# BIG TECH AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF MISOGYNY IN THE BRAZIL ONLINE ECOSYSTEM

An assessment of digital threats to women in public life

April 2024

# SHE PERSISTED

## Big Tech and The Weaponization of Misogyny
## in the Brazil Online Ecosystem

**Research Aims**

In 2023 #ShePersisted conducted a detailed landscape analysis of common gendered narratives, themes and tactics in Brazil circulating among major digital platforms, analyzing the discourse around targets of gendered disinformation attacks as part of a series of country reports called #MonetizingMisogyny, which includes case studies from India, Tunisia, Hungary, and Italy.

In 2024, #ShePersisted enhanced this analysis with a forensic dive into the patterns, modus operandi and motives of gendered disinformation aimed at Brazilian women in politics and journalism. A national public opinion survey was conducted in Brazil in March 2024 in order to better understand the attitudes of the Brazilian public toward social media companies, online harms and gender equality.

**This report provides an assessment of the size and scope of the problem of digital threats to women in public life and provides a greater understanding of how the online ecosystem is weaponized against women's rights advocates in Brazil.**

**Methodology Informing the Analysis**

- **Toxicity scoring and natural language processing** was conducted across three platforms (Facebook, X, YouTube comments), in collaboration with The Nerve, a data analytics company founded by noted disinformation expert Maria Ressa, to provide digital forensics and analyze both networks and narratives that erode democratic institutions at the cost of women's rights.

- **A nationally representative public opinion survey in Brazil,** conducted in March 2024, by Lake Research Partners, a woman-owned polling firm with

decades of experience working in the US and internationally, including extensive experience researching messaging to counter gendered narratives on behalf of their clients. The public opinion survey allowed us to better understand the concerns of Brazilian voters including those surrounding online safety and gendered disinformation. They conducted online surveys of a nationally representative sample of 1050 registered voters in Brazil from 14th - 26th March 2024.

- **Qualitative analysis in the form of a case study was conducted in 2023,** *#ShePersisted Analysis of Gendered Disinformation Trends in Braz*il which included a review of more than 68 articles, academic papers, think tank periodicals and conference presentations related to disinformation, gender, and political developments in Brazil. Key informant interviews identified the thematic areas and observed trends in online attacks by those who have lived through them or worked to provide relief and assistance to the targets.

## Summary Findings

- The majority of Brazilian voters believe that social media platforms are not regulated enough and are supportive of government efforts to protect social media users and the Brazilian public, especially for the protection of children and young women.

- The "Fake News Bill" is broadly popular in Brazil, at 77% support.[1] Additionally, 65% of Brazilians believe that social media companies are profiting from the spread of lies and disinformation, with equal belief (65%) that companies are deepening divisions in Brazilian society.

- Gendered disinformation is used by pro-authoritarian networks to attack their critics. Gendered attacks and disinformation narratives were driven by groups and actors to promote anti-rights ideologies. These networks often use religion, even posing as religious figures or groups, as a tool to sow division or cast doubt on the character of women in positions of authority.

- Significant majorities in Brazil expressed concern about the way women are treated online with more than two-thirds expressing concern over "deep fake"

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[1] Survey Questions: Leaders in Brazil have proposed the "Fake News Bill," in an attempt to combat disinformation online. The bill states that digital content platforms are required to act systematically, preventively, and diligently to prevent or mitigate illegal practices that constitute or incite: crimes against the Rule of Law and Terrorism; crimes of racism; crimes against public health; crimes against children and adolescents; crimes of inducing, instigating or aiding suicide or self-mutilation; and violence against women, and will be held legally liable for any non-compliance by third parties.

videos that spread through social media. 78% of Brazilians believe it is personally important to pass rules and regulations to stop gendered disinformation online.

● Even with active fact-checking networks and civic initiatives attempting to protect information integrity, gendered disinformation thrives. Disinformation narratives persisted online even after being debunked by fact-checkers, indicating coordinated efforts to keep the falsehoods alive.

● Nearly 70% of Brazilians believe that Brazil as a country can ensure that all people are treated fairly and equally, no matter their gender, religion, race, or country of origin.

● While there is a strong belief in traditional gender roles in Brazil, with more than three-quarters (77%) strongly agree and (87% overall agreement) that "*women should be cherished and protected by men*," at the same time a strong majority (76%) thinks it would be better for the country if more women were in politics.

### *Definitions: What is gendered disinformation?*

Gendered disinformation is the deliberate spread of deceptive or false information or images about women political leaders, journalists, and female public figures, using social stereotypes around the role of women. This type of disinformation is designed to damage the reputations of female political opponents, silence critics, and discourage other women from engaging politically[2].

● *76 percent of Brazilians polled indicate that they are concerned about it.*

### *Why does it matter?*

Brazil is a prime example of how gendered disinformation contributes to democratic backsliding. Under former president Jair Bolsonaro, the country experienced a deterioration of democratic principles which were exacerbated by human rights violations, misogyny and racial inequality. Under the previous administration's far right leaning leadership, gendered disinformation was a key tool to strengthen the government's power, attack female activists and journalists and shrink civic space.

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[2] The Problem, #ShePersisted

# Detailed Analysis

**Toxicity online toward women in leadership positions is extraordinarily high in Brazil**

Through analysis of over one million pieces of data gathered for this report, out of all "toxic" posts collected from 2019-2024, X had the highest percentage of gendered attacks, followed by YouTube comments and then Facebook. On X, about 61% of posts contained gendered attacks, while 59.8% of the YouTube comments contained gendered attacks, and on Facebook, 53.4% of the posts contained gendered attacks.

*About toxicity scoring*

The forensic analysis conducted by **The Nerve** was done using an open-source API that uses machine learning models to score social media posts and comments based on a variety of attributes. The Nerve combined #ShePersisted's threat surface frameworks, which are specific to attacks against women in politics online and not meant to measure all toxicity toward women, rather, to design a fit-for-purpose methodology with scoring that takes into account the attitudes toward women that impact voting behavior.

The box (right) shows what data sets are included in this analysis for each platform. WhatsApp, as it is a private messaging service is not included in the analysis, nor is Instagram as text contained within imagery is not searchable, and video contents are beyond the scope of this research project.



- Public posts mentioning the names of the targets
- Facebook pages and public Facebook groups
- January 2019 to January 2024

- Posts mentioning the names of the targets
- Public X accounts
- Nov 2021 to January 2024

- Comments mentioning the names of the targets
- Nov 2021 to January 2024

From the scans, the posts were filtered using toxicity scoring to identify the highly-likely toxic posts. The researchers used a threshold score of 0.6*, getting all posts that the algorithm detected to be 60% toxic. After human review of the highly-likely toxic posts, YouTube comments showed the highest toxicity, followed by X, and Facebook.

**The Brazilian public is deeply concerned about social media and online harms**

*What media sources do Brazilians Trust Most?*

In Brazil, the most trusted sources of information are friends/family/colleagues (27% a lot of trust), newspapers and magazines (25%), radio (25%), and TV media outlets (24%). While platforms like YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook have net positive trust ratings from the public:

- ○ **YouTube** – 64% trust, 34% do not trust
- ○ **Instagram** – 54% trust, 42% do not trust
- ○ **WhatsApp** – 50% trust, 47% do not trust
- ○ **Facebook** – 43% trust, 53% do not trust

Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and Kwai, have net negative trust ratings.

- ○ **X** – 38% trust, 50% do not trust
- ○ **TikTok** – 30% trust, 61% do not trust
- ○ **Kwai** – 27% trust, 60% do not trust

While the public is somewhat more skeptical of social media in general, they place great trust in the posts and news that is referred to them by friends, family and colleagues. Thus even platforms with low trust ratings can have a huge impact if the information is referred by an individual who is trusted. Voters under the age of 50 have less skepticism of social media as a source of news than their older counterparts.

**Are Brazilians concerned about online harms?**

Yes!  More than two thirds of registered voters polled expressed a "serious concern" about several online harms common on social media, including:

- Scams, fraud and/or phishing **(81%)**
- Human trafficking **(80%)**
- Fake news **(78%)**
- Bullying and/or harassment **(78%)**
- Racism **(78%)**
- Deep fake videos **(77%)**
- Hate speech **(76%)**
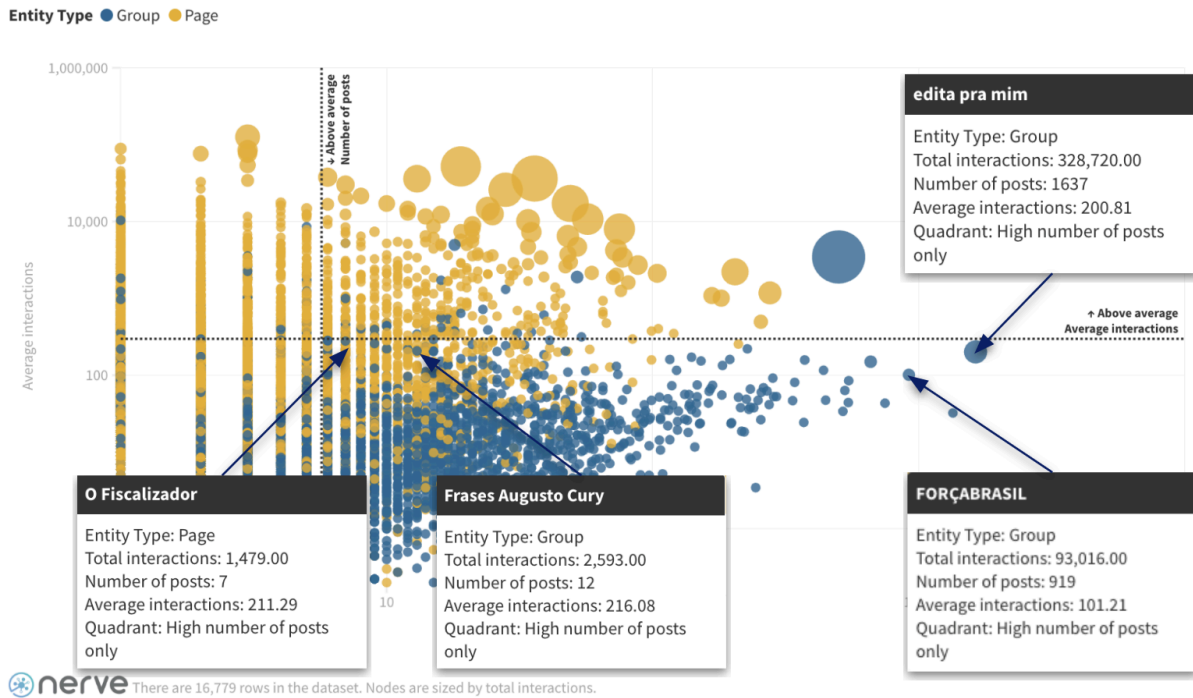- Sexism and media coverage of women and girls  **(67%)**

Additionally, 62% of Brazilian voters think social media platforms fail to protect women and girls from online harassment.

## What fuels gendered disinformation?

The forensic analysis clearly demonstrates that gendered attacks and disinformation were most prevalent during Bolsonaro's term as President, fueled by his own statements as well as those of his far-right supporters and allies.



TIMELINE OF FACEBOOK POSTS
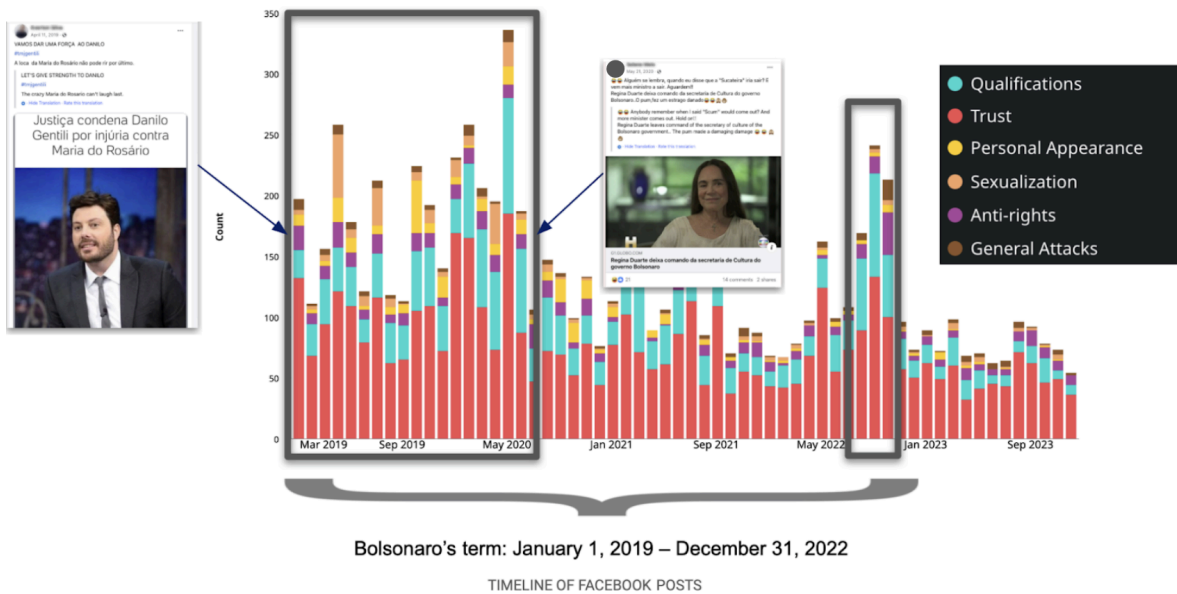
The analysis also shows that the sources for disinformation narratives were among the most active in the dataset. All of these also ideologically belong to the far-right. These actors often insert political content into online spaces that are typically politically neutral as a tactical means of expanding their penetration. There were also efforts to infiltrate non-political communities, including religious, cultural, and lifestyle groups by funneling these disinformation narratives into them.

Entity Type ● Group ● Page



**edita pra mim**

Entity Type: Group
Total interactions: 328,720.00
Number of posts: 1637
Average interactions: 200.81
Quadrant: High number of posts only

↑ Above average
Average interactions

**O Fiscalizador**

Entity Type: Page
Total interactions: 1,479.00
Number of posts: 7
Average interactions: 211.29
Quadrant: High number of posts only

**Frases Augusto Cury**

Entity Type: Group
Total interactions: 2,593.00
Number of posts: 12
Average interactions: 216.08
Quadrant: High number of posts only

**FORÇABRASIL**

Entity Type: Group
Total interactions: 93,016.00
Number of posts: 919
Average interactions: 101.21
Quadrant: High number of posts only

❋ nerve There are 16,779 rows in the dataset. Nodes are sized by total interactions.

A closer look at these interest groups revealed a shared network of amplifiers with right-wing groups where gendered attacks and disinformation were found. This indicates access to a broader network for disseminating harmful content in Brazil. One of these groups is a perfect example of how foreign actors use religion as a deliberate tactic to spread disinformation in Brazil. The Facebook group calls itself "*Igreja Catolica*" (translated as the Catholic Church) and claims to be "created by Pope Francis" and instead is a fake profile, originating from a man in Spain who has a website link that doesn't work and refers to an old Spanish bishop.

#ShePersisted has observed similar activation of "religious" accounts that, when unscrutinized, are simply a vehicle for authoritarian groups to claim a moral high ground around anti-women's rights stances and what the pundits often refer to as "culture war" issues advocating for the rollback of human rights. In reality, much of this activity is driven by suspect accounts; or larger, often foreign-funded, influence operations.
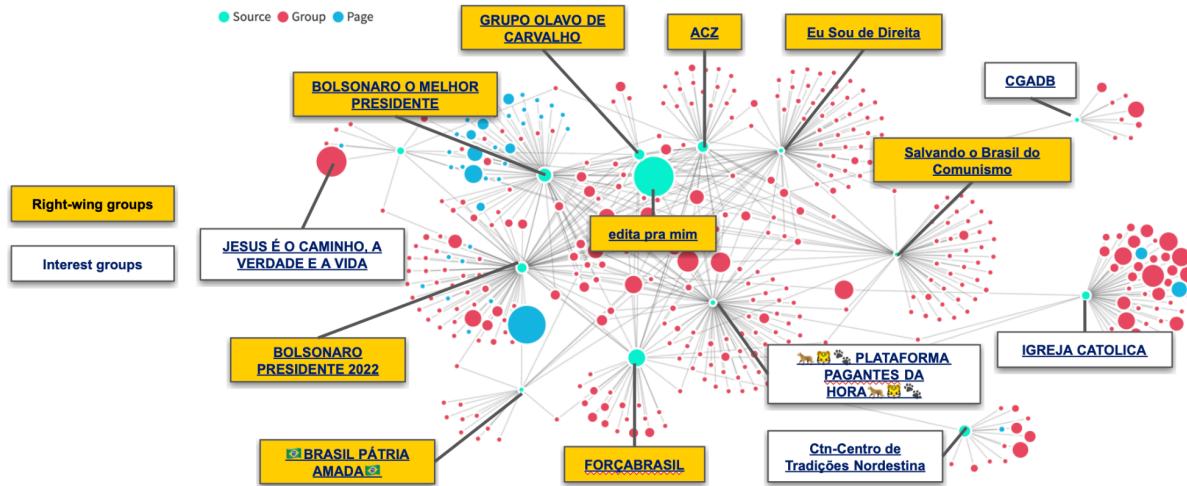
Religious themed attacks on women are likely to intensify - especially in the areas related to reproductive health and gender identity. In densely Catholic Brazil, the 8 April 2024, Vatican declaration that gender-affirming surgery joins surrogacy as grave violations of human dignity, putting them on par with abortion and euthanasia as practices that it says, "reject God's plan for human life" came outside the data gathering period for our research.  However, it is highly likely that this language will appear in future attacks – especially those around surrogacy – being weaponized against women in non-traditional roles and positions of authority.

Weaponizing social media against women leaders and journalists with gendered disinformation and hate is one of the most effective mechanisms deployed to erode democratic institutions, divide social groups, exercise foreign influence and support the growth of transnational far-right movements. Attacks that aim to undermine women leaders reach millions at very low cost, and represent an early warning of democratic backsliding.  Fact-checking and de-bunking efforts to expose disinformation are important, but not sufficient to ever stop its spread.  For that, a concerted and coordinated whole of society effort is needed to bolster a rights-based approach to information integrity.

**What are the most common gendered disinformation attack themes in Brazil?**

*Casting Doubt on Ability (Qualifications and Intelligence)*

Attack lines targeting the woman's abilities, intelligence, and reputation in relation to their profession comprised 75% of the gendered attacks on YouTube comments, 41% on X, 24% on Facebook. Journalists often faced attacks on their credibility. Across all

three platforms, those most frequently targeted were those critical of Bolsonaro. These attacks on their credibility were tied to accusations of them producing "fake news."



Sample comments from the YouTube dataset
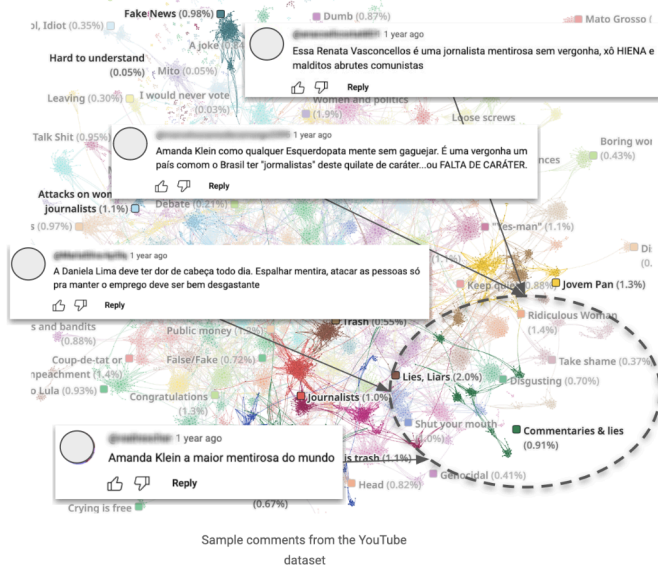
Attack words included "*besta quadrada*" (fool/idiot), "*burra*" (dumb), and "*idiota*" (idiot), "*louca*" (crazy), "*esquizofrênica*" (schizophrenic), that they have "*parafuso solto*" (loose screws), that they are "*não bate bem da cabeça*" (not right in the head) or that they have "*estrume na cabeça*" ("shithead"). These attack lines were also used against progressive politicians to diminish their leadership abilities.

*Casting Doubt on Her Loyalty / Patriotism*

Attacks lines accusing them of being traitors, anti-national, or anti-government comprised 60% of the gendered attacks on Facebook, 31% on X, and 15% on YouTube comments. These posts labeled the targets as "*comunista*" (communist) or "*bandido*" (bandit) – to portray them as adversaries of the state. The targets that had falling-out with the Bolsonaros were also branded as a "*traidora*" (traitor), accusing them that they betrayed the state by ending their association with the Bolsonaros.

This is a very dangerous and intentional attack line that is a pathway to physical violence with a direct history in Brazil applied to women journalists who attempted to hold Bolsonaro to account. In 2021, independent reports by press freedom organizations: the National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) concluded that 2020 was the most dangerous year for professional journalism in recent Brazilian history. FENAJ recorded 428 cases of violence against journalists and RSF identified 580 attacks on press professionals and media outlets. Despite the different methodologies, both surveys identified President Jair Bolsonaro, his children, ministers and the Presidency's Communication Secretariat as the main sources of the attacks. The number of cases of physical aggression increased by 113 percent. There were 32 cases, 17 more than the 15 occurrences recorded in 2019. In

almost half, the perpetrators of the attacks were ordinary people. "*We clearly identified Bolsonarism as being responsible for the explosion of physical violence against journalists. [It encourages] common people in everyday situations to attack journalists and prevent the exercise of their profession*," Maria José Braga, president of FENAJ, told **LatAm Journalism Review (LJR).**[3]

*Casting Doubt on Her Morality / Attacking Her Sexuality*

The analysis indicates that posts with sexual harassment, misogynistic or sexist remarks, and transphobic attacks comprised 18% of the gendered attacks on *X*, 7.1% on YouTube comments, and 4% on Facebook. Sexist insults included clusters of comments like "*mulher chata*" (boring woman), "*mulher insuportavel*" (unbearable woman), "*bruxa*" (witch), and "*fraca*" (weak) were present.



Insults based on the targets' physical appearance to portray them as unlikeable or unpleasant comprised 10% of the gendered attacks on X, 4.8% on Facebook, 0.26% on YouTube comments. These attacks were also fueled by political motivations, often targeting women who were critical of the Bolsonaros. The common insults under this category included comments calling the targets "*feia*" (ugly), "*muito feia*" (very ugly), and "*mulher feia*" (ugly woman), among others.



Previous studies[4] have shown that incorporating moral-emotional language in messages leads to broader dissemination. What is known as "moral contagion" is influenced by group affiliation, such as religion or politics, with moral-emotional language facilitating greater diffusion within liberal and conservative networks, but less so between them.



Progressive politician Erika Kokay, who is also an LGBTQIA+ advocate, was a prime target of this. A false post claimed that Kokay pushed for sex-change surgeries in children even without parental consent, meant to stoke moral outrage and feed QAnon adjacent content. She was also falsely accused of "defending incest and the destruction of the patriarchal family.

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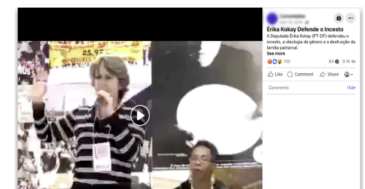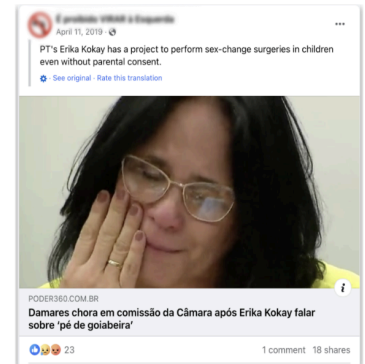
[3] "Attacks on Journalists explode in Brazil 2020, and most of them come from President Bolsonaro, LatAm Journalism Review, January 2021; sponsored by the Knight Center.
[4] "Social Network Emotional Marketing Influence Model of Consumers' Purchase Behavior Sustainability 15(6), 2023

Sexuality is also the baseline for weaponization meant to impinge women's reputations, as in the case of Patricia Campos Mello who during the Bolsonaro years was forced to leave the country after escalation of violent threats, yet was able to make her case in court by showing the forensics pathway to defame her reputation and its impact.

**Aren't Fact-Checking sites enough to counter gendered disinformation?**

Fact-checking **_alone_** is an inadequate counter to gendered disinformation. The evidence from this project demonstrates what has been verified by counter disinformation researchers — _disinformation narratives persisted online even after being debunked by fact-checkers_, indicating coordinated efforts to keep the falsehoods alive. To illustrate this, we use the example of the false claim that Miriam Leitao robbed a bank during the military dictatorship. This led to narratives portraying her as a "communist" aiming to harm the country. Mentions of her name alongside the term "comunista" persisted notably during Bolsonaro's term, despite being debunked as early as 2018.  In the graph below you can see a red spike for the repeated iterations of that debunked lie continuing throughout the period from 2019 through to 2024.



Volume of Facebook posts over time mentioning Miriam Leitao and "comunista"

Total no. of posts: 3,249
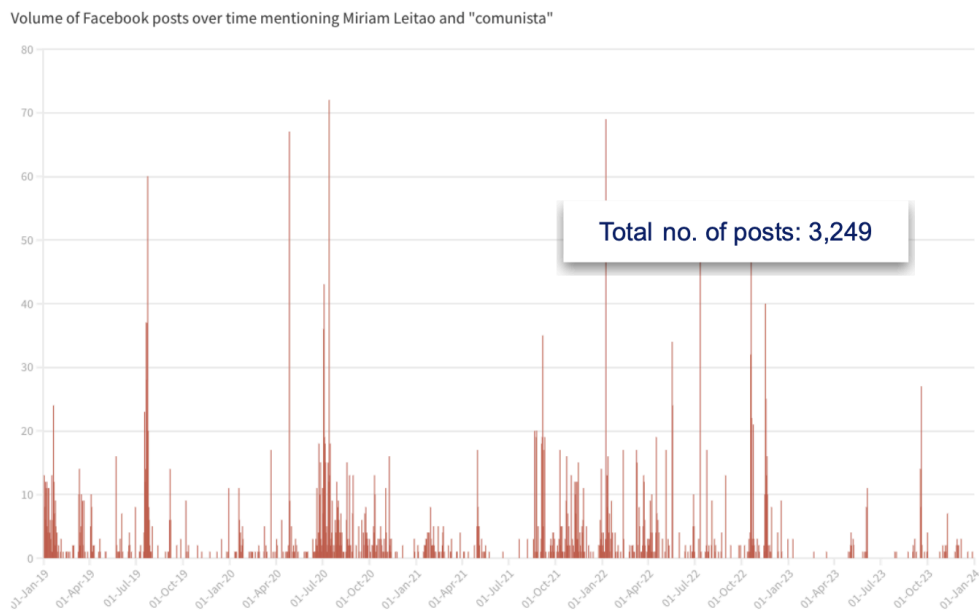
The false claims that were intended to defend the Bolsonaros and their allies were also re-posted multiple times even after they were fact-checked. The false quote attributed to Regina Duarte continued to proliferate on social media until 2021, after it was debunked in January 2020.

Volume of Facebook posts over time mentioning Regina Duarte and "responde à Zélia Duncan"
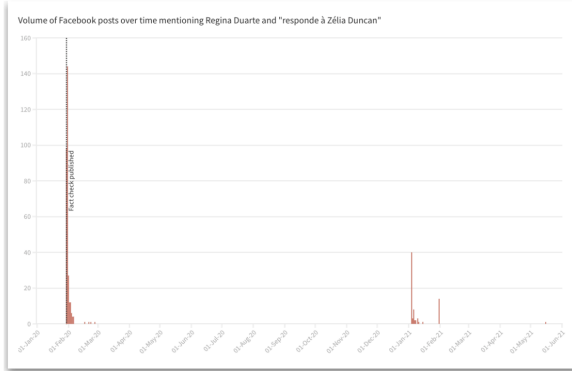
Similarly, the false video of Marielle Franco's supposed aunt defending Bolsonaro persisted until 2020 after it was fact-checked in November 2019. All these posts, despite some being labeled as false, are also still accessible on social media at the writing of this report.



Volume of Facebook posts over time mentioning "Tia da Marielle Franco denuncia"
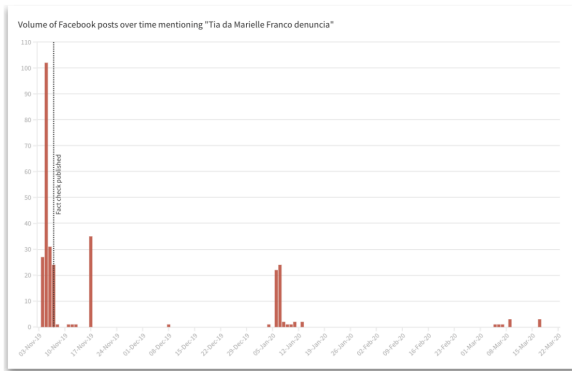
There is a long shelf life for character attacks against women in politics even when based on falsehoods, evidenced by the Black Brazilians running in the 2022 election who were labeled as the "Franco" candidates.

**Voters don't really care about gendered disinformation, do they?**

Our research clearly shows that large majorities of voters are aware of social media harms and they are concerned. **Seventy-nine percent** of those polled said they were "concerned" or "very concerned" about the way women are portrayed on social media. *That concern grows to **85 percent** following educational messages about the possible negative impacts on democracy or the online harassment and exploitation of women and girls.*

Brazilians are very supportive of government action to protect women and girls online. Approximately two-thirds (65%) strongly favor passage of the "Fake News Bill" and that percentage increases to 77% when you had in those that just only favor its passage. More than three-quarters of those polled felt that it was important or very important to pass rules and regulations to stop gendered disinformation online.

Almost half of these registered voters indicated that they would not support an elected official who took a different position than their own on combating gendered disinformation – with 19 percent indicating they definitely would not.

**Is regulating social media stifling free speech?**

Our research, as well as numerous other studies, have demonstrated that the public supports efforts to create a safer online environment for women and girls, and that they have little faith that the platforms will take the necessary actions themselves.

In 2023, tech companies began quietly rolling back their policies to address different forms of mis-and disinformation while gutted their trust and safety teams[5] during layoffs. NBC News reported that X, the platform formerly called Twitter, slashed both its disinformation and election integrity teams[6] mere weeks after the company claimed it was hiring folks for similar positions. Reuters reported that Twitter also disabled a feature that allowed users to report election disinformation to the platform.[7]

On April 6th, X  owner Elon Musk [publicly declared](#) his intent to defy a Brazilian Supreme Court judge's order[8] that the platform block accounts believed to be associated with far-right movements[9]. Musk portrayed the order as unconstitutional and called for the resignation or impeachment[10] of the judge involved, Justice Alexandre De Moraes, who is an outsized focus of violent threats given the stoking of conspiracies around his upholding of Brazil law relating to threats against the integrity of the election in 2022. Claiming the social media company faced threats of daily fines for non-compliance, Musk quickly took advantage of this opportunity to make claims of government censorship in Brazil and is receiving widespread support from Bolsonaro supporters online, who are framing the issue as one of "free speech," "censorship," and "freedom," including conservative congressman and "family defender" Nikolas Ferreira and Eduardo Bolsonaro.

Attorney General Jorge Messias [took to X](#) to counter Musk's reaction, citing an "urgent" need for regulation and stating, "we cannot live in a society in which billionaires domiciled abroad have control of social networks and put themselves in a position to violate the rule of law, failing to comply with court orders and threatening our authorities"

Justice de Moraes later announced Musk would be subject to an investigation regarding an "alleged intentional criminal instrumentalization of X as part of an inquiry into a network of people known as digital militias who allegedly spread defamatory fake news and threats against Supreme Court justices," and to determine whether Musk "engaged

[5] [Tech layoffs shrink 'trust and safety' teams, raising fears of backsliding efforts to curb online abuse](#) NBC News, 10 February 2023; [Harmful Content Has Surged on Twitter, Keeping Advertisers Away](#) TIME, 19 July 2023

[6] Tech layoffs, NBC News

[7] [Musk's X disabled feature for reporting electoral misinformation - researcher](#), Reuters, 27 September 2023

[8] [Elon Musk Is Platforming Far-Right Activists in Brazil, Defying Court Order](#) WIRED, 9 April 2024

[9] [Musk challenges Brazil's order to block certain X accounts](#) Reuters, 8 April 2024

[10] [Elon Musk asks for resignation or impeachment of Alexandre de Moraes in the X](#) Brasil de Fato, 7 April 2024

in obstruction, criminal organization and incitement."[11]

Brazilians appeared shocked about the attack on the sovereignty of Brazil and its own territorial integrity, which is indicative of the information gap in how digital threats to democracy are organized by far right players and increasingly coordinating across borders, with the aid (direct or indirect) of tech companies.

> *"It's not about Twitter or Brazil. It's about a strategy from the global far right to overcome democracies and democratic institutions around the world," says Nina Santos, a digital democracy researcher at the Brazilian National Institute of Science & Technology who researches the Brazilian far right. "An opinion from an American billionaire should not count more than a democratic institution." -* [*Wired, April 9, 2024*](#)

## Conclusion

Brazil is a troubling example of the connection between gendered disinformation and democratic backsliding. After 30 years of a fairly successful democratization process that followed a military dictatorship, the country experienced a quick deterioration of democracy together with setbacks in environmental protection, human rights and gender equality under Bolsonaro.

Brazil isn't the first democratic country to experience such an attack on democracy,[12] nor will it be the last. Distribution of these gendered attacks and disinformation strategies mirror those used in countries like [Hungary, Tunisia and India,](#) where illiberal groups have effectively used digital platforms to undermine democracy.  In this light, what is happening in Brazil is not only important for the country but rather has broader ramifications: it is a clear example that the dangerous movements that are testing democracy worldwide, weaponizing social media and anti-gender sentiments, are on the rise, and will probably strike again.[13]

Weaponizing social media against women leaders with gendered disinformation and hate is one of the most effective mechanisms deployed to erode democratic institutions, divide social groups, exercise foreign influence and support the growth of transnational far-right movements. Attacks that aim to undermine women leaders reach millions at very low cost, and represent an early warning of democratic backsliding.  Fact-checking and de-bunking efforts to expose disinformation are important, but not sufficient to ever

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[11] [Elon Musk will be investigated over fake news and obstruction in Brazil after a Supreme Court order](#) AP News, 8 April 2024
[12] [U.S. "Stop the Steal" Messages Reverberate to Brazil, and Back](#) Tech Policy Press, 27 October 2022; [The Far Right Rails against Another Presidential Election Loss: Brazil's](#), The Washington Post, 2 November 2022
[13] U.S. "Stop the Steal", Tech Policy Press; The Far Right Rails, The Washington Post

stop its spread.  For that, a concerted and coordinated whole of society effort is needed to bolster a rights-based approach to information integrity.

Digital platforms cannot be counted on to self-regulate or place the protection of their users paramount to market pressures of profit, unless required by law.  They have repeatedly demonstrated a failure to live up to the meager standards contained in their own terms of service and a lack of responsiveness when urgent harms are imminent.

***Who funded this research?***

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## Acknowledgements

[www.She-Persisted.org](www.She-Persisted.org)