianism, hierarchy, fatalism, and hermitage. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources that span centuries of historical periods to defend this thesis, Ellis succeeds in getting this point across. The evolution of the communitarian conceptions of authority and social relationships, for instance, is one of the main innovations that this book provides to the understanding of American political life since it's founding. Another most important contribution is the view that people may have a consensus on what type of government they want (democracy) or on the fact that they value equality, but there are inevitably different understandings of what democracy and equality *means*. That is, people may talk the same language, but still not understand each other.





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