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**Women**

# **Betrayed by the System in Brazil**

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**While various human rights reports show that annually between one and four million Brazilian women have abortions, the right to women's bodily autonomy remains a major battle. Currently the law allows abortion only in the case of rape or to save the woman's life. This means millions of women are forced to seek underground abortions.**

Given the rise of conservative parties following Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, far-right politicians are seeking to roll back legal abortion even in the case of rape. Congressman Sóstenes Cavalcante has introduced Bill PL 190424, which would criminalize abortion under all circumstances after 22 weeks of pregnancy.

If passed, this legislation would subject rape survivors to unbearable psychological burdens, forcing them to carry pregnancies to term. Meanwhile their aggressors face much lighter penalties.

### Impact on Survivors

Due to his role in spreading disinformation, Jair Bolsonaro is currently ineligible for public office. However his influence is felt with the introduction of Bill PL 190424. Largely supported by members of the Congressional evangelical caucus, the bill is an affront to the secular state established in Brazil's constitution.

Brazil is a predominantly Christian country, a slight majority Catholic but with evangelical congregations growing rapidly. In the face of social inequality they project a deeply conservative "prosperity gospel."

While many may support the bill from a deeply religious and moralistic viewpoint, it is criminalizing the victims of abuse, not their abusers. Moreover, religious beliefs have no place in public health and policy. Abortion is a human right, recognized by the UN and World Health Organization.

The bill was marked "urgent" through a symbolic vote lasting just 23 seconds. Although this designation has since been revoked due to significant public pressure, the bill remains under congressional review and could still be passed.

This congressional proposal starkly reflects a state that not only fails to protect its citizens but also exacerbates the trauma endured by victims, further penalizing them by forcing them to carry the physical embodiment of their trauma for the rest of their lives.

The bill's proponents argue that adoption after birth is "an option." Yet this completely disregards the will and psychological needs of the person, who may face gestational depression, the dangers of younger victims to safely give birth, as well as the bureaucratic inefficiencies of Brazil's adoption system. Societal prejudices hinder adoption and as a result, post-adoption support is inadequate. Brazil's adoption system is already overwhelmed.

Judicial delays can take up to 10 years, often leaving children eligible for adoption only in adolescence while most prospective parents, aiming for easier familial integration, prefer infants or toddlers under three.

## The "Child Pregnancy Bill"

Those most affected by Bill PL 190424 would be underage girls, and it's already being referred to as the "Child Pregnancy Bill."

Children, especially those from marginalized communities, take longer to recognize abuse and seek legal support. The psychological toll of processing the trauma and overcoming the stigma, even from medical and legal professionals, further delays access to legal abortion, often pushing the pregnancy beyond the 22-week limit.

According to a 2022 study by the Brazilian Public Security Forum, the country recorded the highest number of rapes in its history, with 74,930 victims, 75.8% of whom were cases of statutory rape. This alarming figure highlights Brazil's culture of rape and pedophilia, which the state fails to dismantle — instead, it institutionalizes the crimes through patriarchal structures.

Under this bill, women and girls who terminate pregnancies resulting from rape could face up to 20 years in prison. They would be convicted as murderers and detained in juvenile facilities until they could be transferred to the adult prison system — punishment that is not only cruel but also disproportionate, as rapists themselves face sentences ranging from six to 12 years, almost half the penalty imposed on the victims. Indeed, how many abusers are ever held accountable?

This dangerous inversion of roles discourages abuse reports, as victims, understandably opting for illegal abortions, would avoid formal complaints to escape such harsh consequences. Considering that most child sexual abuse in Brazil is perpetrated by family members, this is even more concerning. Victims, often coerced by their families into silence, would be denied legal support.

## Criminalization and Trauma

For those who experience sexual violence, the trauma does not end with the act itself. Forensic examinations are frequently insensitively handled, meaning that survivors can be exposed to immediate post-trauma humiliation. They not only face the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy, but the questioning of what they may have done to cause their own victimization.

Yet "pro-life" advocates argue that the "unborn child" should not be punished, claiming that one crime does not justify another.

This means they prioritize the "rights" potential life over the rights of the pregnant person. How can one justify coercing a person to risk their health and well-being in order to bring a fetus to term?

The dominant Christianized notion in Brazil posits that "life begins at conception," as the soul supposedly enters the body, making it sacred before birth. Debates on the nature of life vary. But the right to abortion cannot be restricted to one's religious belief. It is a public health issue.

Denying this right strips affected women of ownership over their own bodies. Undermining female autonomy insults human dignity, placing a wide range of reproductive rights under the control of the church and state.

Where abortion is a legal right, no person with a uterus should be forced to continue a pregnancy or to undergo an abortion. The far right maintains that abortion, a safe and legal procedure in many countries, is coercive. But that

stands the reality on its head — without access to abortion one is condemned to continuing a pregnancy despite the dangers and problems that may entail. By forcing women to carry unwanted pregnancies, the state turns their bodies into sanctuaries for abuse, where trauma solidifies and renews daily.

Criminalizing abortion does not reduce abortion rates — it only makes the procedure less safe. An estimated 70% of abortions in Brazil are performed clandestinely.

# The Fight Against Oppression

Women who choose to terminate pregnancies, even when it's legally prohibited, have resorted to unsafe methods that can result in irreversible consequences. Annually around 200,000 hospitalizations are due to unsafe abortions, predominantly among young and impoverished women.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Brazil's rate of maternal mortality stood at 45.8 per 100,000. with unsafe abortions the fourth leading cause of death.

Protestors across Brazil have taken to the streets in hundreds of peaceful demonstrations against Bill PL 190424 — the largest being 10,000 marching in São Paulo — and forcing national media coverage. Feminist organizations, social movements, and human rights collectives are mobilizing to resist this proposal and demanding that the government respect women's rights. Thus the feminist movement is not just demonstrating against this reaction-ary bill, but confronting the entire dismal state of reproductive rights.

Only five years ago Brazil and Argentina had similar restrictive abortion laws, although Argentinian feminists were able to work more openly. At the end of 2020 Argentina's congress passed a law that made abortion available upon request for the first 14 weeks of pregnancy and guarantees access to abortion services free of charge in both public and private health care facilities. This was the result of a sustained movement that involved massive demonstrations.

Clearly the fight for female freedom and autonomy must be a collective effort, extending to all women confronting patriarchal systems worldwide and opposing every form of gender oppression and restriction of women's rights. International solidarity can play a crucial role in amplifying resistance beyond South America's borders.

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