

ARTICLE

Gendered Political Violence: The Perspective from Female Brazilian Federal Deputies and Senators

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This study examines Brazilian female legislators' perceptions of gendered political violence by analyzing responses from 61 female federal deputies and 12 female senators (representing 81% of female legislators in office during the 56th legislature) to a self-administered questionnaire on the subject. The data indicate that gendered political violence affects a significant majority of these legislators, with 81% of respondents reporting firsthand experiences. For 90% of the interviewees, this violence discourages women from participating in politics, and according to 78%, it impacts women's electoral outcomes. Among the legislators who reported experiencing gendered political violence, 62% indicated that it took place within the premises of the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate, and 36.2% within their political parties. Additionally, 54.7% stated that this violence undermines their ability to carry out their mandates effectively. The data indicate that violence against women in the National Congress is systematic, infringes on their rights, compromises their ability to fulfill their mandates, and negatively affects their lives.

Keywords: Gendered political violence; democracy; political representation; inequality; Brazilian National Congress.

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In recent decades, gender quotas and reserved seat mechanisms have significantly boosted female representation in parliaments worldwide, raising the global average from 11.3% in 1995 to 27,2% in 2025 (IPU, 2025). In the Americas, which holds the highest global average at 35,3%, three countries — Cuba, Nicaragua, and Mexico — have already achieved gender parity, while Costa Rica, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, and Dominica have exceeded the 40% mark for women in their lower chambers or unicameral parliaments.

However, these quantitative gains have not necessarily led to profound cultural shifts, nor have they ensured equitable conditions for exercising political representation (ALBAINE, 2017). The increased presence of women in positions of power has not by itself, ensured substantive representation (GILAS, 2023; SANCHEZ, 2021). While women have faced violence since entering the political arena, research suggests that Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP) is a reactionary response to their growing presence (KROOK, 2017; KROOK and SANÍN, 2016). In recent years, the increase in female participation has also helped to raise awareness of the collective and gendered nature of this phenomenon, making it more visible to the victims and to society as a whole.

In this article, we examine the manifestations of Gendered Political Violence (GPV) in the Brazilian National Congress, focusing on the symbolic dimension of political representation — which, as Gilas (2023) describes, includes the discourses and practices that legitimize or delegitimize political actors in the public sphere and regulate access to power within legislatures, parties, and governments. This research is based on a questionnaire completed by female federal deputies and senators from the 56th legislature (2019-2023), aiming to analyze female legislators' perceptions of GPV, its prevalence, and its impacts on the exercise of their mandates and their personal lives.

Aiming to contribute to comparative studies on GPV, this paper explores the experiences of female legislators within a context of low, though increasing, female presence; limited access to key positions within the congressional hierarchy; high rates of violence against women. Which, as Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) suggest, may contribute to the normalization of violence directed at them; and a political culture characterized by recurring episodes of political and electoral violence. This study is

notable for the breadth of its data, encompassing 81% of the female legislators in office at the time of data collection.

The results indicate that GPV is a pervasive reality in the Brazilian National Congress, with 81% of female legislators reporting experiences of some form of violence during their mandates. The study also highlights the detrimental effects of this violence on the exercise of mandates and on women's sustained participation in politics. The conclusion emphasizes that strengthening Brazil's democracy is closely tied to implementing measures that tackle GPV and ensure women can exercise their mandates on equal terms with men.

Gendered political violence: a concept under debate

According to Krook and Sanín (2016), the specific forms of violence and political harassment against women in Latin America were first documented during a seminar for female councilors in Bolivia, which aimed to address reports of attacks these women had experienced in rural municipalities. Only later did the concept of Violence Against Women in Politics develop, strongly influenced by progress in debates on legislative matters. According to the authors, VAWIP is a form of violence specifically targeted at women as women, intended to pressure them into abandoning their political participation. This violence has a collective impact, affecting not only the immediate victim but also women as a group, diminishing their political ambition and participation.

In their early works on VAWIP, Krook and Sanín (2017, 2016) categorize it into four types: physical, economic, psychological, and symbolic, emphasizing the potential interconnections among these forms of violence, as a single act of violence can carry multiple meanings and be experienced in various ways. Physical violence includes acts that threaten a woman's physical integrity or that of her family members, also encompassing sexual violence. Economic violence refers to actions that systematically limit women's access to financial resources available to men, thereby obstructing their entry and participation in the political arena. Psychological violence, on the other hand, involves hostile behaviors that inflict emotional, psychological, or social harm on the victim, including acts of intimidation and disqualification (KROOK and SANÍN, 2016).

Symbolic violence against women in politics, as defined by the authors, draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (2007) concept of symbolic violence, a form of discipline imposed on others to reinforce their position within the social hierarchy. In the political arena, symbolic violence operates to delegitimize women's competence, often through subtle actions that silence, ignore, or deny their presence in spaces of debate and decision-making. Like psychological violence, these practices are often less visible than physical violence and may even go unnoticed by the victims themselves. The VAWIP framework was essential in identifying and categorizing these less visible forms of violence that disproportionately affect women, shedding light on the systemic nature of gendered political violence and its collective impact. By demonstrating that attacks against women in politics are not isolated incidents, but rather systemic practices aimed at discouraging their political participation and ambition, VAWIP laid the groundwork for understanding political violence as reaction to the increasing presence of women in political spaces.

To enhance conceptual clarity, Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) propose a typology that elucidates the gendered dimensions of political violence by bringing together two areas of research: political violence studies and gender and politics scholarship, which examines barriers to women's political participation. Their framework not only highlights how gender can serve as a motive for attacks but also examines how it shapes the forms, expressions, and consequences of political violence.

By emphasizing that political violence can be gendered in multiple yet distinct ways, the authors' typology offers a more nuanced perspective, expanding the analytical tools available to examine its manifestations across diverse contexts. In this sense, gendered political violence (GPV) builds on the foundations of VAWIP, capturing the complex interplay of motivations, expressions, and impacts that characterize political violence. Moreover, their framework underscores that GPV encompasses not only violence explicitly targeting women, but also violence shaped by gender dynamics that affect individuals across different gender identities. This broader perspective is particularly relevant in contexts like Brazil, where systemic gender inequalities and intersecting forms of oppression intensify the prevalence and impact of political violence against women in public office.

Building on these analyses and seeking to investigate Brazilian female legislators' perceptions of GPV, this study examines its impacts and its forms of

expression in the National Congress. To categorize GPV, the article draws on Krook and Sanín's (2016) framework with certain adaptations. While the authors classify sexual violence as a subset of physical violence and sexual harassment as psychological violence — alongside threats of physical or sexual harm — Bardall (2013) argues that women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault, as sexual violence has historically served as a tool of male domination. The data from this study reinforce this argument, demonstrating the need for a distinct analytical approach that treats sexual violence separately from physical violence.

Following the definition provided by UN Women (2020), which categorizes sexual assault, abuse, sexual harassment, and rape as forms of sexual violence, this study classifies sexual harassment within this category rather than as psychological violence, while acknowledging potential overlaps between the two forms.

After this introduction to the problem and the theoretical framework, the next section will present the methodological approach. Next, we will discuss the incidence of GPV in the Brazilian National Congress, drawing on responses from female federal deputies and senators, and present the prevalence of the four categories of gendered political violence that guided this work. Finally, the conclusion and reflections on the topic will be presented.

Methodology

This study analyzes the perceptions of female deputies and senators from the 56th legislature regarding GPV in the National Congress, using data collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. Given the sensitive nature of some questions, this format was chosen to minimize potential discomfort and protect respondents' privacy. Data collection occurred between July 13 and 21, 2021, with the questionnaire sent to the institutional email addresses of all female federal deputies and senators in office at that time. At the end of the data collection, we received responses from 61 federal deputies and 12 senators, resulting in a response rate of 81% of the total female legislators in office.

Journalist Bianca Gomes, who shared the questionnaire through a major media outlet and provided the raw data for this study, made this high participation rate in a

short time, possible¹. Anonymity was ensured to protect the legislators' safety and maintain the confidentiality of the information. It is important to note that the project received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Center for Health Sciences at the Universidade Federal da Paraíba (CEP/CCS).

The legislators who responded to the questionnaire represented various age groups, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and political affiliations. The participants' ideological classification was based on their party affiliation at the time the questionnaire was administered. We applied² the categorization proposed by Bolognesi, Ribeiro, and Codato (2022), retaining the original classification of parties as 'Center' and grouping the extremes and variations of the Center into the categories closest to 'Left' and 'Right'.

Table 01. Profile of respondents

	(n)	(n)
	Senators	Deputies
In office	12	78
Respondents	12	61
Average age	57	50
Under 40 years old	0	17
White	09	42
Black	03	18
Indigenous	0	01
Right-wing (Avante, Cidadania, DEM, MDB, NOVO, PL, PODE, PP, PROS, PSC, PSD, PSDB, PSL, PTB, Republicanos, SDD)	11	39
Left-wing (PCdoB, PDT, PSB, PSOL, PT)	01	20
Center (PV and REDE)	0	02

Source: Elaborated by the author, based on respondents' reports.

Questionnaire structure

The questionnaire included 26 questions: five about the legislators' personal backgrounds and characteristics, and 21 focused on their perceptions of gendered political violence. Of these, 19 were multiple-choice questions, and two were open-ended. The questions addressed the types of violence experienced, the contexts in

¹The database containing anonymized data is available at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1hUR0IbAW9J2HtrldCuDDfq1KMRZa2Djc_Zb65C_8Ws4/edit?usp=drive_link.

²The interviews were numbered following the order in which they were conducted. Going forward, we will use 'R' followed by the assigned code number. Thus, R1 stands for Respondent 01, and so forth.

which they occurred (in the National Congress, within political parties, on the streets, in the media, or online), the perceived reasons for these violent acts, and their consequences.

The legislators were invited to indicate which forms of violence they had experienced from the following categories: physical, sexual, economic, psychological, and verbal. To ensure clarity and standardize responses, examples of each type of violence were provided within the question:

- Physical: direct physical assaults;
- Sexual: sexual threats and/or non-consensual physical contact;
- Economic: restriction of access to party or electoral resources;
- Psychological: threats, blackmail, and attempts to disqualify;
- Verbal: insults, name-calling, and public disparagement.

Approach to symbolic violence

Given the specific nature of symbolic violence discussed in the previous section, we adopted a distinct methodology to capture it. Rather than directly asking if legislators had experienced symbolic violence, we aimed to identify experiences that are part of this phenomenon³:

- Questions about their personal life (relationships, sexuality, motherhood);
- Exclusion from debates or frequent interruptions during their speeches;
- Comments on physical appearance and clothing;
- Episodes in which they were labeled as “‘crazy’ or emotionally unstable.

We also asked whether they had ever been interrupted by colleagues during floor speeches. Symbolic violence was thus understood as a set of practices that includes verbal violence and other behaviors intended to undermine women’s authority in the political arena.

³The questionnaire also included the question: ‘Were you not appointed as a full member of committees, a leader of your party, or a rapporteur of important bills?’. Considering the reflections presented by Darrieux (2020) on the influence of factors such as seniority, expertise, and party alignment within the government spectrum on legislative success and access to hierarchical positions – as well as the impossibility of properly comparing these elements – we have chosen not to work with the responses to this question at this stage.

Gendered political violence in the Brazilian National Congress

In Brazil, women made up 15% of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies in the legislature that took office in 2019 (TSE, 2019). While this percentage in the Senate remained stable compared to 2015, it actually represents a setback. In 2018 (with 2/3 of seats up for renewal), women made up only 12.9% of those elected, compared to 18.5% in 2014 (when 1/3 of seats were renewed)⁴. In the Chamber of Deputies, the women's bench saw a substantial 50% increase compared to the legislature that began in 2015. Despite the increase in the number of women in the National Congress, Brazil remains second-to-last among Latin American countries in the 2025 Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking (IPU, 2025), which classifies the percentage of women in national parliaments⁵. It is worth noting that this increase occurred in a context of near exclusion, as the historical average of female representation in the Chamber of Deputies between redemocratization and 2014 was only 7.4%⁶.

The underrepresentation seen in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, where women hold only 17% of the seats in 2025, is echoed at the state and municipal levels, with women representing 18% of elected state deputy positions in 2022 and 18,2% of elected city councilor positions in 2024⁷.

The lack of women in prominent positions within the National Congress further reflects this underrepresentation. From 1999, when the first woman joined the Directing Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, to 2025, only 15 women have held these positions⁸, and only one was not appointed as a secretary or substitute deputy. In 2019, women led 20.5% of national parliaments worldwide (IPU, 2020). In contrast, Brazil has never elected a woman to preside over either the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate.

⁴The Brazilian Senate is elected through a majoritarian system, which is not subject to gender quota legislation. Senators serve eight-year terms, with elections held every four years. Thus, the Senate alternates between renewing one-third and two-thirds of its 81 seats in each election cycle.

⁵Despite the rise in the number of female federal deputies elected in two consecutive elections (2018 and 2022), Brazil continues to experience underrepresentation in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, ranking 133th in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) index for female participation in 2025.

⁶Available at Centro de Documentação e Informação da Câmara dos Deputados (CEDI).

⁷Available at <<https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1104771-estudo-da-camara-mostra-crescimento-de-dois-pontos-percentuais-no-numero-de-mulheres-eleitas/>>. Accessed on March 20, 2025.

⁸These are updated data from the survey originally conducted by the Observatório do Legislativo Brasileiro. Available at <<https://olb.org.br/camara-dos-deputados-no-brasil-uma-historia-de-sub-representacao-das-mulheres/>>. Accessed June 30, 2023.

This pattern is also evident in the leadership of the lower house committees. According to the Observatório Legislativo Brasileiro (OLB, 2020), women accounted for only 10% of all committee chairs over the past 20 years. The Chamber of Deputies' most important committee (the Committee on Constitution, Justice, and Citizenship, CCJC)⁹, was chaired by a woman for the first time only in 2020. The historical average of female participation in this committee and the Committee on Finance and Taxation is below 10%. Only the Committee on the Protection of Rights of Women has had a majority of women (THOMÉ and LUCCIOLA, 2023). Furthermore, women rarely lead parliamentary blocs or parties: at the time of writing, in 2025, only two congresswomen were leading their parties in the Chamber of Deputies, and only one was leading blocs. In the Senate, one woman was leading a bloc but none was heading a party. These data show¹⁰ that, despite the rise in female presence, women continue to face numerous institutional and cultural barriers in the Brazilian National Congress.

In Brazil, we see an increase in the number of elected women, which the literature identifies as one factor contributing to the intensification of GPV (ALBAINE, 2015; ARCHENTI and ALBAINE, 2013; BIROLI, 2016); however, this growth still leaves women in the position of a political minority. Given this context, we analyzed the perceptions of female legislators from the 56th legislature on GPV, assuming that this situation, along with increased public debate, would make instances of violence more visible and frequent.

An important initial finding is that 100% of respondents reported being familiar with GPV. This high level of awareness may be partly due to the timing of the questionnaire, which was completed during the week the Senate voted on Bill 5613/2020. This bill, focused on combating political-electoral violence and discrimination against women, brought the issue into the spotlight. In any case, it is a significant indication of the growing public debate on the issue. In terms of prevalence,

⁹In 2021, Federal Deputy Bia Kicis (affiliated with PSL-DF) became the first woman to chair the CCJC, and in 2024, Federal Deputy Chris Tonietto (affiliated with PL-RJ) assumed the chair, becoming the second woman to hold this position.

¹⁰Federal Deputy Adriana Ventura serves as the leader of the Novo party, Talíria Petrone is the leader of the Socialism and Liberty party and Caroline de Toni is the leader of the Minority party, while Senator Eliziane Gama leads the Democratic Resistance Parliamentary Bloc. Available at <<https://www.camara.leg.br/deputados/liderancas-e-bancadas-partidarias>> e <<https://www25.senado.leg.br/web/senadores/liderancas-parlamentares>>. Accessed on February 25, 2025.

81% of participants reported experiencing some form of violence during their term, and 77.5% said they are victims of GPV either frequently or occasionally.

Consistent with the report by the IPU (2016), which highlights that systematic violence against female legislators often causes them to reconsider their political participation, 12% of Brazilian female legislators who reported experiencing GPV said they had considered giving up their mandate, 20.6% thought about not running again, and 54.7% stated that the violence negatively impacts the exercise of their mandates.

The diffuse origin of attacks, identified by Krook and Sanin (2016) as a key characteristic of GPV, was also reflected in the legislators' reports. Among participants, 74.1% reported experiencing online aggression — a space where political violence has escalated — as well as incidents within the National Congress (62%) and their political parties (36.2%). This is another key indicator of the distinct nature of GPV compared to broader political violence: it occurs in spaces typically considered safe for men.

Among the female legislators who reported experiencing violence, only 29.4% filed a complaint with congressional or party bodies. This low rate is consistent with international data (IPU, 2018; 2016), which show that only 24% of female legislators who experience sexual harassment report the incidents. Albaine (2018) suggests that fear of negative repercussions in private life and political careers, along with a sense that perpetrators will go unpunished, contributes to the low reporting rate. Data from Pinho (2020) on the Council of Ethics and Decorum of the Chamber of Deputies (Coetica) reveal that, since its establishment in 2001, no complaint related to GPV has resulted in punishment for the accused. Of the nine complaints filed, eight were dismissed, and one did not even lead to a case being opened.

This pattern of impunity discourages reporting a perception reinforced by 14 legislators who shared their experiences, noting that their cases were not adequately addressed by the authorities they approached. The only case that led to a conviction occurred within the judicial system. One respondent summarized this experience by stating: "I reported it, nothing happened, and it even became a joke" (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 32)¹¹.

A study by the IPU (2018) involving European female legislators found that 61.5% of respondents believe acts of violence against women are primarily intended

¹¹In order to maintain the privacy of our interviewees, all quotes are numbered per response. The database can be accessed through the Dataset available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/W97W36>.

to discourage their continued involvement in politics, with political rivalries being only a secondary factor. The accounts of Brazilian legislators support this view, showing that none of them is immune to GPV.

Regarding political-ideological positioning, some observations can be drawn from various sources. Data from the aforementioned IPU survey indicate that female legislators actively working against gender inequality are more frequently targeted with violence. Similarly, Barros and Busanello (2019) found that feminist deputies in Brazil often face interruptions during their speeches and efforts to obstruct their work. This trend is also evident in the account of one of the legislators interviewed for this study:

(...) The Chamber of Deputies has become a place where gendered political violence is the norm, especially where I work daily, the Committee X. Verbal assaults and interruptions are unfortunately common. The use of crude, sexist, and stereotypical language, with the aim of disqualifying us as legislators. It is a behavior that comes from the government's base [Bolsonaro], encouraged by the way the current president treats female journalists every day. There is a normalization of these forms of violence, as they are treated as just part of the parliamentary debate, but in reality, they target left-wing women, and sometimes also affect right-wing women, though less so because they are aligned with the conservative agenda (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 17).

Kuperberg (2018) notes that women who hold strong positions, whether on the right or the left, are often more readily identified as threats to the status quo than those positioned at the center. Similarly, a survey by the IPU (2016) of female legislators worldwide found that 60.5% of respondents believe that by taking firm positions, women become primary targets of sexist behavior and violence. This pattern was also observed in the 2020 Brazilian municipal elections, where 96% of offensive tweets and attacks targeted Manuela D'Ávila and Joice Hasselmann —candidates from opposing ends of the political spectrum but both known for their strong positions (INTERNET LAB, 2021).

In the 56th legislature of the Chamber of Deputies, responses indicated that gender-based political violence affects women across the political spectrum, unlike the findings of the Coetica study (PINHO, 2020), which showed that all cases of GPV targeted women affiliated with left-wing parties. The reports in this study include legislators who publicly identify as antifeminists, supporting findings that show violence is not confined to any single ideological field.

Acknowledging that GPV affects women from diverse backgrounds and political positions does not imply that all are exposed to violence in the same way. It is important to emphasize that social markers of difference, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and age, can intersect as structures of oppression (CRENSHAW, 1989), making some women more vulnerable, while also shaping the form, intensity, and impact of violence. When asked about other possible motivations for the violence they experienced beyond gender, 12 legislators identified race or color as an additional factor.

In the National Congress, where white, heterosexual men make up the majority, racial inequality among women is also pronounced. At the time of data collection, there were only three black women and no Indigenous women in the Senate, while the Chamber of Deputies included 18 black women¹² and one Indigenous woman. No legislators in either house identified as LGBTQIA+, and there was only one senator with a disability.

A comparison by race/color reveals that while 78.4% of white women reported being victims of GPV, all six black women and the sole Indigenous legislator reported experiencing such violence. In terms of sexual orientation, 39.6% of legislators cite it as a factor in the violence they experience, possibly reflecting the activism of some in support of LGBTQIA+ issues. It is worth noting that in the Brazilian National Congress, neoconservative movements promoting heteronormative values have become highly organized (LACERDA, 2018). Jean Wyllys, a homosexual legislator and LGBTQIA+ activist, resigned from his position shortly before the start of the 56th legislature due to ongoing threats.

Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo's (2020) perspective, in this regard, aligns with observations made in the Brazilian National Congress. The authors acknowledge the gender hierarchy that positions men above women, but they advocate for a broader approach that also considers the violence against non-dominant men, including ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The responses from the legislators, along with emblematic cases like the 2018 murder of Councilwoman Marielle Franco¹³, a black woman from a marginalized area

¹²According to the IBGE definition, the black population includes those who identify as 'pretos' (black) and 'pardos' (mixed race).

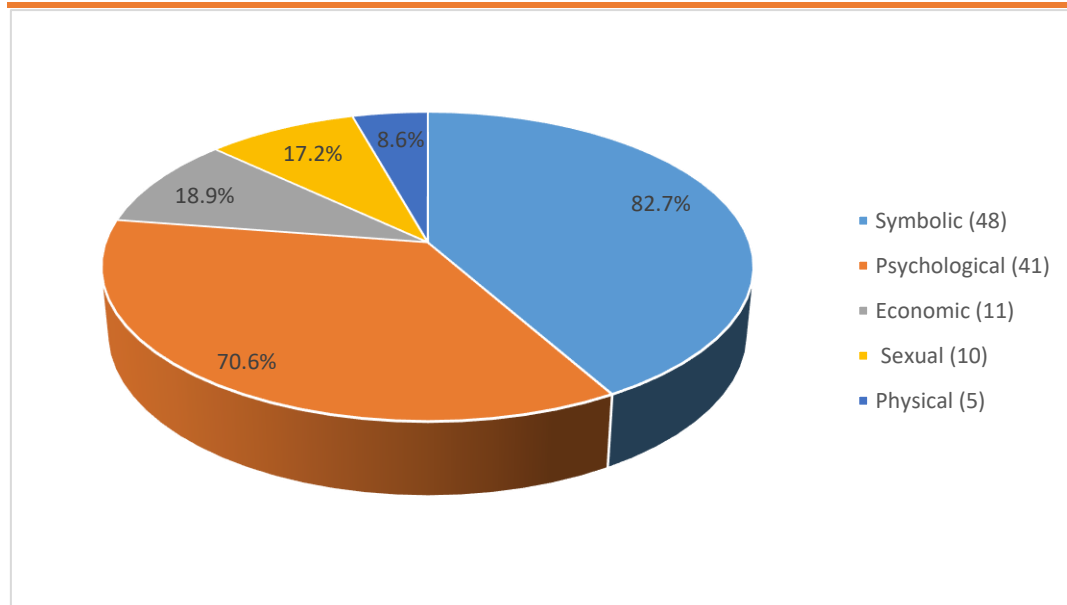
¹³Marielle Franco, a councilwoman for Rio de Janeiro elected in 2016 by PSOL-RJ.

in a same-sex relationship. The threats against black Federal Deputy Talíria Petrone¹⁴, who faced an assassination plot. The situation of black trans Councilwoman Benny Briolly, who left the country due to threats; and the shooting attack on State co-Deputy Carolina Iara¹⁵, an intersex person identifying as ‘travesti’¹⁶ — all vividly illustrate the reality and suggest an expected outcome: women from social or political minority groups are even more exposed to violence than white, heterosexual, cisgender women.

The expressions of violence

Following an overview of the incidence of gendered political violence in the National Congress and the profiles of the women who reported experiencing some form of aggression as legislators, this section will connect the collected data to the categories of GPV discussed in this article. The graph below shows that all forms of GPV were reported by the legislators, with symbolic violence (79.3%) and psychological violence (70.6%) being the most prevalent.

Graph 01. Prevalence of types of violence



Source: Elaborated by the author, based on respondents' reports.

¹⁴Talíria Petrone, federal deputy elected in 2018 and 2022 by PSOL-RJ.

¹⁵Carolina Iara is a member of the Feminist Bench of PSOL-SP, serving as a co-deputy in a collective candidacy elected in 2022.

¹⁶‘Travesti’ refers to a person who adopts a female gender identity and expression.

In Brazil, where political violence¹⁷ is historically rooted, normalized, and systemic, and electoral disputes sometimes turn into criminal cases (PISCOPO, 2017), gendered political violence involving physical aggression is also a reality. However, unlike many media professionals, grassroots activists, social movement members, and NGO workers, legislators belong to a political elite that typically has greater access to security mechanisms, partly due to their visibility, which may reduce the level of violence they face. Therefore, while physical violence may occur in legislatures, it is likely to be less prevalent than other forms of violence.

Moreover, physical assaults are considered a violation of parliamentary decorum. Thus, even though a murder has occurred within the Senate¹⁸ without resulting in the revocation of any mandate, it is foreseeable that in these institutional settings, violence will manifest in less overt forms than physical aggression. It is not surprising, then, that physical violence is the least reported form of violence, though this does not lessen the gravity of the accounts from five women legislators who report having been victims of this type of violence in the National Congress.

The gendered nature of violence becomes especially evident in cases of sexual violence. Among the legislators who participated in the IPU (2018) survey, 20% reported having been sexually harassed during their mandate; 7.3% stated that attempts were made to coerce them into a sexual relationship; and others referred to non-consensual physical contact¹⁹. The respondents said that most of these acts were committed by their colleagues, and they were not limited to political opponents.

Studies by the IPU (2018, 2016) suggest that being a young legislator can be an aggravating factor for experiencing violence, especially sexual violence. Legislators under 40, the least represented age group in national parliaments (5%), were more frequently targeted by sexual and psychological harassment than older age groups. The

¹⁷A report by Global Witness reveals that in 2020, three-quarters of recorded lethal attacks on environmental and land rights activists occurred in Latin America. An estimated 165 people were murdered in the region for defending their land and the planet. Available at <<https://www.globalwitness.org/pt/global-witness-reports-227-land-and-environmental-activists-murdered-single-year-worst-figure-record-pt/>>. Accessed on August 08, 2022.

¹⁸Available at <<https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/10/18/faroeste-senado-o-dia-que-o-pai-de-collor-matou-um-parlamentar>>. Accessed on August 08, 2022.

¹⁹A notable case in Brazil involved [state deputy] Isa Penna from São Paulo, who was sexually harassed in December 2020 when deputy Fernando Cury groped her breast on the plenary floor. In an unprecedented and unanimous decision, the legislator was temporarily suspended from his mandate.

2018 IPU survey shows that 36.4% of legislators under the age of 40 have experienced sexual harassment, which is 12% higher than the average for their counterparts.

In the Brazilian National Congress, 17% of respondents, who reported experiencing gendered political violence, indicated that at least one incident was of a sexual nature. Situations like the one recounted by one legislator: “During a session where I was serving as the rapporteur on an important issue, after spending half an hour explaining the topic to a colleague, he harassed me by making comments about my mouth and appearance”(ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 35).

All seventeen legislators under 40 reported experiencing gendered political violence. Among them, 29,4% reported experiencing gendered political violence — a proportion significantly higher than that of legislators in other age groups. It is important to emphasize that the growing feminist debate — particularly regarding gendered political violence — can influence how women perceive violence in different ways, depending on their age and ideological background. As feminist debates have advanced, they have played a key role in raising awareness and recognizing political violence as a systemic issue. However, this awareness is not evenly distributed. Younger generations, who have grown up in an era of more widespread feminist discourse, may be more sensitive to identifying and denouncing such violence compared to older women who entered politics when these debates were less prominent. Additionally, since feminist perspectives on political violence are more prevalent within leftist movements, women with progressive leanings are often more likely to perceive and interpret their experiences through this lens than those more aligned to the right.

When it comes to economic gendered political violence, it is important to consider the unequal distribution of campaign resources between men and women. Sacchet (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) presents data illustrating how, in Brazil, political parties continue to concentrate these resources on white men. The preliminary report of the OAS (2018) Electoral Observation Mission in Brazil supports these findings. It notes that even after the requirement to allocate at least 30% of public campaign funds and free advertising time to women, political parties continue to use various tactics to circumvent this rule and gender quotas. In addition to the concentration of resources among a few women or executive candidates, the Mission highlights the presence of

women candidates. Who are launched solely to meet quotas, without any genuine intention to compete in the elections — commonly known as ‘fictitious candidacies’.

This overview suggests that while economic gendered political violence is ‘widespread’, in Brazil, it tends to be confined to the electoral process. Therefore, examining its occurrence within the National Congress provides only a limited understanding of the issue. Also, this focus is biased toward elected women, excluding the broader group of women who were not elected and who may have experienced even greater economic violence than those who secured mandates.

Despite these limitations, the practice appears so common that it could still be captured through the questionnaire responses. Among the legislators who experienced violence, 18.9% reported being victims of some form of economic violence. One of the legislators described an incident as follows: “I was barred from using political advertising time. My electoral fund resources were blocked by party leaders. I was removed from the presidency of the Municipal Directory” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 21).

When examining the most common types of violence, we note that psychological harassment, though experienced by both men and women, has distinct characteristics in the case of women. In the vast majority of cases, the perpetrators of this form of violence are not strangers, as is often the case for men, but rather fellow legislators.

The IPU (2016) study reveals that psychological violence is the most prevalent form of violence against female legislators, impacting 81.8% of respondents, with 44.4% reporting having received various kinds of threats during their terms. The IPU’s 2018 survey reinforces these findings, with 85.2% of participants reporting experiences of psychological violence. In the Brazilian National Congress, 70.6% of legislators who experienced violence reported being subjected to some form of psychological violence. The accounts also reveal explicit threats:

A second incident also occurred in this [56th] legislature, when a deputy insulted this legislator and her party colleagues. Because we tried to block the vote on PEC 32, the Administrative Reform, in the Committee X, legislator X²⁰ attacked this deputy and other party colleagues with several insults, saying he wished that the

²⁰To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, we will not disclose the names of the legislators mentioned.

day would come when we wouldn't wake up so he wouldn't have to hear our criticism of the genocidal government (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 06).

Deputy Y, in the plenary, said I should be careful with who was talking and made a gesture referencing Marielle's broken plaque (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 07).

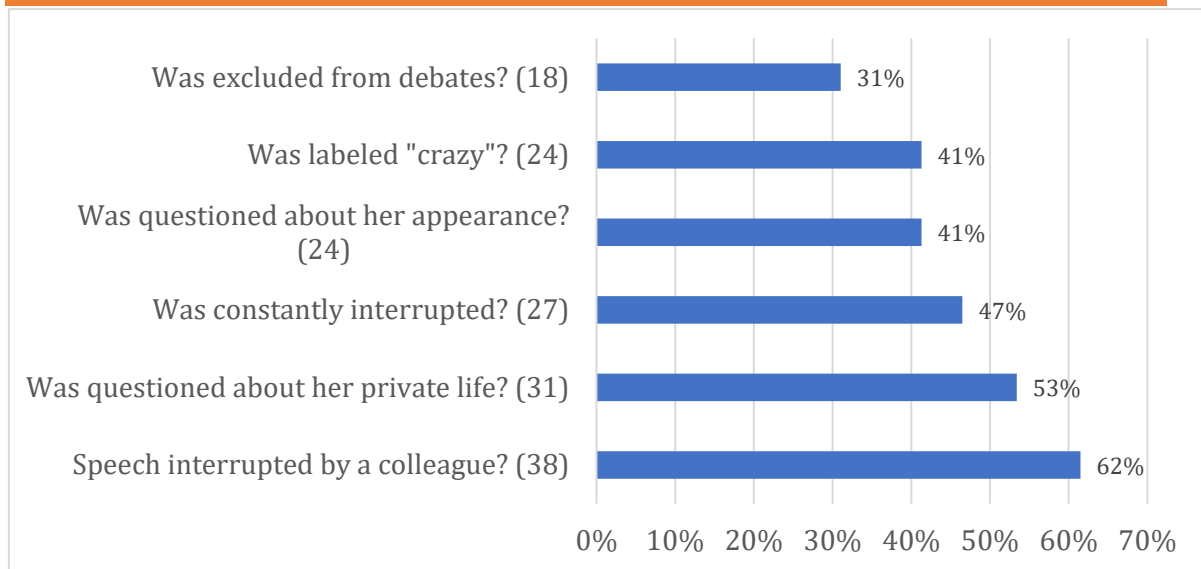
One legislator also highlighted attacks on the families of women —especially targeting their children — and threats of rape as forms of gendered political violence, sharing her own experiences of such threats: “Death and rape threats. Threats against the children. Insults regarding the body” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 41).

Symbolic violence, on the other hand, affected 79.31% of the women who reported being victims of violence. Of these, 56% reported having their floor speech interrupted by a colleague in the Chamber of Deputies or Senate, with 25.8% saying it happens frequently and 27.5% saying it happens occasionally. At times outside of floor speeches, such as during meetings, 46.5% report being constantly interrupted. One of the legislators also reported requesting to speak but not being allowed to do so in some meetings.

Miller, M. G. and Sutherland, J. L. (2023) found a similar scenario in a study based on transcripts of over 24,000 hearings in the U.S. Congress over 25 years, which showed that the likelihood of a woman being interrupted in that space is higher than that of a man.

Examining elements beyond interruptions, Barros and Busanello (2019, p. 02) introduce the concept of “discursive machismo” in Brazil, which they define as “a set of rhetorical maneuvers that affirm and reaffirm authoritarian policies in public debate, to the detriment of democratic forms of discourse”. These maneuvers include “assertive statements, methods of ridiculing and disqualifying opposing arguments, excessively firm and inflexible opinions, and arguments rooted in personal conviction and pride” (BARROS and BUSANELLO, 2019, p. 06). In this study, such elements are presented as expressions of symbolic gendered political violence (Graph 02).

When barred from participating equally in the various discursive spaces within their institutions, these legislators are denied the opportunity to present their social perspectives (YOUNG, 2006). Therefore, we agree with Barros and Busanello's (2019) assessment that, in the parliamentary arena, these practices should not be viewed merely as micromachismo that leads to microviolence, as they ultimately undermine the quality of political representation.

Graph 02. Prevalence of manifestations of symbolic violence

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on respondents' accounts.

The data presented by Feitosa and Miguel (2009) are noteworthy, as they show that in the Chamber of Deputies, men's length of service does not significantly affect the number of speeches they give. In contrast, for women, greater legislative experience is associated with fewer speeches delivered on the floor. They attribute this phenomenon to a sense of disenchantment brought about by the symbolic obstacles these women face in exercising their mandates.

According to data from the IPU (2018), 67.9% of respondents reported being subjected to comments about their physical appearance or remarks based on gender stereotypes. As illustrated in Graph 02, within the Brazilian Congress, 53.4% of women who experienced violence reported being questioned about their private lives, while 41.3% were questioned about their physical appearance and style of dress. These are recurring, gendered practices, as men are rarely subjected to the same treatment (BIROLI, 2010).

These attitudes, often downplayed, have real consequences for these women's lives, eroding their sense of legitimacy and competence. Examples can be found in the testimonies of female legislators: one recounts that the president of a committee "suggested that I might have been a prostitute" (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 30), while another reported being labeled "unloved, among other adjectives" by a governor (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 58).

The age-old association between women and madness, hysteria, and psychological instability (BELINTANI, 2003; FOUCAULT, 1972) has long served as a rationale to exclude women from the public sphere, premised on a supposed inability to control their emotions and, by extension, their actions. Though it may seem archaic, the accounts clearly demonstrate that this perspective persists, with 41.3% of women stating they have been labeled ‘crazy’ in some situation, as illustrated by the following statement:

An emblematic case in this current legislature occurred when I was in the Virtual Plenary and, at one point, I spoke out against the government’s irresponsibility and inaction in addressing the pandemic. A government-aligned legislator, filled with anger and clearly disturbed by my speech, said that from that moment on, he would call the female deputies “deputéricas” [a play on “deputadas” and “histéricas”], “hysterical deputies”, who “do not show the slightest respect for the president of the Republic”, further stating that they “only criticize and offend” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW 06).

As Feitosa and Miguel (2019) highlight, the parliament is a space where discourse is aimed not only at an internal audience — fellow peers — but also at public opinion. With the rise of social media and the ability to create and share content without intermediaries or external curation, speeches are now edited and transformed into materials that reach a much wider audience. Leveraging this strategy, legislators promoting anti-equality agendas and their supporters have effectively used gendered political violence to strengthen their stance with their electoral base, either by distorting and decontextualizing women’s statements or by directly attacking them. Thus, the violence occurring within the National Congress not only affects the lives of the victims but also reverberates across social media and on the streets.

Conclusion

In Brazil, women’s underrepresentation in institutional politics remains a significant challenge. Addressing this issue requires strategies that include legislative reforms, tackling impunity, and fostering a culture that views women’s participation as fundamental to democracy. Elected women must have access to prominent positions within the congressional hierarchy and, above all, be able to carry out their mandates under conditions of equality, free from violence. In this regard, responses from the female legislators in this study reveal a troubling context.

The data indicate that gendered political violence is a persistent reality in the Brazilian National Congress. A vast majority of respondents (81%) reported experiencing some form of violence during their mandates. Of these, 77.5% reported being frequent or occasional victims of this type of violence. These figures indicate that political violence limits female legislators' ability to carry out their roles effectively, directly affecting the quality of political representation and, by extension, democracy itself.

Additionally, gendered political violence appears in multiple contexts, showing the need for broad political and institutional responses to tackle it. The low rate of complaints (29.4%), tied to a perception of impunity, contributes to underreporting and the persistence of violence.

The impacts are profound: over half of the respondents reported that violence hinders them in carrying out their mandates, seven legislators considered giving up their mandate, and twelve contemplated withdrawing from at least one electoral race due to gendered political violence. These data suggest that violence against women in politics goes beyond the acts themselves; it also undermines women's political ambition and effectiveness, potentially pushing some out of the public sphere altogether. These dynamics sustain a hostile environment for women's participation and obstruct progress toward a more inclusive democracy.

Freidenberg (2017) argues that when citizens reject violence, aggressors have less space to operate. In Brazil, however, the opposite is observed: a portion of the population supports such actions and even rewards their perpetrators with votes. These situations illustrate what Marlise Matos, Danusa Marques, and Layla Carvalho (2021) describe as the planned use of GPV as a strategy to advance undemocratic political careers that promote intolerance and hate. In this sense, violence acts as a tool to bar women from political engagement, while also serving as an instrument for these men to gain visibility and secure positions of power.

Conversely, increased recognition of the issue and the growing public debate on gendered political violence have led to progress in developing public policies and specific legislation, such as Law Nº 14,192/2021. The high response rate to the questionnaire shows female legislators' strong interest and willingness to share their experiences, helping to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon. These accounts make it clear that concrete actions are needed to protect the physical and psychological

well-being of female legislators and to ensure they can fully carry out their political duties.

Addressing gendered political violence, therefore, requires a multifaceted and integrated approach that includes protecting and supporting victims while also ensuring effective accountability for perpetrators. Only then, the National Congress and other political arenas can be transformed into truly democratic and inclusive spaces.

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