



## 'Once You Say the Word Gender, People Become Afraid': The Consequences of the Gender Backlash in Education in Brasil

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### Abstract

Conservative religious, activist and political groups fuel gender backlash in many spaces. This paper explores this phenomenon and its effects on educational programs designed to prevent gender-based violence in Brazilian schools. It argues that this gender backlash in educative spaces violates fundamental rights, like the right to equality and protection against discrimination and violence, and ultimately contributes to the continuity and escalation of gender-based violence in Brasil. This context shapes advocacy work and the facilitators and participants of its programs. Primary prevention research is mainly conducted in the Global North. This article, guided by a southern feminist framework and informed by 14 interviews with Brazilian advocates engaged in youth gender-based violence prevention programs, addresses a significant knowledge deficit and offers new insights in working in challenging contexts. It suggests that the backlash is mostly directed at LGBTIQ+ cohorts due to the ongoing political attacks on these groups, but it has also undermined the capacity of educational prevention strategies for gender-based violence more widely.

### Keywords

Advocates; Brasil<sup>1</sup>; Brazil; teenage intimate partner violence; education; Global South.

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## Introduction

Education is pivotal in preventing gendered violence among young people (here understood as those aged 12–18 years old) as it is a period of development in which they are forming their relationships and identities. While youths are the most vulnerable group to violence, prevention strategies during this stage of life are crucial and have the greatest chance of prompting behavioural change and preventing violence (Crooks et al. 2019; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública [FBSP] 2019; Politoff et al. 2019). Schools are the primary space of socialisation for youth and the school community more broadly; hence, they can leverage primary prevention initiatives (Gleeson et al. 2015; Politoff et al. 2019). Primary prevention refers to actions that take place before (and seek to prevent) the occurrence of violence by addressing its underlying causes, such as strict gender roles and stereotypes rooted in patriarchy (Ávila and Lopes Gomes Pinto Ferreira 2021; Pasinato, Machado and Ávila 2019). Internationally, the literature explains that education initiatives should explicitly address these drivers and promote education about gender equality and respectful relationships to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) (Flood, Fergus and Heenan 2009; Gleeson et al. 2015; Pasinato and Lemos 2017). Accordingly, Brazilian policies and legislations recognise the importance of addressing gender inequalities in education, particularly in schools. These guidelines call for GBV prevention initiatives by including this content and promoting gender equality and respect in the school curricula, changing materials and practices (see Lopes Gomes Pinto Ferreira 2021 for an overview of these provisions). These documents emphasise the need to adopt an intersectional approach to discuss race and ethnicity along with gender and other categories that together aggravate violence experienced by women and girls in the country. This approach was part of the state agenda and can be seen in initiatives established in the 2000s, like Gender and Diversity in the School (2005), Women and Science (2005), and School without Homophobia (2004) (UN Women 2017).

Despite these important initiatives and the Brazilian legislation and policies, the concepts of gender and a gendered perspective to prevent GBV in schools have been attacked by conservative groups. These groups prompted a misinformation campaign named 'gender ideology'. Research indicates that the Catholic Church developed this term over 20 years ago (Corrêa and Kalil 2020: 5; Miskolci and Campana 2017). Gradually, a wide range of conservative religious and political groups embraced this concept as a reaction to the World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, at which it was proposed that inequality experienced by women is a structural problem that should be understood and addressed within a gender perspective (Casseres 2018: 25; Miskolci and Campana 2017: 727; UN Women 1995). Anti-gender groups rejected this approach, and the term 'gender ideology' became popular and encouraged in Latin America after Argentina (2010) and Brasil (2011) recognised legal unions between same-sex couples (Miskolci 2018: 5; Miskolci and Campana 2017: 738). Further, also in this period, the Argentine lawyer Jorge Scala published a book that made the expression 'gender ideology' even more popular in Latin America, including Brasil (Miskolci and Campana 2017: 725; Scala 2011; Segato 2016: 15).

According to Scala, gender theory, gender perspective, gender lens are actually part of a 'gender ideology'. He defines this 'ideology' as a discursive political instrument of alienation with global dimensions that seeks to establish a totalitarian model with the purpose of 'imposing a new anthropology' to modify moral guidelines and lead to the destruction of human beings and society (Miskolci and Campana 2017: 725; Scala 2011: 11). Scala (2011) asserts that 'gender theory' is a radical theory that can destroy marriages, families and societies<sup>2</sup> (10, 70). He states that adopting what he calls a radical feminist, pseudo-anthropological and gendered approach can result in terrible consequences as it aims to indoctrinate and socially engineer individuals (46). Scala ascribes the origin of 'gender ideology' to the 1960s sexual revolution, which, according to him, produced a severe identity crisis for women (47). According to him, women were not satisfied with civil and political rights to achieve sex equality, which they pursued through a 'gender ideology' (61). He invents that women who support this 'strategy' deny that biology limits women and instead feel that gender, which is socially constructed, poses restrictions to them (62). Scala denies the existence of family violence in what he considered a family: an official marriage between a heterosexual couple (89–92) and ultimately alleges that feminism is a reprehensible behaviour (132) and that homosexuality is a 'psychic anomaly' (16).

Scala's ideas are clearly based on essentialism and determinism. Feminism is not a disease but has a fundamental role in raising awareness about gendered violence against women and placing it in the public eye (Bandeira 2014). The diversity of LGBTIQ+ groups are not an anomaly, and they must be free and respected to fully exercise their personal dignity rights (Ávila and Lopes Gomes Pinto Ferreira 2021). Scala's denial of GBV and family violence is against the evidence of its alarming rates in Brasil: a country where four women are killed per day by their current or past male partners (Waiselfisz 2015); where girls under 14 years old are overrepresented victims of rapes perpetrated inside their families (Bueno and Sobral 2020; Corrêa 2020), which is also a form of family violence; where the best teenage intimate relationships are described by girls as 'not having forced sex' (again, rape) (Taylor et al. 2017: 105); and where, almost every hour, an LGBTIQ+ person is a victim of interpersonal violence (Pinto et al. 2020). Hence, his perspectives do not reflect the reality that several forms of GBV disproportionately affect women and girls in Brasil. Further, his perspectives are problematic as they reinforce rigid gender roles and can contribute to the normalisation of GBV. Ultimately, Scala's stance contravenes the national and international body of legal and political guidelines that prescribe the promotion of gender equality through educational programs and school curricula featuring gender equality using a gender perspective (Campos and Bernardes 2019: 8).

This article explores the rise of the gender backlash in education before reviewing research on the effects of this backlash in Brasil's GBV prevention initiatives. It then presents the methodology of the current study and discusses the consequences of this backlash from a thematic analysis of 14 semi-structured interviews with advocates engaged in primary prevention initiatives. Finally, it presents conclusions and suggestions for future research.

### **The Rise of the Gender Backlash in Brazilian Education**

In Brasil, the gender backlash in education seems to primarily target LGBTIQ+ cohorts but also poses severe consequences for the prevention of GBV against girls and women in heterosexual relationships. Four main events illustrate this: the attacks on the program School without Homophobia in 2011 and Dilma Rousseff's presidential veto of the program a week after the legal recognition of same-sex unions in Brasil; the sharp rise of the gender backlash in education with the deletion of the word gender from the National Plan of Education in 2014; anti-gender groups' attacks on Judith Butler during her 2017 visit to Brasil; and, finally, Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential campaign, primarily based on misinformation around 'gender ideology', which led to his election. These events are explored below.

In 2011, a week after the legal recognition of same-sex unions in Brasil, conservative politicians began to attack the program School without Homophobia. These groups referred to the program materials as 'kit gay' and affirmed it aimed to 'turn' children 'gay' and should be abolished. This backlash gained momentum and resulted in Rousseff's presidential veto of the program (Miskolci 2018: 5). In Australia, the Safe Schools program was defunded by the federal government for similar criticism (see Law 2017). Rousseff's veto represents a severe setback, particularly during a government deemed attentive to human rights. In 2014, the rising gender backlash fostered another extreme setback in the educational arena: the guideline on overcoming educational inequalities, with its emphasis on promoting racial, regional, gender and sexual orientation equality, was excluded from the National Education Plan 2014–2024 and replaced, more generally, by 'all forms of discrimination' (*Law No. 13.005 [Brasil] 2014; Rosado-Nunes 2015: 1241*). Terms like 'gender' and 'gender equality' were seen as indicative of a 'gender ideology' framework, which anti-gender groups said had to be removed (Luna 2017: 24; Pasinato and Lemos 2017: 21; Vianna and Bortolini 2020). This suppression ignored the extensive body of Brazilian legal and political guidelines and seriously affected the development and implementation of public policies to prevent GBV against women and girls, particularly in schools (Nascimento and Arruda 2015: 4–6; Pasinato and Lemos 2017: 21). During Judith Butler's visit to Brasil in 2017, she was attacked by anti-gender supporters as they saw her as the 'creator' of the 'gender ideology'; although, her visit to Brasil was to talk about democracy, not about gender theories, in which she clarifies that has never denied biological differences, which Scala claimed to be denied by 'gender ideology' supporters (Butler 2017; Miskolci and Pereira 2018; Scala 2011).

In 2018, the School without Homophobia materials were once again under attack in disinformation campaigns that turned to be highly politicised. The 'crusade' against 'gender ideology' intensified during this period and was at the core of the political debates at the national level (Corrêa and Kalil 2020: 11). During his 2018 presidential campaign, (now President) Bolsonaro asserted that his opponent, Fernando Haddad, was the creator of the program materials. In this vein, Bolsonaro stated that people voting for Haddad were voting for 'stimulating precocious sexuality, teaching sex to children at schools' (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral [TSE] 2018). The Superior Electoral Court stated that these comments were inaccurate and ordered Bolsonaro to retract them (TSE 2018). However, these statements were widely repeated and heard. These debates around education were central in Bolsonaro's campaign and led to his election (Corrêa and Kalil 2020: 85; Severo, Gonçalves and Estrada 2019: 19). A discourse analysis examined 100 far-right Brazilian profiles on Twitter and confirmed that education was the main theme used in an attempt to sensitise the population against the 'gender ideology' in Brasil and identified Bolsonaro as being at the core position of this discourse (Bianconi n.d.; see also Corrêa and Kalil 2020: 76). Not surprisingly, during his presidential inaugural speech, he emphasised, once again, the need to combat the 'gender ideology' (Folha de São Paulo 2019). Having discussed the politics of the background to the gender backlash in Brasil, the following section reviews the literature on the effects of this backlash in education.

### **Anti-Gender Groups' Strategies to Intimidate Schools and Stakeholders: Previous Research on the Effects of Gender Backlash**

'Gender ideology' supporters encompass diverse groups, including secular movements like the Free Brasil Movement (*Movimento Brasil Livre*) and religious groups like the Nonpartisan School (*Escola Sem Partido* [ESP]). These groups' ideas are supported by a wide range of politicians, including evangelical groups, enthusiasts of the military dictatorship, defenders of the death penalty and 'gay cure', liberal and pro-privatisation groups (Ribeiro 2016: 5). The approach used by these former two groups is similar to that used by other anti-gender groups, as they work under the logic of moral panic and the creation of enemies (Cohen 2011; Junqueira 2018: 451; Miskolci and Campana 2017: 739–740; Miskolci and Pereira 2018: 2). According to the ESP, the use of a 'gender ideology' consists of abuse of the freedom of teaching focused on promoting political indoctrination. They assert that education must be 'ideologically neutral' and respect parent's moral convictions. However, this alleged neutrality is absent in the ESP's proposals, as they pose obstacles to recent advances in human rights by promoting certain themes and excluding others (Manhas 2016: 18; Prata and Souza 2018: 78). In this vein, they call parents and schools for action to impede the advancement of what they named 'ideological indoctrination' and for surveillance in schools (Leão 2019: 64; Leão and Barwinski 2018: 57). These actions foment a context of mutual distrust between students and educators, which places barriers to the construction of democratic space open to free participation and engagement, as well as the development and implementation of education modules to prevent GBV (Prata and Souza 2018: 83).

Anti-gender groups' calls for greater surveillance and monitoring of educators in classrooms are clearly quests to intimidate and control schools and educators. They have led to the attempt to criminalise educators by proposing a new crime of 'ideological assault', described as 'every practice that conditions the student to adopt a determined political, partisan, ideological or political any kind of embarrassment caused by someone else to the student for adopting positioning different from theirs, regardless of who the agent is', which was later withdrawn by the politician author (Barroso and Silva 2020: 437; Marinho 2015: 2; Semana de Ação Mundial 2020). These calls also resulted in templates of extrajudicial notification made available by anti-gender groups like ESP and high-profile individuals like the federal attorney Guilherme Schelb, which families could use to constrain educators (Leão and Barwinski 2018: 57; Prata and Souza 2018: 83; Procuradoria Federal dos Direitos do Cidadão [PFDC] 2018: 35–36; Ribeiro 2016: 5). In Brasil, extrajudicial notification is frequently used as a formal mechanism regarding a relevant matter before the commencement of a potential legal process. In theory, it attempts to resolve a conflict without having to file a legal complaint, but it can also be used as evidence in the courts if the alleged conflict is not addressed via this mechanism. In practice, amid the 'gender ideology' debates, extrajudicial notifications have been used by parents to complain about what educators have been delivering in schools to their

offspring. The Human Rights Federal Prosecution Office outlined that the use of extrajudicial notifications per se is not illegal (PFDC 2018). However, analysing Schelb's template, they concluded that it is intimidating because it threatens the school, principal and educators with legal prosecution and financial penalties. Further, they demonstrated that this template is vague and uses legal provisions that are not applied and discriminate against LGBTIQ+ groups (PFDC 2018).

In addition to these monitoring and intimidating strategies, anti-gender groups have been proposing several bills to forbid the discussion of gender in schools at the Brazilian Supreme Court (Leão 2019; Manhas 2016; Vianna 2020). Before the conclusion of my data collection, decisions were still pending. More recently, from April of 2020 onwards, the Supreme Court decided in favour of the legality of discussing gender in schools (see ADPF 457; ADPF 460). Advocacy work was fundamental here, acting as *amicus curiae*, proposing actions and counteractions. These decisions represent a victory to the freedom of speech and promotion of education aligned to the Brazilian democratic principles, legislation and human rights. They also favoured the weakening of movements like the ESP, as its creator, Miguel Nagib (ESP 2020), announced he had abandoned it in August 2020. The ESP webpage is currently unavailable. While I will not analyse this new scenario, it is essential to note that it might take time to fully encompass a gender perspective in education despite this considerable achievement. Along these lines, Professor Duque (2020) affirmed that despite these decisions, the widespread moral panic propagated by the 'gender ideology' will still be part of a moral agenda in anti-gender daily actions targeting educators. Hence, more ongoing work in this field is crucial.

While there is a robust body of literature examining the origins of the 'gender ideology' in Brasil, including documental and political analysis (Corrêa and Kalil 2020: 85; Miskolci and Campana 2017), its illegality (Campos and Bernardes 2019; Leão 2019) and monitoring bills at the Supreme Court (Ação Educação Democrática et al. 2018; Leão 2019), there is limited empirical research with advocates about the implications of this backlash in the prevention of GBV among youths. Recent studies documented the lack of educators' training to embrace a gender perspective in schools (Bahiana, Brito and Fonseca 2020; Souza and Rocha 2020) but did not delve into the effects of the gender backlash in educational programs. This article addresses this gap by adopting a southern feminist framework and semi-structured interviews with 14 advocates engaged in educational prevention programs. This framework and methodology are explained below.

### **Southern Feminist Framework**

At present, most studies of youth GBV predominantly come from the Global North, particularly from North America (Crooks et al. 2019; Taylor et al. 2017). The application of northern theories to the south is problematic and too often does not observe singularities from the south, limiting the potential and existence of 'possible projects of knowledge' (Connell 2014: 216). Southern scholars, mainly from non-English-speaking countries, are often isolated due to the Anglophonic dominance in academia (Carvalho 2014; Faraldo-Cabana 2018). The hard work of advocates made GBV against women and girls visible to the public agenda, and this work is fundamental for preventing and responding to these forms of violence (Mendes 2017; Saffioti 1994). However, advocates are often overlooked in academic studies (Harris, Dragiewicz and Woodlock 2020). I embraced a southern feminist framework, which combines southern theory (Connell 2007), southern criminology (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016), feminist research methodology and intersectionality as a pathway to address this imbalance and knowledge gap. In this sense, I actively engaged with voices from the south, Brazilian advocates, scholarly and grey literature mainly published in Portuguese, which is rarely heard and visited by northern scholars. In doing so, I aimed to contribute to the southern criminology agenda on GBV prevention. Gender inequality is a key feature of feminist methodologies, yet it is insufficient for comprehending the simultaneous oppressions embodied by Brazilian women and girls. In this sense, it is necessary to be attentive to race and ethnicity, age, social and cultural aspects, along with gender inequalities, which increase girls and women's vulnerability to GBV in the country (Campos 2020; Debert and Gregori 2016). All these intersecting categories must be addressed in prevention and responses to GBV.

## Methodology

This qualitative work draws on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted between June and July 2019 with advocates engaged in preventing youth GBV in Brasil to answer the following questions: 1) How has the gender backlash affected education programs to prevent GBV against young people aged between 12 and 18 years old? 2) What strategies have advocates used to resist and respond to this backlash? Ethics approval was obtained from the QUT Human Research Ethics Advisory Team. All participants were offered anonymity, yet most of them chose to identify themselves. Despite this, all identities were preserved in this article to protect participants' confidentiality and the young people they serve. This study used purposive and snowball sampling strategies to identify advocates from peak organisations aligned with an 'advocacy of a feminist value position and perspective' (Neuman 2014: 118), that is, recognising that intimate partner violence (IPV) and family violence experienced by young people are forms of GBV that disproportionately affect women and girls. Participants can be classified into three main groups: nine were from the legal sector, three worked for anti-violence organisations, and two were researchers or consultants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and examined using thematic analysis. This process involved analysing my reflective journals, data tables with initial codes and importing the transcripts to NVivo for further coding and analysis (Bazeley and Jackson 2013; Bryman 2016). The main themes that emerged from my analysis were a) advocates' perceptions of 'gender ideology'; b) the effects of the gender backlash in GBV prevention more broadly and to stakeholders more specifically; and, finally, c) advocates' strategies to resist and respond to this backlash, which can be divided in c.1) talking directly or c.2) indirectly about gender and gendered violence.

## Analysis

### *Advocates' Perceptions of 'Gender Ideology': A Threat to Human Rights, a Myth, Nonsense, a Fallacy, a Lack of Knowledge, a Confusion, it Doesn't Exist*

Participants explained that anti-gender groups sought to demonise everything that uses the word gender and coined the expression 'gender ideology'. These ideas echoed in the literature reviewed (Luna 2017; Nascimento and Arruda 2015; Pasinato and Lemos 2017; Vianna and Bortolini 2020). Indeed, my participants identified the 'gender ideology' framed by anti-gender groups as a threat to human rights, a fallacy, nonsense, a myth, a lack of knowledge of gender relations and confusion, which do not align with the Brazilian and international body of policies to prevent GBV against women and girls (see also Campos and Bernardes 2019; Leão 2019). Several participants affirmed that this backlash is centred on LGBTIQ+ groups, as anti-gender groups misunderstood gender and sexuality. One participant put in this way:

It's actually a way to directly attack Queer theory and rights, especially when it comes to sexual orientation, gender identity. This criticism did not arise in efforts to directly attack violence against women but to persecute those who speak about sexual orientation, gender identity.  
(Participant from the anti-violence organisation)

Additionally, this study confirms that the gender backlash in education, mainly targeting LGBTIQ+ groups, was a central argument during the 2018 elections in the country, which influenced the election results (Bianconi n.d.; Corrêa and Kalil 2020; Severo, Gonçalves and Estrada 2019; TSE 2018). Accordingly, participants emphasised that anti-gender groups used this discourse to spread fake news during the 2018 elections, which resulted in the election of far-right candidates like Bolsonaro and other politicians (participants from the legal sector, anti-violence organisation, and researcher/consultant group). As a participant from the anti-violence organisation explained:

It ended up polarising who was against or for the 'kit gay' [as it was called by anti-gender groups], and there is no 'kit gay'; this is a marketing ploy that convinces families we could make a teaching material that convinces the child, the boy and the girl, to adapt and define their sexual orientation and everything else.

This perspective is in line with those of Vianna and Unbehaum (2016: 97), who concluded that prevention programs in schools aim to improve the quality of education and students' rights and freedoms, nurturing a democratic and inclusive environment. Consequently, this approach is not focused on teaching 'how to be a boy or a girl' nor on destroying families, as anti-gender groups asserted, but on how to welcome all forms of gender and sexuality expression in any family structure (Vianna and Unbehaum 2016).

While advocates affirmed that the backlash is focused chiefly on LGBTIQ+ groups, they also explained that it has been undermining their programs' capacity, including the prevention of IPV among youth and family violence. These effects are analysed in the following section.

### ***The Broad Effects of the Gender Backlash in GBV Prevention***

Participants explained that gender inequalities, machismo and patriarchy drive violence against women and girls. To address these drivers, advocates highlighted the importance of discussing gender relations in schools (participants from the legal sector, anti-violence organisation, and researcher/consultant group; see also Casseres 2018; Miskolci and Campana 2017). They outlined that the benefits of education programs embracing these recommendations are extended to the whole society: children, families, communities and the economy. A participant from an anti-violence organisation noted that:

Studies show that more gender-equitable companies have a potential to profit more than those that are more macho, for example, so the impacts are for all. (Participant from an anti-violence organisation)

The overwhelming majority of participants argued that the best way to address the drivers of GBV against women and girls is to include this topic in the school curriculum, as prescribed by the Maria da Penha Law (*Law No. 11.340 [Brasil] 2006*) and national and international policies (participants from the legal sector, anti-violence organisation, and researcher/consultant group). However, they indicated that this approach is negatively affected by the gender backlash, particularly led by the current government. Yet, they recognised that education losses have started during previous governments, including those that seem progressionist (anti-violence organisations and researcher/consultant participants).

Participants from different backgrounds outlined that the veto on the program School without Homophobia in 2011, the removal of the word gender from the National Plan of Education in 2014 and initial changes in the structure and budget of the Secretariat of Policies for Women in 2015, all during Rousseff's mandate, are examples of significant setbacks that affected the primary prevention of GBV in schools (participants from the legal sector, anti-violence organisation, and researcher/consultant group). This program's presidential veto and the deletion of gender from the National Plan of Education are implications often discussed in the literature (Nascimento and Arruda 2015; Pasinato and Lemos 2017), but the changes in the Secretariat of Policies for Women from 2015 onwards are not discussed as often. Hence, this research adds to this body of work. A participant pointed out that gender was eliminated not only from the National Plan of Education but also from the Secretariat of Public Policies for Women, which used to work with gender equality policies (researcher/consultant participant). This approach was replaced by equality between men and women. This advocate evaluated this change as worrisome because it does not recognise gender and power imbalances, discrimination and differences in victimisation, such as those present in young women's experiences of IPV and sexual violence within their families. As a result, this change overlooks and does not address GBV drivers as prescribed by participants, policies and the literature. This approach of ignoring gender raised concerns among my participants who reported the vulnerability of young people to IPV and sexual violence perpetrated by family members; hence, they urgently called for the prevention of these forms of GBV in schools (see also Bueno and Sobral 2020; Corrêa 2020; FBSP 2019).

One participant assessing government responses to GBV over the years argued that the prevention of violence against women and girls has never been part of a state policy in Brasil. This advocate demonstrates that it has been seen as a marginal rather than a priority problem by governments, police and courts. To address this issue, this participant predicted that more coordinated actions are needed. In this sense, this participant concluded that 'we cannot let more women die to act, but I think we reached this moment of having more women dying because of the lack of [state] investment' (participant from the anti-violence organisation).

Supporters of the 'gender ideology' are often said to be right-wing. However, their discourse also appeals to different audiences, including people who are frustrated with corruption scandals and the country's economic crisis. In this vein, many supporters perceive this backlash as nonpartisan (Miskolci and Campana 2017: 742). Consequently, Brasil is experiencing a stark political polarisation and the advancement of the right. A participant from the legal sector explains that many confuse defending ideas of a social state with being a supporter of the labour party. This participant clarifies that these perspectives should not be conflated, yet these connections are often made:

We often joke that conservatives 'came out of the closet' so in the old days it was fashionable to be on the left, now it is fashionable to be on the right; and there is absolute confusion between combating corruption and fighting against ideas that have to do with a vision of social state [concerned with social rights including education, food, housing]. Of course, there cannot be corruption, but in Brasil, there has been an association that if you defend social state ideas, which are taken as left-wing ideas, then you are [automatically associated with] in favour of corruption, because you are [associated] in favour of the PT [*Partido Trabalhista*, the labour party]. But these are absolutely different things. (Participant from the legal sector)

Having addressed the extent to which the backlash affected the development and implementation of educational programs to prevent GBV in general, the analysis will now turn to the severe consequences on stakeholders engaged in existing prevention programs.

### *The Effects of the Gender Backlash on Education Program Stakeholders*

Some advocates argue that the gender backlash and the political context have hampered their work and placed their education programs under greater scrutiny. In this vein, one advocate explained that their first challenge 'is this conservative wave, which limits our ability to work on these themes broadly, and even the possibility of having more capable adult facilitators to implement the programs' (participant from an anti-violence organisation). Another participant outlined their challenges in this arena:

This myth that was created about gender has challenged our operations and we're adopting strategies to get around these barriers. We've had institutions where we've arranged to go in and train their professionals and a condition put was: 'But you will not talk about lesbians, right? You aren't going to teach others about transgender peoples are you?' (Participant from the legal sector)

These obstacles come from a variety of groups (see also Miskolci and Campana 2017). As mentioned in the literature review (Manhas 2016; Prata and Souza 2018), my participants outlined that different groups affect their work, such as anti-gender movements like ESP. One advocate explained that this movement recites supposed ideological indoctrination in schools and that schools cannot support any political parties: they have to be neutral and, to be neutral, schools cannot have any political discussion. This participant stated that ESP's arguments wrongly conflate points that warrant further clarification. This advocate explained that obviously, a school cannot promote any political party and that it is different from discussing political ideas in schools, which this participant argued to be unavoidable, because 'life in society demands a plurality of ideas, students have to know that there are some ideas that are more conservative, some ideas that are more liberal, [that] there is an international discussion on human rights,



this is part of humanist education' (participant from the legal sector). However, anti-gender movements do not seem to understand this need and have equipped parents to take action against schools. As a result, my participants argued that their work and the facilitators, educators, students, and recipients of these prevention programs, in general, are under threat in this context. Consistent with the literature, my participants reported the use of extrajudicial notifications by students' parents as a means to intimidate educators and school principals (Ação Educação Democrática et al. 2018; Leão and Barwinski 2018; Prata and Souza 2018; PFDC 2018). They mentioned that extrajudicial notification templates like those made available by ESP are highly intimidating. Regarding the use of these templates, advocates said:

The parents add their names, sign and deliver this document to the school principal, notifying the principal [that their son/daughter is having discussions they believe are problematic] and that if they don't stop, they [the school principal and educators] will be personally prosecuted. This is all intimidating as sometimes the teacher or the principal doesn't have legal training [to legally understand and question the content of this notification] ... So this represents [efforts to] put a gag on teachers and schools. (Participant from the legal sector)

So, we are in a moment of criminalisation of those who talk about gender, this is something very complicated. Because a great material that eventually talks about gender with a focus on violence can be criminalised inside schools. A father may want to go there to complain, want to send [an extrajudicial] notification, and all of this is against the law. But we are at a moment in which these things are happening: fathers and mothers of students are rebelling against teachers, accusing them of being indoctrinators. (Participant from the anti-violence organisation)

Other participants explicitly demonstrated their concerns when talking about GBV in schools:

How do you approach this topic in the classroom? ... I would like to see if you have any tips, because sometimes someone went through a situation ... it [if this topic] comes to the father of a child in a completely different way than it should, the father can come to the school to complain, it negatively impacts our [prevention] initiative, so the limiter [imposed by the backlash on us] would be how to talk about it. (Participant from the legal sector)

There were, for example, professionals from the legislative ... who went to schools to arrest educators who had been talking about gender, several teachers responded to administrative process because of that. (Participant from the legal sector)

Another participant mentioned that educators had been intimidated not only by the parents of their students but also by their family members:

There was an educator who was afraid of her partner finding out what she was talking about in the classroom. The vulnerability experienced by educators and students is high, and we have to work in this new context, and we still have to invest a lot more in security. (Participant from the anti-violence organisation)

These risks and threats are not limited to educators but also program recipients. One participant concluded that the 'gender ideology' discourse had been widely spread around the country, limiting the work on gender equality and silencing students to discuss this topic with their family and friends:

All this fallacy of the 'gender ideology' is reaching the tip. So, we are working on gender equality, and there is an advance in discourse, in languages, in disputes over narratives. What leads these students' parents to believe in this narrative of, I will use in quotes, 'gender ideology'? And what does this mean? Why can it be so threatening? So, there are a whole series of questions related to it. What would influence students to arrive, students to continue

working, students being free to return home, to their neighbourhood, comment on these topics, and other topics. (Participant from the anti-violence organisation)

Along these lines, one advocate mentioned that students engaged in their program have been subjected to violence and even assaulted on the streets. In addition to the risks to students and educators, another advocate mentioned that academics are also at risk because 'we are noticing persecution of gender studies, from cuts to research funding, to how the university will work' (participant from the anti-violence organisation). For example, Professor Marlene de Fáveri, who teaches history and gender relations at a public university in the south of Brasil, was prosecuted by Ana Caroline Campagnolo, a former research student. The latter accused the professor, her former supervisor, of discriminating against her because she (the student) declared herself as anti-feminist and Christian. While Campagnolo's case was dismissed by the courts (Happke 2018), she gained conservative support and was elected state deputy, defending the crusade against 'gender ideology' and the ESP.

The above discussion focused on how the gender backlash has affected education programs to prevent GBV against young people aged between 12 and 18 years old. The analysis below will now move to how advocates have resisted, responded and worked in this climate of backlash.

### *Advocates' Strategies to Resist and Respond to the Backlash: Talking Directly or Indirectly about Gender?*

The gender backlash in education places prevention programs and their stakeholders under extensive risks. Despite these implications on developing and delivering these programs in schools, advocates did not stop working on their prevention initiatives. One of this study's aims was to discuss what strategies advocates have been using to respond to and resist this backlash. This section answers this question by discussing advocates strategies. While they common strategies key to addressing gender inequalities in education programs, challenging rigid gender stereotypes, empowering girls and promoting healthier masculinities, as recommended by the literature reviewed and prevention policies (Flood, Fergus and Heenan 2009; Gleeson et al. 2015; Lopes Gomes Pinto Ferreira 2021; Pasinato and Lemos 2017), they adopted different strategies to resist and respond to the backlash. These strategies can be classified as talking directly or indirectly about GBV.

Carreira (2016: 16) examined how educational departments in Brasil developed initiatives focused on gender and sexuality in educational policies before the removal of the word gender from the National Plan of Education in 2014. She explained that at this time, only a few initiatives used the term gender. To overcome the lack of support and include gendered discussions in these policies, Carreira demonstrated that an 'invisible strategy' could be used by covertly talking about gender. According to her, this approach is helpful in periods of resistance and threats to rights. While advocates did not mention being inspired by this 'invisible strategy', they reported similar strategies to avoid the gender backlash. These included not talking about gender overtly and not using the word gender in their education programs. In this vein, advocates have made adaptations, from program names to content. For example, one advocate from the legal sector mentioned that their program had the word gender in the title. When their program was expanded, this participant was convinced by other advocates to change its name because restrictions could be imposed. This participant explained that this discussion occurred before the peak of the polarisation and deletion of the word gender from the National Plan of Education, which indicates that the gender backlash has been ongoing and increasing. Further, some advocates explained that initiatives that do not use the word gender but still discuss similar messages have been successful among different groups, including outside their workplace (participants from the legal sector). Some of these messages involve the discussion of equality, respectful relationships, machismo and patriarchy. Other advocates also identified this strategy as relevant:

We have faced the gender backlash as water's wisdom says: you circumvent, but you pass. And the important thing is that you pass. There is no point in getting there, confronting because

people are going to negatively react and create an aversion to everything you say. So, if you go there and say, for instance, 'folks, the machismo is killing women', this is [an accepted] way, but if you say, 'folks, the gender issue [is killing women]' ... Once you say the word gender, people become afraid, so we need to work slowly. (Participant from the legal sector)

An advocate explored the use of this strategy when talking about GBV against women in a church after a catholic mass:

The priest [in the sermon we attended and were invited to give a lecture at after the service] spoke a lot against gender, against 'gender ideology' and he's very against 'gender ideology', and religions in general work a lot with this concept of 'gender ideology' that doesn't really exist ... instead of talking about gender [to the same group at the end of the service], I started talking about the patriarchal model and machismo, because if you talk about machismo people accept it, but if you talk about gender people get suspicious and in the end, I'm going to say the same thing because gender issues are closely linked to machismo and to the patriarchal model of male domination, of female subjection. (Participant from the legal sector)

Advocates in this section identified the strategy of covertly talking about gender but still approaching violence as being gendered as crucial to quelling the gender backlash in education. An advocate affirmed that this approach was still useful to teach people about GBV (participant from the legal sector). Similarly, another participant believes this strategy is valuable for discussing the prevention of GBV with educators and students (participant from the legal sector). Otherwise, they would not even be able to reach this cohort. Some advocates demonstrated that avoiding using the word gender and covertly talking about GBV is a pivotal strategy for overcoming the backlash and reaching the programs' recipients and stakeholders. However, other advocates argued that this is not the best approach to circumvent the backlash, despite the risks for participants and facilitators in not adopting a covert strategy. In this sense, one of these advocates proposed:

I think all this conservative response is offensive and we need more coordinated tactics': we won't give in, we won't stop talking about these issues because there's an antipathy for them ... we need to create some security mechanisms around our beneficiaries [program participants], but that doesn't mean we will stop talking, or stop working with them. (Anti-violence organisation participant)

Likewise, another participant stated that 'I don't give up talking about gender' (researcher/consultant participant). Some participants agreed that directly avoiding talking about gender can favour an essentialist understanding that women and girls are victims of GBV because they are females, leaving aside that it is a social problem, that violence is not natural or given but a result of socially constructed problems (participants from the legal sector and researcher/consultant group). Without embracing gender, these participants affirmed that it is not possible to comprehend IPV among heterosexual couples, nor the cycle of violence. According to these participants, this lack of understanding can result in severe consequences for victims and survivors, such as victim blaming. In this vein, an advocate critiques the covert strategy because it does not address the drivers of GBV as prescribed by the Maria da Penha Law. Hence, this advocate demonstrates that this approach is not effective:

Unfortunately, many people who work with the Maria da Penha Law within the justice system ended up taking a stance that you better not use the word gender, because when you use it [it] creates a certain animosity, resistance, so they think 'let's talk about violence against women but let's not talk about gendered violence'. Which to me is a mistake because we will lose a battle without having a chance to explain what gender is. Without showing how important it is to consider gender. Instead of promoting greater awareness of the concept, issues and causes, what it allows is for us to work in public policy. We get scared and say 'let's just talk about violence against women' and let this field be dominated by the understanding that women are

protected as a means to protect the traditional family, and deny women their place as subjects of rights. (Researcher/consultant participant)

This advocate explained that feminist movements have not engaged enough with the concept of gendered violence and that with the ongoing backlash, this discussion became inescapable:

It is a loss that we went through a lot of confusion that I think was not properly undone: that was to associate gender with sexuality ... What that is really going to do is to create resistance to the concept of gender. It means that we are not associating gender with the condition of women, even though with gender we confront privileges of the status quo, male power, the white elite class, etc. ... there is no strong engagement of the feminist movement in defining and defending this concept which is so important to the feminist movement. (Researcher/consultant participant)

A participant from the anti-violence organisation asked if they could find anything positive among the gender backlash context stated:

I think we never talked about gender as much as now. That's good, it's good to talk about. But it's not a proactive speech, it's for us to react to, we started talking about our strategy: yes, there will be discussions about gender and gendered violence in school. When they started excluding the word gender from the National Education Plan, when they started saying that it was forbidden to talk about gender in school ... [we decided that] Yes, we're talking about gender, we're looking for feminism, in a way that we might not be able to do spontaneously if it wasn't for the scenario that arose. But I don't know if this is a positive shift or something that was spontaneous and unavoidable ... it's a consequence of that debate, a consequence for both sides. (Participant from the anti-violence organisation)

The discussion above analysed two main approaches used by advocates to resist, respond and keep working on preventing GBV against young women. The participants in the study adopted two main strategies, talking directly or indirectly about gender and GBV. The benefits and critiques of each approach were assessed as well as insights for future work.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the consequences of the gender backlash in education from the perspectives of advocates engaged in education programs in Brasil at a time of deeply conservative political and ideological change in the country, particularly during and after the election of Bolsonaro. The findings indicate that the gender backlash promoted by anti-gender groups uses a captivating discourse and creates a Manichaeian perspective in which one must be 'against them to join us' in this 'crusade'. Consequently, advocates' gendered perspective of violence has been marginalised. This study has shown that advocates' programs have been severely affected by the gender backlash fomented by anti-gender groups. These staggering consequences involve extensive risks and threats to advocates, educators, students, facilitators and recipients of their programs. Accordingly, this backlash violates the fundamental right of being educated free of gendered violence. Advocates have used two main strategies to quell this backlash. The first is talking directly about gender and GBV and increasing stakeholders' security, and the second is avoiding using the word gender and covertly discussing GBV and its drivers. Together, these findings suggest that advocates' work from different backgrounds has been fundamental in leading prevention initiatives in a space that should be primarily occupied by the executive, as seen in past state agendas. The present study has been one of the first empirical investigations into the effects of the gender backlash in education from the advocates' perspectives. This work has shed a contemporary light on the contentious issue of gender backlash in education in the Global South. While these findings identified the effects and strategies for overcoming the gender backlash in education in the Brazilian context, they can almost certainly illuminate new understandings in working and responding to backlash internationally. Further

useful studies could explore the effects of recent decisions from the Supreme Court in developing and implementing education programs to prevent GBV. Future research should also analyse the COVID-19 pandemic's effects in these prevention initiatives and youth experiences of IPV and family violence during this unprecedented time.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Connell, Brasil is spelled with and "s" as in its national language, resisting Anglophone dominance (2014).

<sup>2</sup> In this vein, although affirming to be open to dialogue about gender theory in education, the Vatican has recently published a document (Versaldi and Zani 2019: 3) which reinforces its long-term perspective (Corrêa and Kalil 2020: 52).

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