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Statement submitted by Associação de Jovens Engajamundo, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Brazilian gender agenda: scenario and challenges

Equality – isonomy – a constitutional principle and sustaining pillar of the Democratic State that is included in the Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees equal treatment among citizens and repudiates discrimination. However, being a woman in Brazil still means constantly facing gender inequality in various social sectors.

Gender equality, in addition to being socially beneficial, is advantageous for the economy. A World Bank study estimates that total world wealth would rise by 14 per cent if equal pay was achieved. In Brazil, women receive on average 81 per cent of the male salary. In addition, they face a number of obstacles, such as the difficulty of being hired due to maternity. The Brazilian President has said that he, as an employer, would not pay the same salary to a woman, even if she were working at the same level as a man.

Other alarming data reported by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics concern unemployment. The compound underutilization rate of the workforce is 29.7 per cent among women and 21 per cent among men, although women are more skilled. Women are also more susceptible to the informal market.

According to the International Labor Organization, only 5 per cent of women hold leadership positions in Brazil. Currently, female representation in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate is only 15 per cent, which puts Brazil in one of the worst positions of gender parity compared to other governments in Latin America.

The situation of Brazilian women regarding violence is also worrying. There are countless types of violence directed at women. Female urban mobility is restricted, and women are more subject to general urban violence, and are victims of femicide. Brazil is the fifth country that most murders women, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): one woman is killed every two hours in Brazil. Every 11 minutes a Brazilian woman is raped. These numbers may still be far from the actual data, given that only 35 per cent of cases are reported.

Violence often presents itself through the practice of child marriage. A report produced by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) revealed that 26 per cent of Brazilian teenagers were married or living with their partners before turning 18 years old. There is also a connection between early marriage and pregnancy, considering in 80 per cent of cases of child marriage girls gave birth before turning 20 years of age. Such risks increase where living conditions are more difficult and in places where girls face, for instance, poverty, and drought.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, gender inequality increases for women who are Black or Brown and live outside the urban centers of the South and the Southeast regions in Brazil. The lack of access to information and the lack of decision-making power of married women (and women in relationships with men) makes them more vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and sexually transmitted infections.

Trans women are more vulnerable to inequalities in relation to cisgender women. A trans person lives in a routine of exclusion, and has difficulty accessing the health system and entering the job market. Linked to these problems is the systematic genocide of this group. In Brazil, the country that most kills trans people in the world, life expectancy for a trans person is 35 years old. 90 per cent of transgender people in Brazil are in the prostitution market, most of them women.

Considering the current Brazilian context, a moment of political crisis is perceived. The country has been going through corruption scandals made public, which has led to polarization among the population. In 2019, the conservative Jair Bolsonaro, assumed the presidency of Brazil. The President campaigned with a speech strongly based on the “values of the traditional Brazilian family”, which involve aspects contrary to the rights of minorities, such as women, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer or questioning, intersex, plus additional identities relevant to sexual orientation, gender identities, and expression community; people of color; African-originated religions; indigenous people; and Quilombola communities, among others. In his first speech as president, Bolsonaro spoke of his intentions to “fight against gender ideology”. The president’s true intentions are to abolish any discussions about gender, especially in schools, demonstrating a very explicit purpose of the perpetuation of the patriarchy in Brazilian society, with all its consequences, in the name of the values of the “traditional Brazilian family”. Ever since, he has been acting to fulfil his promise.

In order to protect the so-called “values of the traditional family”, Damara Alves was appointed as Minister of Family, Women and Human Rights. Alves is an evangelical pastor, founder of the Atini organization, which is under investigation for inciting hatred towards indigenous peoples. She has become known for her notoriously biased statements against minorities. Her agenda is based on Christian religious inclinations, which threaten the rights acquired by women and other minorities in Brazil.

This movement of the conservatives against “gender ideology” has gained a lot of momentum in recent years, especially with the resurgence of the Escola sem Partido (School without Political Party) project in 2014. The Escola sem Partido Movement emerged in 2004 from an initiative of the then state prosecutor of São Paulo, Miguel Nagib, and was brought to discussion again in 2014 when Rio de Janeiro State Representative Flavio Bolsonaro invited Attorney Nagib to write a bill - PL 2974/2014, to be taken to the Rio de Janeiro Legislative Assembly. The purpose of this project, according to its proponents, is to combat the presence of ideologies within the classroom discussions to prevent the “indoctrination” of political parties and points of view that supposedly interfere with the freedom and rights of students to learn. According to Miguel Nagib, some attempts by teachers to arouse students’ critical sense can be configured as attempts to disseminate political propaganda. Therefore, the movement seeks the political impartiality of teachers in relation to the educational content that should be transmitted to students.

However, what this bill implies is the possible persecution and censorship that may be established in the teaching work, allowing breaches even to political persecution. Escola sem Partido runs counter to the principles of freedom, extinguishes debates, promotes censorship, and reinforces oppressions. The aforementioned minority groups will have discussions regarding access to their basic rights excluded from the school agenda. According to supporters of this project, one of the problems to be tackled is “gender ideology,” a term used by conservatives to name (with a negative connotation) gender discussions. Escola sem Partido argues that topics, such as gender inequality and combating homophobia, transphobia and violence towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer or questioning, intersex, plus additional identities relevant to sexual orientation, gender identities, and expression community should not be part of students’ school life, leaving to the parents the role to educate their children about these subjects. Sex education and conversations about sexual abuse and reproductive rights are also topics to be excluded. Thus, it is ignored that families are the main places of child abuse and molestation.

On 14 October 2019, the Belo Horizonte City Council approved, in the first voting process, the Escola sem Partido Bill. The voting took place behind closed doors, without the participation of the civil society. The city is the first capital of Brazil to approve this bill.

Given this, it is clear that what we face in Jair Bolsonaro's government in Brazil are setbacks with regard to laws aimed at protecting women and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer or questioning, intersex, plus additional identities relevant to sexual orientation, gender identities, and expression community. Not only is the gender agenda unimportant to this government, it is also seen as something to be eliminated from discussions and public policies. It seems evident that most efforts to combat gender inequality will continue to stem from non-governmental organizations, such as Engajamundo, which are also under attack, the President said he would "put an end to all activism in Brazil." According to a report by Amnesty International released in February 2018, Brazil is the country in the Americas that most kills human rights defenders.

Therefore, intense international pressure is required for the Brazilian government to address the gender agenda with seriousness and to move towards achieving the objectives set out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
