

## Women and politics: the Brazil paradox

By Ana Alice Alcântara,  
Created 2008-03-11 11:04

In June 2007 - five years after it was first promised during the 2002 electoral campaign - political reform finally made it onto the Brazilian National Congress [1] agenda. It was an opportunity for a corrupt Congress plagued by scandals to salvage its tarnished reputation by creating new criteria for representation, rethinking the role of the legislative branch, and establishing civil society-driven accountability mechanisms for both legislators and executives. After years of waiting, women were anticipating deep changes in the patriarchal rules and elitist power structures that had characterised the Brazilian state for decades. Instead, we watched as pacts and alliances among political cronies squelched the possibility of real reforms [2] yet again, and powers were redistributed based on a convenient set of political friendships rather than a genuine commitment to increasing parity. The majority of women's demands did not even come close to the negotiation tables. This was more than a defeat for women: it was a defeat for all Brazilian citizens.

### Confronting inequalities

Brazil is characterised by deep social and economic inequalities [5]. With one of the highest income concentrations in the world, a small sector of the population lives in opulence, while the majority live in poverty. Despite high hopes for widespread change, even the rise to power of the Labor Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores / PT* [6]) with the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva [7] (Lula) as president in 2002 and 2006 has done little to alter this landscape.

Women make up the majority of Brazil's poorest: they represent the majority of the unemployed, and even those Brazilian women who have jobs often suffer from disproportionately low salaries and few social protections. Women constitute 98% of Brazil's paid domestic workforce [8], but only 40% of these 12 million women enjoy any kind of employment benefits or social security.

Women face similar inequalities in the political sphere. We won the right to vote in 1934 [9], and even though women currently make up 51% of the electorate, we hold less than 10% of elected seats, placing Brazil among the countries of the world with the lowest proportion of women in public office [10].

This low rate of representation stands in contrast to the strength, reach, and political influence of Brazil's feminist movement. Despite three decades of vibrant activism and evolving engagement with the state, increasing women's political participation has remained an all but insurmountable challenge.

**Ana Alice Alcântara** is a professor of political science and member of the Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Studies on Women (NEIM [3]) at the Federal University of Bahia. She serves as vice-coordinator of the Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment for Latin America [4], and director of the Research Network of Studies on women and gender relations in Northern and Northeastern Brazil.

## A long struggle

Grounded in a left-wing ideology that seeks to radically transform the social relations of production, the women's movement - along with the rest of the [revolutionary left](#) [11] - spent its early years in the 1960s and 70s resisting the authoritarianism and repression of Brazil's military regime. Feminists, however, have always faced additional challenges from their so-called allies, including male-dominated left-wing social movements and political parties, as well as conservative elements of the "progressive" church who are uncomfortable with women's demands for equality and autonomy.

When the military regime fell in 1985, feminists recognised that the new democratic state could influence society beyond the coercive and punitive measures of the past. The modern state used laws, social and economic policies and programmes, public assistance, and regulatory mechanisms for both culture and mass communication. Since all of these channels represented major opportunities for women, feminists sought to forge a relationship with this new state, and the government became an important ally. Feminists were integrated into several state mechanisms and institutions designed to defend and promote women's rights, and feminist activists began to build alliances with women politicians.

A key victory came in 1988; through direct action aimed at parliamentarians (dubbed the "lipstick lobby" by the Brazilian press), feminists succeeded in securing most of their demands during the drafting of the new constitution, gaining a reputation as the most organised sector of civil society. The real innovation was the emergence of a "women's caucus" (*bancada feminina*), made up of female deputies from various political parties who transcended their partisan differences to push for a set of jointly agreed demands. The coordinated efforts of this "gender bloc" ensured the approval of the vast majority of women's proposals. For the feminist movement, it was a key lesson in the value of working effectively with female legislators to improve the legal system.

Nationwide, the movement was growing in size, influence, and scope as a so-called "popular feminism" gained momentum. Black women founded autonomous feminist organisations, pushing the boundaries and broadening the discourse of the entire movement.

By the mid-1990s a cohesive feminist platform was emerging amidst the movement's growing diversity. In preparation for the [World Conference on Women in Beijing](#) [14] in 1995, roughly 800 women's organisations from across Brazil contributed to the development of the Brazilian Women's Declaration to the Fourth Conference (*Declaração das Mulheres Brasileiras à IV Conferencia*), a process that was repeated in 2000 during preparations for the five-year review of the Beijing conference. Building on this capacity to convene and coordinate, in the lead-up to the 2002 elections, feminist networks and groups brought

Also in **openDemocracy**:

Andrea Cornwall, "[Pathways to women's empowerment](#)" [12] (27 July 2007)

Srilatha Batliwala, "[Women transforming power?](#) [12]" (6 October 2007)

Mulki Al-Sharmani, "[Egypt's family courts: route to empowerment?](#) [12]" (7 September 2007)

Naila Kabeer, "[Marriage, motherhood and masculinity in the global economy](#) [12]" (29 January 2008)

Emily Esplen, "[Men and gender justice: old debate, new perspective](#) [12]" (28 February 2008)

These articles open a new collaboration between **openDemocracy** and the research consortium [Pathways of Women's Empowerment](#) [13] project at the [Institute of Development Studies](#), University of Sussex. This explores ideas, projects and initiatives from around the world - Brazil to Egypt, Sierra Leone to Bangladesh - which aims to understand what enables women to empower themselves and sustain changes in

together more than 5,000 women from all over the country through 26 state-level conferences aimed at building a common "Feminist Political Platform" (*Plataforma Política Feminista* [15]). The platform, which represented a comprehensive overview of feminist demands, was delivered to all of the presidential candidates prior to the election. Two years later in 2004, president-elect Lula organised the first National Conference on Public Policies for Women [16] in partnership with the National Secretariat for Women's Policies. An estimated 500,000 women participated.

## **From theory to practice**

This is the key paradox of Brazilian feminism: its political strength has succeeded in putting women's demands on the table, but it has failed to open formal political spaces to women themselves.

Feminists first organised to address women's political representation in 1995. They worked closely with federal deputies to establish a gender quota for political participation, and the resulting law guaranteed that 30 percent of all candidates in proportional elections (town councilors, as well as state and federal deputies) would be women.

Despite this legislative success, the quota has not translated in practice for three main reasons:

- The law does not include a penalty for parties who fail to meet the quota, so many simply ignore it
- It provides no concrete support for female candidates, such as public campaigning funds or free TV and radio advertising
- It neither establishes nor incentivises the creation of any mechanisms within political parties to encourage women's political development and education.

In the absence of these enforcement and support mechanisms, increasing the proportion of women who hold public office in Brazil has remained an elusive goal.

## **Bridging the gap**

Part of the democratization process in Brazil has been the creation of a participatory governance structure that operates in parallel to the representative democratic system. At each of the three tiers of government, sectoral secretariats—such as for health, education, women, environment and so on—are obliged to hold regular conferences to engage with organized civil society in shaping and monitoring public policies. These conferences offer a significant opportunity for social movements to engage with the state, composed as they are of 50% representation by organized civil society and 50% representatives of the state.

In the northeastern state of Bahia, I worked with colleagues from the Interdisciplinary Nucleus of Studies on Women (NEIM [17]) of the Federal University of Bahia through six municipal conferences to establish consensus on a set of consistent proposals that would address women's demands through the creation of institutional mechanisms aimed at facilitating truly democratic participation. Our proposal, which centered on the need for strong legislation that would guarantee political parity between men and women in all public functions and positions, as well as public funding for election campaigns and women's political development, was approved at the state conference in Bahia and sent on to Brasilia for consideration at the national conference. By the time it reached Brasilia, it had benefited from a process of consultation involving 250,000 women from across the country.

Meanwhile, we worked to build support and awareness among lawmakers by organising a seminar entitled "Pathways for Women's Empowerment: International experiences of Affirmative

Action" during the political reform process that took place at the Brazilian National Congress in June 2007. The seminar, which brought together federal deputies, senators, and male parliamentarians, as well as representatives from the executive branch and women activists from both feminist organisations and political parties, was organised by NEIM, with support from national and international partners [18]. Focusing on a critical evaluation of the Brazilian quota system, the seminar sought to build politicians' and activists' awareness of the kind of reforms that are needed to bring about significant shifts in women's political representation, based on women's experiences in other countries. It coincided with a week of high-profile political reform, and attracted significant attention in both the National Congress and Brazilian press.

Clara Araújo from the State University of Rio de Janeiro provided a real insight into the Brazilian experience identifying a number of weaknesses in Brazil's political system, in particular, the government's inability to redistribute power over the last 13 years, which has consistently kept women (among others) outside the decision-making sphere. This analysis was confirmed by the reform process that ensued that very same week. Despite a unified set of proposals backed up by international experience and strong state-civil society partnerships, feminists and their allies in the Brazilian legislature were able to secure few measures aimed at ensuring gender parity in political representation.

Women managed to guarantee that free TV and radio advertising for political parties would address the political participation of women, and succeeded in ensuring that 20% of public campaigning funds would be set aside for female candidates (10% less than the desired 30%, which would correspond to the current quota), yet very few of women's overall demands were incorporated into the Political Reform Project's official report (PL 1210/07), and still fewer made it onto the list of final reforms.

The Brazilian women's movement is accustomed to transforming experiences of struggle into opportunities for learning. Despite the overall defeat, women used the political reform process [19] to organise, raise awareness, build new alliances, and strengthen existing collaborations with members of the executive branch and female deputies and senators from the legislative branch. Two months later, the women's movement entered the Second National Conference on Women's Policies armed with new allies and broader public and political support for its original proposal. At that conference, the proposal was strongly reaffirmed, and the women's movement was able to secure a commitment from the federal government to make building representative parity among men and women a national priority. Time will tell if this commitment will translate into real changes. Until then, Brazilian feminists and their allies will continue to capitalise on every opportunity they have to build momentum and support for balancing the scales of power for the sake of women, and for the sake of Brazil.

*This article was translated from Portuguese by Andrea Lynch.*

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/5050/political\\_representation\\_brazil](http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/5050/political_representation_brazil)

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.britannica.com/eb/topic-404620/National-Congress>

[2] <http://www.economist.com/hk/>

[displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=9409179&CFID=12091827&CFTOKEN=c93d3e7c808128fc-9952803A-B27C-BB00-012BCD38DAFC0B9C](http://www.economist.com/hk/displayStory.cfm?story_id=9409179&CFID=12091827&CFTOKEN=c93d3e7c808128fc-9952803A-B27C-BB00-012BCD38DAFC0B9C)

[3] <http://www.projetotempo.neim.ufba.br/>

[4] [http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/hub\\_lamerica.html](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/hub_lamerica.html)

[5] <http://wbln1018.worldbank.org/LAC/LAC.nsf/ECADocbyUnid/28840FED2FE42C2A85256E4D00661B68?Opendocument>

- [6] <http://www.pt.org.br/portalpt/index.php>
- [7] <http://www.presidencia.gov.br/ingles/president/>
- [8] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/developmentcommunications/story/2006/07/060710\\_domestic\\_workers.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/developmentcommunications/story/2006/07/060710_domestic_workers.shtml)
- [9] <http://countrystudies.us/brazil/99.htm>
- [10] [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2267/is\\_3\\_69/ai\\_94227139/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2267/is_3_69/ai_94227139/pg_1)
- [11] <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1772491,00.html>
- [12] [http://opendemocracy.net/article/pathways\\_of\\_womens\\_empowerment](http://opendemocracy.net/article/pathways_of_womens_empowerment)
- [13] <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/Part/proj/pathways.html>
- [14] <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>
- [15] [http://www.cladem.org/portugues/nacionais/brasil/plataforma\\_politica\\_feminista.asp](http://www.cladem.org/portugues/nacionais/brasil/plataforma_politica_feminista.asp)
- [16] <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38922>
- [17] <http://www.projetotempo.neim.ufba.br/>
- [18] [http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/lamerica\\_projnews.html](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/lamerica_projnews.html)
- [19] [http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=10104985](http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=10104985)



This article is published by Ana Alice Alcântara, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.