

# What to do with teenage sexuality? The anthropology of forms of government in Brazil

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses how the Brazilian Ministry for Women, the Family and Human Rights operates in relation to the prevention of so-called “teenage pregnancy”, analysing the Ministry’s political strategies, directives, initiatives for conversation with society-at-large, and campaigns for engaging their target public. We find, at the interstices of state bureaucracy, peculiar ways of dealing with and erasing teenage sexuality and gender markers that bear on teenage socialization, both of which are constitutive dimensions of these subjects, in favour of an idyllic family ethos which is contrasted to the sociocultural, material and symbolic dimensions that weave relations between generations within the domestic sphere. Childhood and self-care become central to government rhetoric, mobilizing conservative strategies that stem from an alarmist outlook which remains restricted to the private domain, singling out the (cis)heteronormative family – rather than schools – as the *locus* for sexuality education.

**Key words:** teenage pregnancy; sexuality; gender; reproduction; family; State.

# O que fazer com a sexualidade adolescente?

## Antropologia das formas de governo no Brasil

### Resumo

O artigo discute as formas de atuação do Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, no que concerne à chamada prevenção da “gravidez precoce”, analisando suas estratégias políticas, diretrizes de governo, iniciativas de diálogo com a sociedade civil e campanhas de mobilização do público ao qual se dirigem as ações do Estado. Nos interstícios da burocracia estatal, gestam-se modos peculiares de enfrentamento e de apagamento das sexualidades adolescentes, bem como das marcas de gênero que incidem em sua socialização, como dimensões constitutivas destes sujeitos, em prol de um ethos familiar idílico que se contrapõe às dimensões socioculturais, materiais e simbólicas, que integram as relações entre gerações no espaço doméstico. A infância e o autocuidado adquirem centralidade nos discursos governamentais, mobilizando estratégias conservadoras derivadas de um enfoque alarmista e restrito ao âmbito privado, ao eleger a família (cis)heteronormativa, e não as escolas, como lócus da educação em sexualidade.

**Palavras-chave:** gravidez na adolescência; sexualidade; gênero; reprodução; família; Estado.

# What to do with teenage sexuality?

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### **Introduction**

This article sits within the field of studies usually called “reproductive governance”, which considers that sexuality and reproduction are woven and permeated by the cultural stamp of a given historical and socio-political configuration. In a recent analysis of the theme (Brandão and Cabral, 2021) we retrieved the original formulation of the concept by the feminist anthropologists Lynn Morgan and Elizabeth Roberts (2012: 243):

the mechanisms through which different historical configurations of actors – such as state institutions, churches, donor agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – use legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor and control reproductive behaviours and practices.<sup>1</sup>

As we claimed, the concept of “reproductive governance” is not new, much like the multiple connections which exist between race, social class, reproduction, gender, sexuality, health and the (nation) state (Brandão and Cabral, 2021: 52). The challenge before us is to elucidate the contemporary forms of these socio-technical and political strategies, in close dialogue with discourse on human rights.

Within debates on this theme, Fonseca et al. (2021: 12) point to Morgan and Robert’s insistence, in what pertains to Latin American studies, on so-called “moral regimes”, which, “due to global logics which pervade national strategies of intervention, exert a normative influence on practices of reproduction, sexual behaviour and gender relations”. In Foucault’s (1999, 2008) terms, and in those of authors who have developed his theories (Fassin & Memmi, 2004), such “moral regimes” are ways of governing bodies and subjecting them to the laws of the State.

If, at the time, we broached the matter of contraception, and in particular of long-acting reversible contraception, under the lens of this conceptual and political framework, our focus is now on the “moral regimes” that dominate the federal government’s management of so-called “premature sexual risk”. In contradiction to the urgency and gravity of unintentional pregnancy, in particular in a country which does not consider abortion to be a woman’s right, the ministerial office, headed by Pastor Damares Alves, “mocks” the theme, infantilizing youth and teenagers, stripping them of the teaching of sexuality and gender. In order to gauge the importance of unintentional pregnancy in different contexts, at both a local and global scale, a recent report of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2022) draws attention to the theme, stressing the need to make visible an “invisible” social fact. This situation tends to be aggravated during crises, pandemics, humanitarian conflicts, and so forth. According to the report, unintentional pregnancy is directly related to

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent article, Morgan (2019: 113) rewrites the preceding definition: “[...] refers to the mechanisms through which different historical configuration of actors – such as state, religious, and international financial institutions, NGOs, and social movements – use legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviors and population practices”.

social development and to inequality of gender within a territory or nation. A study covering 96% of the world's teenage population has observed that, within the set of the world's least developed countries, almost one in every three young women between the ages of 20 and 24 had become mothers during adolescence (between 10 and 19 years of age), the majority being around 17 years of age (UNFPA, 2022: 115). In Brazil, between 2004 and 2020, birth rates for teenagers were at around 49 per 1000 girls aged between 15 and 19 (UNFPA, 2022: 126).

Despite a political agenda in defence of sexual and reproductive rights (Corrêa and Petchesky, 1996) which finds echo in other Latin American countries<sup>2</sup>, The Ministry of Women, the Family and Human Rights (Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, henceforth MMFDH) conjoins an anti-gender rhetoric (Bulgarelli and Almeida, 2022; Miguel, 2021; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Junqueira, 2018)<sup>3</sup> with a pro-life initiative, taking the (cisgender) heteronormative family (rather than the individual subject) as the idyllic matrix, the locus of matrimonial and filial love.

The effacement of inequalities of class, race/ethnicity, gender, generation, and sexual orientation is the more immediate corollary of government actions centred on the family which silence the multiple conflicts that exist among its members, charging it with “educating” children and teenagers to find “matrimonial love”. The proximity of representatives of the ministry with the movements that promote pre-marital celibacy is not random.<sup>4</sup> The Biblical trope of feminine chastity is the basis of the moral regime that informs initiatives seeking to curb “premature sexual risk”, focusing on women (girls and mothers) and the “mismanagement of flesh” that is believed to be at the root of “premature” reproduction.

In her ethnographic study of the *Eu escolhi esperar* Movement (I chose to wait Movement), Terassi Hortelan (2018, 2020) shows how aspiration to joy in marriage is intertwined with the ideal of romantic love and the gender grammar that reifies the traditional roles of women in the family. Suppressing sex before marriage becomes a path towards a healthy, monogamous, and indissoluble cisgender heterosexual relationship. As she states: “by means of technologies of the self, which aim for the self-government “of flesh”: princes and princesses are thus individuals capable of self-government aspiring to the projects of amorous achievements” (2018: 273). Promoting values such as “sexual purity” and “emotional health”, a pedagogy of affect is activated so that “waiting” (pre-marital sexual abstinence) becomes a choice for “true liberty” (Hortelan, 2020). We will see how this rhetoric of “sexual preservation” recurrently emerges in the documents analysed here.

This article thus aims to question and unveil the government strategies implemented in Brazil during the last years that seek to inhibit teenage pregnancy, articulating them with a wider moral and religious conservatism that pervades the government of president Jair Bolsonaro.

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2 Abortion, it should be noted, was decriminalized in Argentina (2020), Mexico (2021), and Colombia (2022). Chile has summoned a new Constitutional Assembly which may rewrite abortion legislation.

3 A number of studies have investigated conservative, anti-gender invectives at the international and local levels, presupposing a partnership between Catholic and Evangelical religious groups in order to restore traditional values by denying sexual and gender diversity. These movements are furthermore in collusion with the political agenda of the far right.

4 On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2019, a congress held in the house of representatives, promoted by the Ministry, discussed the postponement of the sexual initiation of teenagers, inspired by the religious initiative ([www.euescolhiesperar.com](http://www.euescolhiesperar.com)) and the North American Ascend, represented by its president, Mary Anne Mosack, ([weascend.org/about-us/](http://weascend.org/about-us/)). Ascend is a social organization active in Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Programs. A bill of law (n. 813/2019) is being considered in the São Paulo state legislature, signed by the Evangelical city councillor Rinaldi Digilio (PSL), which would instate the “I choose to wait” week to prevent and raise awareness of premature pregnancy (São Paulo, 2019).

## Methodological Inspirations

The theme defined above is developed through anthropological research following the method of ethnography with documents. This method is itself inspired by anthropological studies of public administration and governance (Teixeira & Lima, 2010; Vianna, 2013; Fonseca et al., 2016; Ferreira and Lowenkron, 2020) and ways of governing bodies and populations (Foucault, 1999, 2008; Fassin & Memmi, 2004) as materialized in the normative dimensions which penetrate the quotidian of political institutions and those who use them by means of vast documentation. By poring over the values and meanings of ways of governing, we also scan the “two-way fabrication of gender and the State” (Viana & Lowenkron, 2017). What are the predominant discursive forms? What moral grammar surrounds such initiatives? Which semantics are used to rename consolidated social practices? How do “discursive practices on ‘good’ sex, ‘good’ gender, and the ‘good’ State” (Vianna & Lowenkron, 2017: 6) incite discriminations and inequality? According to Vianna and Lowenkron (2017: 50), “the quotidian of administrative instances that make themselves the State in the lives of people is shot through with pedagogies of inequality of every order, including gender”. What prudish pedagogy and rhetoric does the MMFDH activate and make resound in the public that their actions target?

To capture the “State in action”, public policies in movement, the social groups that they target, to attend to in the day to day of their practices of administration, the role of civil religious institutions in formulating government policies – these are the challenges which our analysis must meet. Even if members of the MMFDH do not recognise ‘gender’ as an analytical and political category, its absence in documents is indicative of what it seeks to deny or make invisible.

This article queries documents coming from the MMFDH, some in partnerships with the Ministries of Education, Health, Citizenship, and presidential decrees, all of which, in my view, consolidate the familial ideal (Miotto et al., 2015; Moraes et al., 2020) predominant in the federal government’s public battle against teenage pregnancy. These documents attest to a set of bureaucratic strategies, ranging from notices of public funding for research aimed at strengthening families, to financial support for municipal public policies that support families, audio-visual campaigns in the media, monitoring and surveillance in schools, and the *disque denúncia* (Disque Direitos Humanos 100), a hotline for reporting human rights violation, as well as other strategies for garnering resources and institutional agencies for the desired moral and familial reordering.

The documents analysed are publicly available on the internet, and they mostly concern the theme of sexuality and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. I will first focus on the National Strategy for Strengthening Family Ties (Estratégia Nacional de Fortalecimento dos Vínculos Familiares), which was the object of a presidential decree (Brasil, 2020a). I consider this to be the main inspiration for subsequent policies aimed at the family, since it states the main operational directives of the MMFDH. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, an inter-ministerial ordinance created a working group to draft the National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy (Brasil, 2022a), published in February 2022, alongside two other statements which complement the guidelines for action on this front (Brasil, 2022b, 2022c).

The Bolsonaro government, it should be recalled, created in the National Week for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy in 2019, through law n<sup>o</sup>. 13.798, signed on January 2019. The Week is observed every year in the first week of February.<sup>5</sup> In January 2020, public debate on the undesired effects of “teenage pregnancy” was promoted through a partnership between the MMFDH and the Ministry Health (MS), using the slogan “Adolescence first, pregnancy later – everything in its time”. Despite not explicitly adopting the expression “sexual abstinence”, perhaps due to its widespread rejection and the criticism it had received from specialists and healthcare

<sup>5</sup> Since the school year begins in February, PL n<sup>o</sup> 4.883/2020, which is being discussed in the National Congress, hope to instate the National Week for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy for the week that falls on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, a date in which over 70 countries observe the Global Day for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy.

professionals, the underlying appeal of a delayed start to sexuality set the agenda of the campaign. We have elsewhere analysed in greater detail the two conflicting perspectives on teenage sexuality: one a more comprehensive approach, and another which is more controlling (Cabral and Brandão, 2020).

Other ethnographic work has also focused on the material explored here, dealing with how to qualify/discriminate the (young) women who make use of social infrastructure, such as day cares or basic health units, defined as “teens”, “nervous moms” (Fernandes, 2017, 2019) or “difficult patients” (Milanezi, 2019), thereby reiterating the non-compliance of these women to the public policies that are offered to them as a “gift” rather than a right. Finally, Corossacz (2009) and Faya-Robles (2015) are also sources of inspiration for my research on the theme of reproduction in Brazil.

As we will see, the analytical and political framing of the problem of “teenage pregnancy” blurs into an emphasis on the purported risks of “premature” sexual activity between two cisgender heterosexual persons, fuelling the atmosphere of moral panic that surrounds teenage sexuality. Instead of promoting opportunities that allow teenagers to prepare themselves for sexual experiences with others, this only generates more fear. It is only coexistence and debate with peers that enables learning the many idioms that pervade social relations between men and women, such as gender, race and class hierarchies, violence, monetary exchanges, and sexual and gender diversity.

This article is thus structured in the following way: it begins with an analysis of the impact of the MMFDH, which places at the centre of its agenda public policies for the family and for individual subjects in their specificities and inequalities. This turn is central to understanding the backdrop to their initiatives against “teenage pregnancy”. I then move on to the National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy, so that we may pinpoint the main strategies for engaging children and teenagers under the care of their families. Finally, I consider some paths for reflection that remain uncharted, by way of a process of constituting “new” norms in relation to the health of teenagers, in particular in what pertains to their sexual and reproductive dimensions.

### **An emphasis on the family as the *locus* of government social intervention**

The Ministry of Women, the Family, and Human Rights (MMFDH) is today the main articulator of anti-gender policies in Brazil, operating in distinct social areas.<sup>6</sup> A wide set of political and public initiatives have sought to convert the family into the central nucleus of state intervention since the Presidential Decree nº 10.570, published on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2020 (Brasil, 2020a), which instituted the National Strategy for Strengthening Family Ties and established an inter-ministerial committee to monitor it.<sup>7</sup> This committee is presided by the minister of the MMFDH, gathering representatives of the ministries of Citizenship, of Health, of Education, and the Executive Office of the President, with a deadline of one year to implement its policies. The executive secretary of this inter-ministerial committee has been occupied by the National Secretary of the Family, the Catholic lawyer Angela Gandra.

6 Other ministries are also involved in this moral crusade against so-called “gender ideology”, including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Health. However, Damares Alves’ persistence in the role during all of Jair Bolsonaro’s term, in contrast to her changing colleagues in other ministries, no doubt places her at the head of this political aim.

7 The full text of the decree can be consulted at: [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_Ato2019-2022/2020/Decreto/D10570.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2019-2022/2020/Decreto/D10570.htm)

Along with the creation of the National Family Observatory<sup>8</sup>, of a National School of the Family<sup>9</sup>, of public notices of support for research that seeks to strengthen public policies which target the family, and the Coordinating Agency for Advanced Training in Graduate Education (CAPES) of the Ministry of Education (Brasil, 2021a), the MMFDH acts in two fronts to garner support for its agenda: through the municipal public sphere and through private ventures. The Family-Friendly Municipal Programme (Programa Município Amigo da Família (PMAF)), instated by decree nº 1.756 and put into effect on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, is an initiative that seeks to promote acts that implement public policies focused on the family and which strengthen marital and intergenerational bonds. An Award for Good Practices in Municipal Family Policies was also instated (Brasil, 2020b). The Family Public Policies guidebook (Brasil, 2020c), aimed at city managers, clarifies the requisite procedures for participating in the Program. Hoping for support from the private sector, the Family-Work Equilibrium Programme, instated by Bill nº 2.904, signed on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2020 (Brasil, 2020d), aims to find an equilibrium between family and the workplace by means of continuing education, the creation of the “A family-friendly business” seal, and the Award for Best Practices in Work-Family Equilibrium. A noteworthy feature is how the MMFDH allows for partnerships between public or private jural persons, opening up the possibility of establishing alliances with multiple religious institutions which are active in various social fields, including therapeutic communities, missionary activities, education, creation and development of public policies for social aide, the protection of childhood/youth, and so forth.

Two further initiatives of the MMFDH are relevant to the theme of this article. First, the Education and Family Programme, created by bill nº 571, passed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2021 by the Ministry of Education, known as “Family in School” (Brasil, 2021b), which, among many initiatives which seek to involve families in their children’s school life and educational institutions, promised to create the “Dial School” app, through which families could consult the educational content taught to children and teenagers. Monitoring what goes on in public schools in order to filter content which the MMFDH considers to be inadequate to the socialization of children and teenagers, has been a recurring strategy of the present government. Second, the “Strong Families” Programme<sup>10</sup> (Brasil, 2021c), which, adapting methodologies developed in European and North American contexts, allows the MMFDH to launch or update programmes and initiatives that seek to strengthen family ties. As the Programme’s website stresses:<sup>11</sup>

“Various studies have demonstrated that an improvement in the quality of family relations, through honing parental and socioeconomic capabilities, favours the healthy development of children and teenagers, reducing risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug consumption, truancy, involvement in violence, premature sexual initiation and teenage pregnancy”.

As its website makes clear, the “Strong Families” Programme (2021c) is configured by a “methodology of seven weekly meetings for families with children between 10 and 14 years of age that seeks to promote the wellbeing of family members, strengthening process of protecting and constructing family resilience and reducing risks related to problematic behaviour”.

8 The Observatory’s page reads: “A service of the federal government, under the supervision of the National Secretary of the Family, which aims to foment, produce and disseminate scientific knowledge on the family, strengthening conversations between the academic community, public policy makers concerned with the family, and the many actors involved with this theme”.

9 This is a virtual platform that seeks to further the continuing education of parents/caretakers and professionals interested in the theme of the family and parental education. Its aim is to strengthen family ties and to promote qualified instruction on the themes of the family and parental education.

10 This is an adaptation, to the Brazilian context, of the *Strengthening Families Programme* (SFP-UK), drafted by the Oxford Brookes School of Health and Social Care. It aims to aide youth with substance abuse problems. As of 2019, its coordination has been transferred to the MMFDH.

11 Available at: <http://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/navegue-por-temas/familia/familias-fortes-1>

We can see that a clear strategy of the federal government, particularly the MMFDH, is the disarticulation of organized civil society, instituting a single (natural) model of social organization – the family. The family is, of course, understood to be derived from the union of a cisgender heterosexual couple and their descendant and ascendant kin. Emphasis has been placed on overtures to religious institutions that support the Bolsonaro government, participate in educational processes, are attentive to healthcare and social aid for families. Such a presence depoliticizes and de-professionalizes the work of government agencies in the eyes of citizens.

The Report on the Anti-Gender Offensive in Brazil (SPW 2021), a document submitted to the United Nations Independent Expert on Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, elaborated by various nongovernmental organizations in 2021, synthesizes some of the directives of the MMFDH:

1. The promotion of municipal policies for strengthening and monitoring family structures through newly-established local mechanisms that rely on the support of religious organizations;
2. A national public call for registering partnerships with religious entities in the MMFDH's development policies;
3. Establishment of a training platform for forming local 'tutelary councillors' qualified to implement the MMFDH's directives for family policies. By means of learning at a distance strategies, the MMFDH will offer various courses centred on the "Strong Families" programme;
4. The Establishment of a new line of financial investments of the MMFDH to 'form human resources in strategic areas' and to improve social science research on the family and related policies, in partnership with the Coordinating Agency for Advanced Training in Graduate Education (CAPES) of the Ministry of Education (SPW 2021: 22).

According to the Sexuality Policy Observatory (SPW, 2021: 18), the struggle against "gender ideology" and the promotion of "traditional values" are central to the National Policy of Human Rights. This led to a crucial turn in the protection of subjects deemed to be "vulnerable". The human rights rhetoric is no longer restricted to the human person, in her autonomy, liberty and individuality, having been redirected to the (cisgender heterosexual) family as a moral value that needs to be protected. A vast linguistic and political repertoire is being constructed to obliterate teenagers as right-bearing subjects (Leite, 2013) in their sexual and reproductive experiences. Control over the temporality of sexual initiation has been the main government strategy, hedging its bets on the delay of the start of sexuality, appealing to parents and caretakers as partners in this moral endeavour.

A resignification of "human rights" is being promoted, based on the exclusion of premises dear to so-called sexual rights and reproductive rights (Correa & Petchesky, 1996; Carrara & Vianna, 2008; Vianna & Lacerda, 2004), including sex and gender diversity, reproductive autonomy, abortion, and secular sexual education. A concrete example of this trend is the creation of a new "taxonomy" to guide the work of the Ministry's National Regulator of Human Rights (Brasil, 2020e). The manual contains a new classification of crimes, in which the vocabulary of gender is notably absent.

Contrary to what one might have imagined, "family public policies" do not concern themselves with redistributive social policies or cash-transfer programmes, with ending hunger or poverty, or even with settling families in rural properties. For a policy to be deemed to be oriented toward the 'family' in the context of this ideology, it must aim to strengthen the (hierarchical) structure of the ties between family members. This may seem naïve, even childish, were it not for the fact that the focus on family relations is a subterfuge for suppressing government investment in education, health, the environment, culture, jobs, and food safety.

A structural view of society and its development is thereby substituted by a simplistic, voluntaristic, and reductionist conception which finds in the social relations of families the origin of “social problems” which affect the wider collectivity, society and the State. According to this neoliberal conception, public space is ordered by a private, family-centred and religious logic.

In alliance with municipal authorities and civil society (religious) organizations, the expansion of family public policies in Brazil transfers the root of all evil to the precarity of family ties, which is said to result in violence, criminality, truancy, alcohol and substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and so forth. In the available documents, the ideal family format is the cisgender heterosexual couple with their sons and daughters. There is no discussion of gender hierarchy, plural models of the family, nor of the many family configurations that we find in demographical or anthropological studies, where ties of affinity and consanguinity cut across each other (grandparents and their grandchildren, women heads of households, a couple with their children and grandchildren, etc., homosexual couples with their children, among others).

A range of notices for partnerships with CAPES and the Ministry of Education were announced to fund research on policies for the family. These are in consonance with the government’s dismantling of scientific research and technological innovation, as well as the political persecution of the social and human sciences, particularly in light of their typically critical position against the federal government’s infringement of human rights (of the rights of Indigenous peoples, maroons, rural workers, peripheral populations in urban centres, and others). Going against research that social scientists have carried out for decades, dealing with inequalities of class, race, ethnicity, and gender in Brazil, the MMFDH intends to ban “Marxist” influences and with they call “gender ideology” in favour of an ethnocentric and religious view of just what a ‘family’ is supposed to be.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we see how the State has reorganized itself against gender and its instability and flux – which invites us to inhabit society alongside the existence of multiple bodies – by stabilizing and fixing finely delimited categories (masculine x feminine; man x women; adult x child) and re-articulating them, within the family, in alignment with the order of nature and the divine.

## **Preventing “premature sexual risk”**

The development of my argument requires an investigation into the normative and political markers of what is called the National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy, launched in February 2022, as a joint initiative of the MMFDH and Ministries of Health, Education, and Citizenship (Brasil, 2022a). There are two accompanying guides to this Plan, which I will also take under analysis. These are the Selfcare Guide: Recommendations for the Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy (Brasil, 2022b) and the Orientation Guide on the Prevention of Premature Sexualization in Early Infancy (Brasil, 2022c). The presentation of the latter guide, prepared by the National Secretary for Early Infancy Care, itself linked to the Special Secretary of Social Development of the Ministry of Citizenship, begins thus: “The Federal Government’s motto is: God, Country and Family”. The secularity of the democratic, lawful State has imploded and is constantly called into question.

Since the start of the moral crusade against what (Catholic and Evangelical) conservative and religious sectors call “gender ideology”, children and teenagers have been seen to be a priority group in terms of which public opinion is mobilized regarding the perils of public debate on sexuality and gender, particularly in schools, insofar as these themes are deemed to incite sexual initiation and conversation to homosexuality,

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<sup>12</sup> The latest initiative of the MMFDH, through the National Secretary of Women’s Policies, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, was public notice nº 01 with the certification of an Ambassador for the Mothers of Brazil Programme, seeking out a volunteer for “the integral protection of the exercise of maternity and the promotion of the right to life from conception until natural death, observing birth rights through policies of responsible paternity, family planning and pregnancy care”. For further details, see Brasil 2022d.

as well as to blur gender differences. Vanessa Leite (2019) has shown that the defence of a puerile and idealized childhood condenses, within it, discourses on the risks that threaten its corruption, or those which would swerve it towards “evil” (leaving it exposed to abuse and paedophilia), which emerge as recurrent tropes in public debates (Lowenkron, 2015; Balieiro, 2017).

It is this not by chance that institutional agents choose this line of intervention when faced with what is designated as “premature sexual risk”. The extract below summarizes the evils that may come to corrupt “minors”:

The launch of this National Plan is aligned with the importance of capacitating the different target audiences (family, society, and State) so that they can deal with the theme of childhood and juvenile sexuality, focusing on the benefits of sexual preservation, particularly in the country’s current sociocultural conjunction, which has witnessed an increase in the exhibition of bodies and in sexualizing behaviours, which, in turn, results in the premature sexual stimulus of children and teenagers (Brasil, 2022a: 8).

The thesis of “premature sexual risk” is taken to be responsible for possible pregnancy, defined thusly: “the exhibition of children and teenagers and sexualizing stimuli and/or behaviours that can bring about harm to the health, wellbeing, and development of these individuals” (Brasil, 2022a: 23). The general aim of the Plan is “to include, in Brazilian public policies and other public or private initiatives, an approach to the risks and consequences of premature sexualization and teenage pregnancy, in an inter-sectorial way and based on the human rights of children and teenagers” (Brasil, 2022a: 24). What stands out in the Plan, and specifically in its specific aims, is the absence of basic social markers for working with the teenage population, one which lives in extremely diverse and unequal conditions, including those of sexual diversity, gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Strategically, the Plan mentions policies aimed at stigma and prejudice regarding the expression of sexuality among people with special needs, and of widening the access of traditional peoples and communities to services that seek to prevent premature sexual risk and teenage pregnancy (Brasil, 2022a: 24).

Within the conceptual markers of the Plan, we again find no mention of gender, only of sexuality, sexual health and comprehensive education in sexuality. The same is true of the glossary of the Selfcare Guide: Recommendations for the Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy (Brasil, 2022b). These documents emphasise the risks of “premature sexualization” or of the “premature start to sexual life” without defining the precise meanings of the terms being used. There is no clear definition of what “premature” means in terms of the sexual experiences of teenagers and youth. Just what “premature” stands for seems very vague/ imprecise: “the age or condition in which the child does not yet have the physical and psychic elements to adequately understand the stimuli received” (Brasil, 2022a: 23). The fact that learning about one’s sexuality is processual, relational, slow, and involves affective and sexual exchanges that mould subjective experiences during adolescence is ignored (Heilborn et al., 2006).

Strategic axis III of the Plan, concerned with the sensibilization and engagement of teenagers, proposes to: “Create a website to provide information on sexual health and education in sexuality and affectivity for teenagers, **in view of sexual preservation**” (Brasil, 2022a: 31). Strategic axis V, on the role of the family, proposes: “To launch a module on Education on Sexuality and Affectivity in the course for families of the Family in School Project, **geared toward the preservation of sexual integrity** in early infancy and early adolescence” (Brasil, 2022a: 33).<sup>13</sup> These are some of the examples of the multiple sociotechnical and political dispositifs that articulate an inter-sectorial operation which reaches many swathes of the target public. The recurring emphasis on the category of “sexual preservation” within the set of the material analysed here leaves implicit, but at the same time evident, that the legitimacy of sexual activity is restricted to the family environment – that is,

<sup>13</sup> The reader can have an idea of the course and the modules available at this time in: <https://avamec.mec.gov.br/#/instituicao/snf/curso/14476/informacoes>

it is related to marriage. There can be no more inadequate approach to convincing teenagers than one which denies them the value of their repertoire of experiences and knowledge, convincing them to guard themselves, or to “preserve themselves”, for the future.

Intriguingly, the Plan makes no mention of the National Council of the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Conselho Nacional de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (CONANDA)), in its capacity as an agency linked to the theme of the Plan. Indeed, the CONADA convened the XI National Conference of the Rights of Children and Adolescents in 2020, and planning a further conference, which are social spaces for conversation and debates on the theme of teenage pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> Among the many non-government organizations that are listed as participating in this process of collective elaboration, there is no organization that acts in the area of sexual and reproductive health with teenagers, though Brazil has many who are experienced in this area. There is the Brazilian Paediatric Society, the Association of Parents and Friends of Special Needs People, the United Nations Fund for Childhood, the Municipal Managers Teaching Union, among other with less experience of working with teenagers. Among the members of congress referred to which contributed to drafting the Plan we find the Christian congressman Diego Garcia, from the state of Paraná, of the Partido Republicanos (Republicans Party), current president of the Parliamentary Front in Defence of Life and the Family, the congresswomen Paula Belmonte, from the Federal District, of the Partido da Cidadania (Citizenship Party), and Leandre Dal Ponte, also from Paraná, currently with the Partido Social Democrático (Social Democratic Party), president of the Mixed Parliamentary Front for Early Childhood. The document also mentions a public consultation for the participation of interested members of the public, but this does not seem to have been widely notified, and was only made available for a very short period of only ten days in January of 2022.

A webinar called “Adolescence first, pregnancy later” (#everythinginitstime) was held in February of 2021, as part of the process of drafting the Plan. The edited volume released by the National Secretary for the Rights of Children and Teenagers (Secretaria Nacional dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (SNDCA)), part of the MMFDH, lists the panellists. Its Presentation reads: “The aim is to include in the central axis **the physical and socio-emotional preservation of children and teenagers**, the involvement of families, stimuli to the establishment of healthy, non-violent relationships, and responsible decision-making” (Brasil 2021d: 6). Having researched the theme of teenage pregnancy for over twenty years, I can safely say that the participants are complete strangers to the field.<sup>15</sup> It is highly likely that their participation owed more to the ethical-political values that guide the MMFDH than to their theoretical and technical competence.

Appropriately, De Vito and Prado (2019) and Prado et al. (2021: 6) make use of the “notion of depuration as a metaphor for the processes of removing or purifying themes which are considered to be abject, particularly those pertaining to sexuality and gender, and to the human rights agenda, as part of a movement of “moral cleansing” which seeks to be opposed to an understanding of the gender field of production”.<sup>16</sup> There is, no doubt, a purification of the meanings linked to sexuality, shorn of its erotic, sensual and exciting dimensions, in favour of a sexuality that must be submitted to matrimony lest it be fated to cause (physical, moral, emotional, psychic) damage. To avoid such presumed risks, “premature sexualization” must be prevented, “delaying” the start of sexual life until, it would seem, marriage and the constitution of the family.

14 The only agencies which are mentioned as participating in the Plan are: The National Council for the Rights of People with Disabilities (Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Pessoa com Deficiência (CONADE)); National Council of Education Secretaries (Conselho Nacional de Secretários da Educação (CONSED)); National Council of Traditional Peoples and Communities (Conselho Nacional dos Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais (CONCPCT)).

15 Participating in the webinar were: Larissa Ferraz Reis, a psychologist and PhD candidate at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp); Mercedes Figueroa, professor and international panellist; Dorita Porto, an MPhil in Matrimony and the Family from the University of Navarra, in Spain; and Élisson S. Santos, psychologist and a specialist in Existential Analysis and Logotherapy. Cf. Brasil 2021d.

16 Much like Mary Douglas (1976) studied the contrasting notions of purity and danger, we also find, in this case, a frequent association between the terms “sexual purity” or “sexual preservation” as proper ways of experiencing sexuality and upkeeping Christian values, in contrast to the dangers derived from “premature” sexual initiation.

By emphasising the strengthening of family ties, the anti-gender grammar (Bulgarelli & Almeida, 2022; Miguel, 2021; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Junqueira, 2018), which remains subliminal in the documents under analysis, flattens these very ties within the family unit, as if it were a homogenous social group free of conflicts and inequalities of various orders. Dealing with sexuality and gender seems, rather blatantly, to provoke the destruction of the family, or at least of its idyllic image as created by institutional agents. As Prado et al (2021: 14) stress, “panic over the sexual and gender diversity, particularly in relation to infancy and education, becomes, more than a point of controversy and political bargaining, a strategy for governance”.

The Plan’s efforts to express the deviation, from adolescence to infancy, as the very focus of the problem it sets itself, is in agreement with the sedimented rhetoric of the threat of the moral corruption of children, of conversion to premature sex, the dangers of paedophilia, etc... Thus, the emphasis on “premature sexualization” in infancy at the very least obscures the need to openly discuss with teenagers their sexuality and ways of ensuring their health against sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy, and of protecting themselves from gender violence.

An emphasis on a strategy of (psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, social) selfcare is in alignment with a teaching strategy that privileges the domestic environment, outside of school premises, undertaken by parents or tutors with their children. This method of teaching is promoted by the Ministry of Education and the MMFDH. The federal government, which released a manual on home schooling in May of 2021 (Brasil, 2021e), in the hope of stimulating public debate on regulating it as law by means of a bill that is currently being considered by the Federal Senate after having been approved by the House of Representatives. Transferring responsibility over social protection and State support to individuals and families through techniques of self-teaching, self-knowledge, self-protection, and self-care seems to ensure the resolution of all social dramas that afflict us. For Dominique Memmi (2004, 2010), these efforts at social control that permeate health professionals, and are transferred to patients who must carry out a “guided self-evaluation”, can be called “delegated biopolitics”

In brief, there is no discussion on ways of experiencing childhood and adolescence in collective and public spaces, such as day cares, schools, cultural and sports centres, recreation areas; there is no recognition of the fact that many families are responsible for the perpetuation of violence, for the discrimination of its members, for the suffering of children and teenagers who, in general, experience conditions of misery, abandonment, and inequality in diverse spheres. Authority and parental education are taken to be privileged ways of containing children, coercing them into respecting the “right” time to start sexuality – to wit, after marriage. To ensure that families fulfil their task regarding the sexual avoidance of children, the State expands its dispositifs of vigilance and control (Tutelary Councils, schools, hotlines, etc...). We have repeatedly witnessed in the news parents complaining of teachers who disrespect established norms – that is, who speak to their students, in the classroom, about themes that refer to sexuality and gender; of the forced removal of children from their mothers, who are considered to be inept (Alves, 2020); forced marriages and sexual violence; pressure to use long-term contraception; among other government initiatives that indicate the extent to which the autonomy and liberty of children, teenagers, women and transgendered people are relegated in favour of the reification of a patriarchal, hierarchical, misogynist and exclusive model of the family that is underscored by ministerial discourse.

## Final Thoughts

The National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy is extremely ambitious, tracing numerous medium-term and long-term strategies. Many lines of engagement remain to be developed in the future. This means that the task of decoding and unravelling the ruses of the MMFDH and its partners is only beginning. As examples, we can refer to certain activities that remain to be put into practice: “publishing a document providing protocols for an approach to responsible sexuality and family planning for teenagers suited to agents of Primary Healthcare”; “releasing a Thematic Coursebook for Sexual Health”; or new health booklets for teenagers. Curiously, the Plan previews the drafting of a National Policy for the Health of Teenagers within the time frame of twenty-four months, despite the fact that Brazil already has such a policy, elaborated with the input of NGOs (Brasil, 2010). This boycotting of past experiences of participative government and of the role of non-religious specialists (scientists, educators, researchers) deprives society of the benefit of the vast knowledge that has been produced on the theme, takes up public resources and fails to reach the target public, namely teenagers and youth. A range of studies have shown that religious affiliation does not necessarily inform intimate behaviour regarding sexuality and reproduction, as is the case, for example, with the practice of abortion in Brazil (Diniz, Medeiros & Madeiro, 2017).

The government strategy of holding families responsible, delaying the start of sexuality, attributing the start of the interest in sexuality to the ease of access to digital content of a sexual nature, is bound to fail. The MMFDH’s regulation of teenage sexuality in terms of “responsibility”, submitting it to a relationship of commitment between a man and a woman, reiterates Carrara’s (2015) reflection on the conflict-ridden process of making different social subjects into citizens – in the case of this study, teenagers and their sexual and reproductive rights.

By discussing sexual policies in Brazil and their peculiar means of moral regulation, Carrara (2015) stresses continuities and ruptures between a Christian sexual morality and what he calls a secular sexuality regime, which gradually moves toward holding subjects responsible for their sexual desires. Carrara stresses how the dimensions of holding oneself responsible and self-control come to the foreground, by analysing transformations in sexuality, constituted by an anatomo-politics of bodies and a biopolitics of populations which walks a tightrope between sexuality linked to reproduction and sexuality as pleasure and a form of subjectification, consolidated in the notion of “sexual rights”. It is precisely these notions that are at the heart of the debates concerning teenage pregnancy. The problem lies in the fact that the MMFDH neutralized teenage voices and experiences, not recognizing their legitimacy, by electing the family as the centre of strategies of preventing “premature sexual risk”. By not conferring on teenagers the status of right-bearing subjects, with a relative autonomy (since they remain dependent on their parents or other family members) to learn about sexuality as a form of social relation with the other, the government agents of the MMFDH suppress the dialogue and reflexivity inherent to the process of personal growth. These are tools that are essential to sex education (Schalet, 2011). An appeal to a reiterated Christian sexual ethics seems to preside over the government’s strategy, increasingly distancing it from the teenage public it intends to target. By emphasising family ties, in alliance with an anti-gender rhetoric, picking out infancy and education as the nucleus of this moral crusade, the federal government implements one of its main strategies for political governance.

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