

*Vertentes e Interfaces I: Estudos Linguísticos e Aplicados***FEMINIST COLLECTIVE CANDIDACIES:
LISTENING TO DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL¹**

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to discuss feminist collective candidacies as a powerful new means of political representation in Brazil, one historically connected with previous feminist struggles in the country. Considering the key role that language plays in understanding labor, I will explain how this new way of making politics can challenge the sexual division of labor through the idea of horizontality. Moreover, I will examine feminist collective candidacies as an effective tactic to reinforce Brazilian participatory democracy.

KEYWORDS: Collective candidacies; Democracy; Feminism.

Feminism is the opposite of loneliness.

“Feminismo em comum”, Márcia Tiburi.

Pursuing the beautiful idea that “feminism is the opposite of loneliness”, in this paper I will discuss feminist collective candidacies as a powerful new means of political representation in Brazil, one historically connected with previous feminist struggles in the country². I will look at feminist collective candidacies as a movement with a transformative force that has the potential to “change the political system from within” (PAES, 2020, p. 1). Based on the challenges facing women in Brazilian politics today, evidence of a misogynistic political system, these candidacies destabilize structural hierarchies of gender, class, race, and

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² A discussion of the different points of view regarding Brazilian feminisms that have emerged in recent years goes beyond the scope of this article. However, for a deeper discussion of the subject, I suggest the book organized by Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, *Explosão Feminista* (2018).

sexuality, representing, instead, a broad spectrum of Brazilian women who have been victims of the rise in violence in recent years.³

A collective candidacy occurs when not one individual, but rather an entire group of candidates runs for a single seat in government. As this model is not recognized by Brazilian electoral legislation, the group chooses one person among them to act as their representative, with that person making an informal commitment to share their political duties with the group. The group, in turn, is equally committed to defending the interests of the communities it represents (ELLER, 2020; MEIRELES, 2018). As such, a collective mandate constitutes a novel way of exercising democracy, with the direct participation of civil society and a genuine representation of their political interests in government (MANDATO, 2019).

Feminist collective candidacies take their cue from similar collective candidacies of the past, such as those seen in Sweden, in 2002, and in Brazil in the 2016 elections, when the states of São Paulo, Goiás and Minas Gerais elected collective candidates for their city councils. In 2017, a bill was proposed to regulate these mandates, but it has not been passed yet. The following year, different collective candidacies ran for state councils, among them the group known as Juntas (in English, “Together”), in Pernambuco, composed of five women from extremely diverse backgrounds: Jô Cavalcanti, a black street vendor; Robeyoncé Lima, a black trans woman and lawyer; Joelma Carla, a bisexual undergraduate student; Carol Vergolino, a journalist and mother; and Kátia Cunha, a lesbian teacher (MEIRELES, 2018; JUNTASCODEPUTADAS, 2020). For the 2020 elections, collective candidacies were widespread throughout the country, with proposals representing the interests of different social groups, such as people with disabilities, the homeless, and indigenous groups, to name but a few.

Women and feminist agendas alike have traditionally been underrepresented in Brazilian politics. According to the Electoral Superior Court, in the 2020 elections for mayors and city councilors, only 33,6% of the candidacies were from women, a percentage that slightly increased in comparison to the 2016 elections (31,74%). However, this number is still very close to the minimum quota of 30% approved by the electoral law of 1995 (TRIBUNAL, 2020), which means that, in general, women are still a long way from occupying positions of power. And even when they are elected, there is no guarantee that they will finish their mandates, as both the coup d'état against President Dilma Rousseff, in 2016, and the murder of

³ Under Bolsonaro's government, femicide increased 7,3% in 2019 (VELASCO; CAESAR; REIS, 2020).

the city councilor of the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro, Marielle Franco, in 2018, made abundantly clear (just to mention the two most glaring examples⁴).

In what follows, I will present a brief retrospective of the struggle for the equal rights of women in Brazil in the 20th century, focusing on three key moments in which the feminist movement played a significant role in the struggle against authoritarian governments that threatened Brazilian democracy. Following this, I will introduce the topic of feminist collective candidacies emerging from the context of “feminist insurrection of the last decade” in Brazil (HOLLANDA, 2018, p. 231-232, my translation). Considering the key role that language plays in understanding labor, I will finally discuss how this new way of making politics can challenge the sexual division of labor through the idea of horizontality, as well as being an effective tactic to reinforce Brazilian participatory democracy through the notion of a feminist collective representation.

A brief retrospective of the feminist movement in Brazil: twentieth-century Brazilian feminism and the struggle for equal rights

The suffrage movement in Brazil was inspired by the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in the United States, in terms of struggling for the political and legal rights of women as well as for the protection of women’s work. Like the American movement, Brazilian middle-class feminists of the *Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino* (Brazilian Federation for Feminine Progress) opted for lobbying strategies to negotiate legal amends in congress in favor of women’s right to vote, which was nationally earned in 1932, based on the groundbreaking election of the first Brazilian woman – Alzira Soriano – as mayor of Lages, a small town in the Northeast region of the country, in 1927. With 60% of the votes, she defeated her adversary, Sérvulo Pires, a white, rich and powerful man, representative of the traditional politician of the time (ALVES, 2019).

However, differently from the experience of American suffragists, which at least attempted to be associated with the abolitionist movement initially,⁵ the Brazilian movement was conducted by a local elite composed of women of the dominant class whose main role

⁴ Another case in point is that of Márcia Tiburi, who received death threats after running for governor of Rio de Janeiro in 2018. For her own safety, she had to leave the country. She gives an account of being a candidate in this violent political scenario (one that elected Jair Bolsonaro as president) in her most recent book, *Como derrotar o turbotecnocratafascismo* (2020).

⁵ Angela Davis (1983) calls the attention to the fact that, despite the efforts on congregating the struggle for the black people rights and the women’s right to vote by the American Equal Rights Association (founded in 1886), racism was there since the beginning, and that is why the feminists used to value the rights of the women over the rights of black people and immigrants.

was to give birth to and bring up their children (ALVES, 2019). Yet, although women's right to vote and run for election were nationally recognized in 1932, because of President Vargas' coup d'état establishing the New State⁶, in effect they were only able to exercise these rights after 1945.

Despite the importance of the suffragists to Brazilian democracy, as a result of the Civil Code of 1916, women were still on the whole incapable of exercising other important civil rights. According to this legislation, married women should, for instance, obtain the permission of their husbands to work outside the home. This did not change until 1962, when the law was finally modified (SILVA; RIBEIRO, 2019). From 1964 to 1985, a military dictatorship took place in Brazil, and the feminist movement, attached to the Communist Party and to the Progressive Catholic Church, claimed for women's rights together with other civil rights usurped by the military governments (HOLLANDA, 2019, p. 11).

Feminists wanted to be recognized as citizens, so they fought for their sexual and reproductive rights (including the right to abortion), against domestic violence, and for the right to have access to the job market with fair wages and without sexual discrimination. Their struggle was not only against the far right: the conflict of interests with the Church and the Communist Party, neither of which support the feminist struggle for sexual and reproductive rights and gendered discussions on civil rights, also made it difficult to implement a feminist agenda at the time (PITANGUY, 2019).

In the early 80s, the final years of the military dictatorship heralded a new period of re-democratization in Brazil, which meant that social problems of all kinds were once again open to public debate. Among these were sexual rights, indigenous issues, environmental protection, and the intersection between gender, race, and class (PITANGUY, 2019). These debates led to the foundation of the Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher⁷ (CNDM), a federal agency divided into various departments, all run by prominent women: violence, health, work, education, black women, culture etc.

The creation of the CNDM was a response to the demands of activists who believed that equal rights for women, implemented through a federal agency with programmatic and financial autonomy, was a sine qua non condition for the reconstruction of democratic political institutions in a country as large and diverse as Brazil. (PITANGUY, 2019, p. 99, my translation)

⁶The New State was a dictatorial period under President Getúlio Vargas, who dissolved political parties and Congress, implemented censorship, and suspended political rights, concentrating power in his own hands (ENCYCLOPEDIA..., 2020).

⁷National Council for Women's Rights.

Despite the extreme conservatism that persisted throughout the institutions of the time, activists — sometimes at considerable risk to themselves — undertook to occupy positions inside the government itself. As a result, the CNDM mobilized women of different races from all over Brazil, representing every class in the social spectrum, from different professions, to state their demands and suggestions in what became known as Letter of Brazilian Women to the Constituents, a legal document with proposals of women's rights, brought before Congress in 1987. Most of these proposals were incorporated into the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, or in the Civil and Penal Codes (PITANGUY, 2019).

Black feminism⁸ played a key role in the CNDM, in great part due to the efforts of Afro-Brazilian feminist Sueli Carneiro, who created the Black Woman Program. The program comprised several collectives of black women whose aim was to gather information about the social problems that affected them, and to build political strategies to face them (SILVA; RIBEIRO, 2019). Their demands brought crucial innovations in terms of public policies to protect women against violence, as conceived by Afro-Brazilian feminist Lélia González, who, *avant la lettre* in the 1970s, wrote about the intersectional oppression that black women suffered in Brazil in terms of gender, race, and class; as well as with respect to policies to guarantee women's right to healthcare (BIROLI, 2017). In addition, the black movement grew stronger in the 1980s, denouncing racism and classism within the feminist movement itself, which was controlled by white feminists who behaved as if they were superior to black women, and treated them as if they were unable to speak for themselves. This goes to show to what extent white feminists in Brazil suffered from a “lack of self-criticism regarding racism” (BIROLI, 2017, p. 242).

Black feminism was responsible for raising awareness of diversity among Brazilian women, especially in terms of race and class. Apart from opening the path to the multiple feminisms which emerged in Brazil from the late 1980s on, black feminism also reinforced the abyssal differences between white and black women in terms of the labor market: although for white, upper-class women access to jobs outside the home increased in the last decades of the 20th century, it still remained very difficult for lower-class and black women, among whom 48% were domestic workers in 1995 (CARNEIRO, 2019). In this sense, the struggle of black feminism also played a very important role in the creation of the first policy programs focusing on the struggle against racism in public universities, which eventually

⁸ Although the expression *black feminism* in Brazil became widespread only after 2000, I decided to employ it in this text because I subscribe to the idea that black feminism began with Lélia Gonzalez's work. For a more detailed approach to the subject, see Silva and Ribeiro (2019).

resulted in quotas being established for black people in higher education, which, in turn, afforded them better professional opportunities after graduation.

As a consequence of the period of re-democratization,⁹ the CNDM was dissolved by a neoliberal and conservative state in the 1990s. After that, feminism only rose to prominence again under the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who created the Secretaria Especial de Políticas para as Mulheres (SPM) (Special Bureau of Policies for Women), in 2003. Important rights were gained in this period, among them laws against domestic violence (Maria da Penha and Femicide Laws), the regulation of the rights of domestic workers, and policies to protect and socially integrate women and the LGBT population within society, based on a gender agenda that afterwards would clearly affect the most conservative allies of the government Dilma Rousseff, ten years later (BIROLI, 2017).

The feminist movement in Brazil played an essential role in terms of advocacy (PITANGUY, 2019) in the three historical moments briefly covered here: during the struggle for suffrage, in the years of the military dictatorship, and at the time of the country's re-democratization. Those historical facts allow us to state that the Brazilian feminist movement can be seen as an important social actor against the authoritarianism that threatened democracy in the country throughout the 20th century, as well as against the conservative legacy of these neoliberal governments, which characterized the period of re-democratization.

At the start of the 21st century, the close relation between Lula's government and the feminist movement, through the Special Bureau mentioned above, gave rise to important achievements in the battle for gender equality in Brazil, including the election of President Dilma Rousseff (from the Workers' Party – PT) in 2010. However, the “peaceful” years would not last long, due to a conservative ideological basis that had been established in Brazilian politics, as I will discuss below, in order to introduce the context in which feminist collective candidacies emerged.

⁹ It is clear that feminists were prevented from confronting the conservative wing of the government, having to keep silent, for instance, on issues such as: the problem of violence against women and children in the interior, which affected mainly women who worked in other people's lands; racism (which was not recognized at that time as a structural problem in Brazil, due to the myth of racial democracy); and the right to abortion (BIROLI, 2017). The period of re-democratization was further characterized by adjustments and accommodations that were considered by feminists as necessary to negotiate the approval of many public policies, as well as by the inclusion of women's rights in the new Constitution. These negotiations were also known as “the lipstick lobby”. For a deeper discussion of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, see Lilia Schwartz, *Sobre o autoritarismo brasileiro* (2019), and for its interpretation within black feminism, see Lélia Gonzalez's: *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano* (2020).

Feminist collective candidacies: context of emergence

Feminist collective candidacies in Brazil emerged as a consequence of a relevant political mobilization which has been consistent since 2010, through social media sites, especially Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These platforms can impact social movements mainly in two ways: by facilitating “traditional offline activism”, and by creating “new forms of activism and resistance” (HARLOW, 2012, p. 225). To illustrate the first instance in the context of Brazil, the Avaaz platform, which collects signatures in petitions to pressure authorities for a given cause, has seen the numbers of its Brazilian members increase dramatically between 2007 and 2016 (COSTA, 2018). However, the new forms of online activism are not limited to clicktivism,¹⁰ being not only the fastest way of mobilizing people towards a social problem, but also a platform through which people can gather to organize real marches, acts, and protests¹¹ (BOGADO, 2018).

The Brazilian feminist movement of the last decade expanded in a virtual scenario in which women were encouraged to talk about their personal experiences with sexual harassment, rape, sexism, gender/race issues and the abuse of power in labor environments, to mention but a few topics that stimulated the organization of marches throughout the country through the use of hashtags. This powerful virtual label was instrumental in giving voice to the diversity of feminisms that were emerging in Brazil in the middle of the decade, “bringing together multiple feminist identities within an intersectional basis indispensable to the expression of the new women’s activism” (COSTA, 2018, p. 45). According to the author, using personal narratives to denounce different kinds of violence was a strategy these women employed to perform a “public narrative” rather than to “lay blame” or “solve individual cases” (COSTA, 2018, p. 54).

Indeed, it is very important to emphasize that these women were exposing kinds of violence that had always been treated as private issues. On the one hand, the performance

¹⁰ Some prefer to call online activism “slacktivism”, in opposition to the “real” activism of the streets. The former is considered superficial by its critics (FROST, 2020).

¹¹ As Bogado states in her text, a good example of this online mobilization are the protests organized in Brazil, in June 2013, to protest over the increasing price of public transportation and other social problems. According to the author, “In the current insurgencies there is something that provokes a particular disorder: they don’t come from political ideologies, instead they come from ethical truths” (BOGADO, 2018, p. 22, my translation). However, this apparent autonomy of the people taking part in these direct political actions, supposedly apolitical and critical of political parties, guided only by “ethical truths” must be questioned, since in fact the manifestations made widespread use of nationalist symbols. As depicted by Petra Costa in the documentary *The Edge of Democracy* (2019), this form of nationalism became afterwards one of the symbols of Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign, in 2018. Due to the controversies involving these protests, I understand that they cannot be put together with the feminist marches, which are strongly opposed to the far-right agenda.

of a public narrative is a means of penetrating a public sphere traditionally reserved for men in a patriarchal society; on the other hand, it is in itself a manner of giving visibility to a social problem through individuals manifesting themselves collectively. Furthermore, as Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 25) states, we need to consider that “emotions are also relegated to the private sphere, which conceals their public dimension and their role ordering social life”. This is very pertinent to our discussion because, through exposing their painful histories, women make pain enter politics. In this way, they demolish the predominant representation of pain in “Western culture as a lonely thing”, and show that “while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private” (AHMED, 2014, p. 35).

The ever-growing use of social networks gives visibility to women’s voices and helps to strengthen the feminist struggle in current politics, as evidenced by the expressive number of feminist candidacies in different Brazilian regions in the municipal elections of 2020, compiled by *Mosaic 2020* on the website *Meu voto será feminista* (“My vote will be feminist”). This is particularly suggestive in the political context that was established in Brazil, especially after President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016, in which a corrupt congress conspired to accuse her of breaking the law by using “a budget trick . . . to mask public debt”, a strategy that had been employed with impunity by many presidents before her. This is why the impeachment was considered a coup, once “it was never about any alleged lawbreaking by Dilma Rousseff — that was just an excuse to remove a democratically elected president for ideological reasons” (GREENWALD, 2016, p. 1).

It is now clear that one of the main reasons for the coup against Dilma Rousseff was the Brazilian elite’s growing disappointment with the left-wing government from 2002 to 2016. Dilma Rousseff was never involved in the corruption that permeates politics in Brazil, and her decision not to impede the investigations into corruption in her government led to her downfall. Among the politicians under investigation for corruption, her vice-president, Michel Temer, was one of the driving forces behind her impeachment process, and publicly admitted to the coup during a 2019 interview (TEMER..., 2019). Neither Temer nor any of a number of his political allies were charged at the end of the investigation. In contrast, former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – a socialist leader and founder of the Workers’ Party – was controversially arrested without proof in early 2018. The arrest was carried out

under judge Sérgio Moro, who that same year was appointed Minister of Justice by far-right president-elect, Jair Bolsonaro.¹²

Following the impeachment of the first democratically-elected female president in the country, apart from facing the growing involvement of politicians in corruption scandals and witnessing the strengthening of conservatism in Brazil, the defenders of democracy were themselves immersed in a crisis of political representation. By contrast, the feminist movement grew stronger as a result of the crisis, holding a huge march, organized on Facebook by the group *Women against Bolsonaro*, shortly before the 2018 presidential elections. Under the hashtag #EleNão (in English, #NotHim), women took to the streets of many cities, both in Brazil and abroad, to protest against the controversial statements of the then presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, who publicly insulted women, LGBTQ+, indigenous people, black people, and the working classes. According to a report by BBC News, Brazil (Rossi; Carneiro and Gragnani), #EleNão is the greatest women's protest group ever to emerge in Brazil.

Despite the mobilization of women against Bolsonaro, he was elected president. But at least the protests served as inspiration for the emergence of new feminist collectives, including collective candidacies, striving towards a political representation of women's demands in response to a violent social context. The collective candidacy of Fany das Manas¹³ (made up of Fany Bernal, Marília Ferro and Fernanda Limão) to the City Council of Garanhuns, in the interior of Pernambuco, is an excellent example of the relation between the emergence of feminist collectives and collective candidacies, as Fernanda explains:

The collective got together to organize the '#EleNão'... It was a friend who asked me if the women of Garanhuns weren't going to join in, because it was happening all over country. I saw an event on Facebook; Fany belonged to the same virtual event, but nobody knew exactly who was responsible for organizing the march. Then I talked to Fany; we got together with people who were part of the event on Facebook, and then Marília came too, and then many people got together to hold the #EleNão event. After that, we continued to meet to engage in political activities through a group on WhatsApp ... Then with the election of the current president, I had the idea of creating a gathering at the Park Euclides Dourado, and in this way we founded the Collective Motirô ... Right after that I proposed the idea of a collective candidacy, which was accepted by the group (PORTO, 2020, p. 1, my translation).

The name Collective Motirô, which in Tupi-guarani means a group that works together with mutual goals, is illustrative of how feminist collectives fight for a non-hierarchical and

¹²For an excellent introduction to what happened to Brazilian democracy from 2013 to 2018, see Petra Costa's award-winning documentary, *The Edge of Democracy*. In March 2021, Brazilian Supreme Court finally recognized that Sérgio Moro acted partially in the trial of cases involving former president Lula.

¹³I would like to give special thanks to Fany Bernal, Marília Ferro and Fernanda Limão, for conceding this interview right after the results of the 2020 election.

non-individually-based society. These principles will serve as a basis for feminist collective candidacies to seek the approval of bills in the city councils, taking into account their commitment to the most vulnerable social groups, with whom they have close ties. In the next section, I will discuss how these principles are born from ideas of horizontality and collectivity, which are employed by feminist collective candidacies to introduce an innovative form of political representation.

Feminist political representations: challenging the sexual division of labor, listening to democracy

Though approximately one third of all candidates in the 2020 city council elections in Brazil were women, by no means did they all support a feminist agenda. There are women in politics whose role is to oppose other women, perpetuating sexism, racism, classism, homophobia and transphobia, refusing to take a hand in the struggle against increasing violence against women and minorities.

One of the most flagrant examples of this lack of representation is Damares Alves, Minister for Women, the Family and Human Rights, one of the defenders of the conservative wing of Bolsonaro's government. While she distracts the population with controversial statements, such as her claim that there exists a "gay dictatorship" in Brazil, by September 2020 she had allocated only 22% of the money of the Ministry for the creation of public policies. Instead of supporting the implementation of policies to protect women, the elderly, the disabled and underage¹⁴ victims of violence, she either reduced or completely cut the budget allocated to important programs begun by the previous left-wing governments, which actions characterized the ideological management of her Ministry (GUIROTTTO, 2020).¹⁵

Supportive of a feminist agenda are those candidacies represented by Brazilian current feminisms, defined by Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (2018, p. 232, my translation) as the "feminist insurrection", characterized by a struggle for "political justice". More specifically, I am looking at feminists who decided to join with other feminists to run together in

¹⁴ See the brutal and emblematic case of a 10-year-old black girl who was sexually abused by her uncle and became pregnant as a result. Her right to a legal and safe abortion became a national debate in which religious fundamentalist groups and Damares herself revealed and publicized the child's identity, threatening her life. Professor Débora Diniz (UNB), who was the first political exile of Bolsonaro's government and currently lives in the US, defended through her social media the child's legal right to abortion and to be protected by the state (SCHWINGEL, 2020).

¹⁵ Other examples of Damares' work against women is that she drastically reduced the budget ~~to~~ destined for the Casa da Mulher Brasileira (Brazilian Women's House), "an institution that is essential for the protection of victims of domestic violence". She also cut the budget for "secretariats focused on diversity, such as that focused on the promotion of racial equality" (GHIROTTTO, 2020).

collective candidacies, since they intend to represent women in their diversity. As Audre Lorde explains:

As a black lesbian, a feminist, a socialist, a poet, mother of two, including one boy and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior, or just plain 'wrong'. From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference comes in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression ... I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination (LORDE, 1983, p. 1).

Since there is no hierarchy of oppression, as Lorde argues, every form and manifestation of oppression must be faced intersectionally, that is, one cannot prioritize dealing with gender-related issues over race, class, or sexuality: to fight against gender oppression is to struggle against race, class and sexual oppression. Feminist collective candidacies offer a political expedient for an intersectional representation in the public sphere, encompassing not only women, but also other oppressed minorities.

In the 2020 elections, 28 feminist collective candidacies were listed on the website *Meu voto será feminista*, which belongs to the autonomous platform #Partida. The candidacies ran for office in all five of the country's regions, with proposals that included the combat against sexism and racism, the struggle for the rights of the LGBTQI+ population, the preservation of the environment, and respect for diverse identities. The examples below illustrate how some of these proposals are included in the description of the candidates' identities across three candidacies:

TOGETHER – HOMELESS WOMEN (SP)

Jussara, solo mother, has been working since she was 14 years old. Coordinator of the Occupy Movement at Vila Nova Palestina in the South Zone of São Paulo, which nowadays shelters 2,000 families. She has been with the MTST (Movement of the Homeless Workers) for 8 years ... She is a poet, a feminist, and an anti-racist.

Débora, solo mother, feminist, coordinator of the Occupation Marielle Lives, in the North Zone in São Paulo, she has been with the MTST for 8 years and today she is the state coordinator of the MTST in São Paulo. She has a degree in mathematics. She has built the LGBT No Fear Collective and organizes the MTST LGBT Collective.

BLACK WOMEN, YES (MG)

Launa and Tainá share similar trajectories. Mothers, activists and residents of the suburbs of Belo Horizonte-MG, they recognize themselves as militant black women and today they have the anti-racist struggle as their starting point for social action.

ALESSANDRA, FROM THE COLLECTIVE MOTIRÕ (GO)

Alessandra Minadakis, Nina Soldera e Joana Porto, a white woman, a black woman and an indigenous woman, respectively; mothers, feminists, anti-racists and eco-socialists, who believe in the strength of women and in collective work to revolutionize politics in Goiânia, Goiás, and make the change that the city needs (*Meu voto será feminista*, my translation).

The statements above show that feminists of the three candidacies introduce themselves through their multiple identities. Jussara is a working class solo mother who also coordinates the Occupy Movement for homeless people in São Paulo, and one of her partners in the collective candidacy Together-Homeless Women (SP) is Débora, a bachelor in mathematics who organizes an LGBT collective at MTST; Launa and Tainá, from Black Women, Yes (MG), are both suburban and militant black women; while the Collective Motirõ (Goiás) is composed of Alessandra, Nina and Joana, white, black and indigenous, respectively, all of them anti-racists and eco-socialists. By describing themselves in such a diverse manner, these women aim not only to represent the possible voters whose own social realities match with their own, but also the feminist agenda against violence, whether it is provoked by sexism, racism, LGBTQI+ phobia, or by politics that damage both human communities and non-human beings to the profit of a few.

This possibility of representation is crucial when considering the sexual division of labor. According to Maria Mies, the biologically-determined explanation of the sexual division of labor resulted in the exploitation of women by men within the family nucleus in capitalist society: by relating the non-salaried labor of women to the domestic sphere, as if to give birth to children and take care of them were natural functions, while the public sphere was assigned to men whose gainful employment produces the surplus value. However, men could not be publicly productive without being supported by a “subsistence production ... necessary for people’s own survival”, generally performed by women, colonies, or peasants. This is why “we should no longer look at the sexual division of labour as a problem related to the family only, but rather as a structural problem of a whole society” (MIES, 1994, p. 48-49).

Flávia Biroli’s definition of the sexual division of labor as “a fundamental basis which supports hierarchies of gender in contemporary societies” is particularly significant in this context. According to the author, the exploitation suffered by women in the domestic sphere directly affects their access to the public sphere, and consequently their political participation as well, “not only in terms of occupying public seats, but also in terms of participating in broader political actions”. In fact, the effects of exploitation surpass the private sphere, once women’s “obligations with the family restrict and mold their occupation outside the home” in current capitalism (BIROLI, 2017, p. 25-31, my translation).

According to the author, the sexual division of labor affects women as a group, but the effects of that division are not the same for women of different races and social backgrounds, because upper-class, often white, women can afford to delegate housework to lower-class, mostly black women, which gives them the freedom to pursue higher-income jobs outside the home. Considering that the differences between women “are defined as privileges and disadvantages, we are not talking about identities, but rather about *positions* that make sense within a hierarchy” (BIROLI, 2017, p. 39, my translation).

Generally, white, upper-class, heterosexual women have the privilege of holding political office, yet they are not free from gender discrimination either. Manuela D’Ávila’s own experience in Congress is illustrative of this issue: as a congresswoman and breastfeeding mother, she realized that the long night-shifts she had to work to vote bills were not a problem for the congressmen, because they had no responsibilities at home or with childcare. She brought her baby daughter to work, but her colleagues ‘recommended’ she not breastfeed it in Congress, saying she should leave the baby in a nursery during work hours. As an act of resistance to the blatant sexism present in her work environment, Manuela decided from then on always to bring her daughter with her to work, drawing attention to the debate on women’s rights in the public sphere (D’ÁVILA, 2017).

Sexist abuse of this kind is often present even before a woman takes office. In a revealing speech, Marília Ferro, of the feminist collective candidacy Fany das Manas (Garanhuns, Pernambuco), denounced the sexist abuse she suffered during her campaign in the City Council elections:

It is something that I and the girls heard a lot from people who we had never met before, with whom we’d never spoken to before, telling us that it would be very difficult to work with us, because we would be quarrelsome, we would be the bums and the down-and-outers of the City Council ... We are always going to be seen as aggressive, as crazy, as unbalanced women, simply because we defend what we believe in. Unfortunately, we can see a very conservative City Council, full of misinformed people... We live in a patriarchal, sexist, misogynistic country, and we’ve been through many situations in which men tried to explain to Fany how to perform as a lawyer, in which men tried to tell me and Fernanda how to perform, for example, as city councilors, as if we didn’t know (PORTO, 2020, p. 1, my translation).

Ferro’s statements highlight how sexism is used to disqualify women, as if they were not able to pursue a career in public office. By occupying these places of representation, in turn, feminists can fight for the implementation of policies that can contribute to broadening the access of women to the public sphere. The participation of black, indigenous, homeless, working class, and LGBT women in feminist collective candidacies is much more meaningful than just being representative of diverse identities. In other words, if elected, these women

will be able to introduce bills that can help to attenuate the problems of the sexual division of labor in women's lives. In the fragment below, Natália Trindade, from the Hers Campaign – Co-Councillors Candidacies (Rio de Janeiro), puts forward some suggestions:

I am a graduate student and lawyer. Whoever identifies with me probably wants to travel the world, but faces problems in accessing education and cultural facilities, especially women who don't have the right to make use of childcare centers in schools and universities, women working double or triple shifts (*Meu voto será feminista*, my translation).

The elaboration of public policies to help mothers with childcare and to raise awareness of the problem of double or triple shifts that affects the many women in Brazil is not considered priorities by sexist male politicians. Their work, time, and wages are not affected by these problems (BIROLI, 2017), as is well illustrated by Manuela D'Ávila's testimony. In my opinion, without a feminist agenda, these problems will not be discussed in Congress or in city councils, and, for this reason, it is essential that feminists occupy these spaces, in order to represent a collectivity of women. In addition to the importance of implementing a feminist agenda in politics — which, one might argue, could equally be done by an individual candidate — the collective candidacies rely on the dialogue with associations, collectives and unions to write the bills to be introduced in the city councils. More importantly, as a mandate held by a group, collective candidacies are able to share the duties of office among the constituent members, who can likewise separately or in groups remain in touch with the population, listening to their demands.

In the statement that follows, candidate Fany Bernal, head of the candidacy Fany das Manas (Garanhuns, Pernambuco) – now elected – points out that their candidacy had a broad reach, because it was not linked to any specific neighborhood, and goes on to explain how they intend to represent the population through a popular, participatory and decentralized mandate:

Our electorate is not limited to a single territory, as is the case with most of the candidates here. We understood that it was necessary for this mandate to be popular, participatory, and decentralized. As such, we have two proposals: the first is the implementation of a Consulting Board along with unions, associations – in short, with people who are collectively organized. In addition, we also found it necessary to make sure that we have an 'office in motion', what we call 'the itinerant office', so that we can go to a different place each month to bring the institutional politics closer to the people ... We realized that in addition to the Consulting Board, there are people who are not collectively organized, they don't belong to a neighborhood association, but would still like to talk to us, and that's how we came up with the idea of the itinerant office (PORTO, 2020, p. 1, my translation).

As a political strategy, the “itinerant office” decentralizes political power, challenging local oligarchic political structures¹⁶; it provides widespread accessibility and creates a spatial-affective-cognitive shift in people’s understanding of political representatives, making sure they are no longer seen as distant and superior. In this way, due to the necessary exercise of listening to people’s demands – particularly those directly benefiting women’s lives – feminist collective candidacies can “help to improve representative democracy and enhance the dialogue between elected officials and voters” (PAES, 2020, p. 1). As Fany Bernal says: “it is not just about listening to people’s demands, it is also about transforming this act of listening into the passing of actual bills, into creating laws that can improve people’s lives” (PORTO, 2020, p. 1, my translation).

In an insightful essay about the feminist insurgency in recent years, Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (2018) calls attention to how long it has taken people in Brazil to listen to the demands of social movements, because in fact women – in their diversity – have been making their demands known for years. The author points out that black, indigenous, Asian, lesbian, Christian, and trans women’s demands, which have been discussed for at least thirty years, have only recently gained visibility within the feminist movement, especially as a result of the rise of black feminism and transfeminism. Furthermore, Hollanda asserts that black feminism, indigenous feminism, Asian feminism, lesbian feminism, Christian feminism, and transfeminism are different approaches that reject the universal idea of white heterosexual women as being representative of feminism and, although we have recognized all these differences within feminism itself, they are still not heard enough (HOLLANDA, 2018).

When collective candidacies pursue the idea of elaborating their policies based on what they have heard from people, it is clear this means a way of representing a collectivity through a horizontal political point-of-view. This horizontality can be seen in terms of division of labor, and of the wage itself. For instance, although Fany Bernal will officially be the city councilor, effective as of January 2021, she will share her duties and salary with Fernanda Limão and Marília Ferro on an equal basis (PORTO, 2020). As such, there will exist no vertical relation of power between them, or between them and the people who elected them, which means that the election of feminist collective candidacies can truly challenge the political system not only in terms of representation, but also by implementing a participatory form of democracy that can genuinely respond to the population’s demands.

¹⁶ This oligarchic political structure can be inferred by Fany’s statement about the majority of other candidacies being “fixed in a territory”, which can be explained by the candidates being dedicated to specific neighborhoods where they are very powerful and influential, perpetuating the occupation of political seats by traditional families, a legacy of Brazil’s colonial period.

Although feminist collective candidacies aim to strengthen the relation between social movements and institutional politics, there is no guarantee that real changes will automatically occur. Nonetheless, the experiences both past and present of collective mandates in several Brazilian states, and particularly the experience of feminist collective mandates in Minas Gerais¹⁷ and Pernambuco,¹⁸ have already demonstrated their ability to raise awareness of women's demands. Only time can tell how successful these political projects are, but feminist collective candidacies are a sign that the population is eager to be heard and represented.

To Conclude

In this paper, I have argued that feminist collective candidacies offer a political expedient for intersectional representation in Brazil, constituted by the reframing of the work of collectives in institutional politics. In other words, feminist collective candidacies can represent the struggle for equal rights held by feminist collectives within the city councils.

The emergence of these candidacies finds its historical basis in previous feminist struggles that characterized the Brazilian feminist movement throughout the 20th century: the suffrage movement, the fight for women's rights during the dictatorship and later in the period of re-democratization. What all these important moments have in common is women's struggle against the authoritarianism and conservatism that crops up from time to time throughout Brazilian history.

In the beginning of the 21st century, after a period of important social achievements in Brazil, a feminist insurgency took place in opposition to conservative groups focused on destabilizing the gains of those rights by women, the LGBTQ+ population, black and indigenous people, and the working classes. While part of Brazilian society voted for an authoritarian, misogynist, racist and anti-LGBTQ president, with the help of social media the feminist movement grew stronger, and was able to organize acts of protest in the streets. In this context, the feminist collective candidacies emerged to reconnect politics with people; to represent the demands of different women in Congress and in city councils throughout the country.

Of the 28 feminist collective candidacies running for seats in city councils all over Brazil, 8 were elected in the 2020 municipal elections: Silvia, from the Feminist Board (São Paulo-SP); Elaine, from the Suburban Quilombo (São Paulo-SP); Sônia Lansky, from the

¹⁷ For a detailed report on the work of Cida Falabella and Bella Gonçalves (co-councilors), Áurea Carolina and Andréia de Jesus (co-congresswomen), members of the *Gabineteona* (The Great Office) in Minas Gerais, see the website gabineteona.org.

¹⁸ In Pernambuco, see the work of the collective mandate *JuntasCodeputadas*.

Collective (Belo Horizonte, MG); Stégani Carli (Cataguases, MG); Good Living Collective (Florianópolis, SC); Adriane, from the Our Face (Fortaleza, CE); Laina, from the Black Women for Salvador (Salvador, BA); and Fany das Manas (Garanhuns, PE). This number is significant not only because it represents a considerable increase in the number of collective candidacies occupying seats in Brazilian city councils, but also because, as feminist candidacies, they occupy places of power dominated by individual candidacies, these being generally represented by white, heterosexual men.

Among those elected, Fany das Manas is the first collective mandate that will be exercised by three co-councilors in the city of Garanhuns, in the Northeastern interior of Brazil, a region where politics is traditionally associated with an oligarchic power structure. Curiously, it was also in the same region that Alzira Soriano became mayor, being the first Brazilian woman elected, in 1927. Ninety-three years separate the elections of Alzira Soriano and Fany das Manas, yet we are still fighting for women's rights to represent and be represented. Just as in the past Alzira Soriano challenged the traditional politics in her town by defeating a white, wealthy, influential man with the popular vote, Fany das Manas' election starts to dismantle Garanhuns' time-worn view of politicians, practicing democracy by listening directly to the people's demands.

Finally, the election of feminist collective candidates in different parts of the country highlights the widespread desire for a broader, more participatory form of democracy, based on the ideas of collectivity and horizontality. The political representation of feminist collective mandates challenges the current political system, and at the same time brings a message of hope to people who struggle against systematic state violence of Bolsonaro's government. These mandates have a great chance of proving that they are not only representative of women's diverse identities, but that they can also help to weaken the consequences of the sexual division of labor, giving women a chance to occupy positions in institutional politics and fight towards a more equal society.

AS CANDIDATURAS COLETIVAS FEMINISTAS: UM RESGATE DA DEMOCRACIA PARTICIPATIVA NO BRASIL

RESUMO: Neste artigo, discutirei as candidaturas coletivas feministas como um poderoso novo meio de representação política no Brasil, ligado historicamente a lutas feministas do passado. Considerando que a linguagem desempenha um papel central na compreensão do trabalho, desenvolverei o argumento de que essa nova forma de fazer política pode desafiar a divisão sexual do trabalho por meio da ideia de horizontalidade. Além disso, defendo as candidaturas coletivas feministas como uma estratégia eficaz para o resgate da democracia participativa brasileira.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Candidaturas coletivas; democracia; feminismo.

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