

**Targeted for being women and reporting on the presidency: Gendered-based violence against female journalists by populists in office**

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## **Abstract**

This study contributes to the research on the relationship between gender-based violence and journalism safety in the age of the populist *zeitgeist*. An explorative analysis of Jair Bolsonaro's discursive interpretative repertoires employed exclusively against Brazilian female journalists throughout his presidential mandate offers empirical evidence of the enduring misogynistic and patriarchal norms and attitudes of right-wing populists around women relying on their gender or status incongruity to assault them. It concludes that he combined derogatory gender-and-sexual-related offenses with attacks on the reputation and morals of female journalists to damage their credibility and impede unfavorable reporting.

**Keywords:** Peace, justice and strong institutions; Gender violence against female journalists; right-wing populism; derogatory gender-and-sexual-related offenses or attacks on reputation and morals; Bolsonaro and Brazil.

## **Introduction**

Journalism is increasingly becoming a dangerous environment, with the Committee to Protect Journalists signaling 2022 as one of the deadliest years on record for journalists around the globe. Those in power depicting them as untrustworthy enemies are becoming recurrent, while journalists also face innumerable threats at work, such as disinformation and online harassment or hate campaigns that escalate to physical

violence ranging from aggression, kidnapping, imprisonment, torture, and arbitrary detention to murder (Desjardins et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Although labeling and violence designed to discredit and silence news professionals applies to both male and female journalists, the latter are at particular risk. Online and offline attacks on female journalists are escalating, and gender-based assaults are “highly sexualized” and frequently “coupled with other forms of discrimination” (OHCHR, 2021; Posetti et al., 2021; Tandoc et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

Despite the increase of research on gender-based violence against female journalists, with a particular focus on online harassment (Adams, 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Fejős & Zentai, 2021; Lewis et al., 2020), less is known about the nature and scope of the assaults perpetrated by elite power holders. Moreover, a diachronic holistic assessment of the adverse conditions to women journalists’ occupational safety documented via attacks by official authorities holding powerful cabinet positions remains under-researched. Indeed, the power dynamics of right-wing populists manifested in societal factors comprising political and cultural risks that spawn verbal online and offline threats against female journalists are yet to be analyzed. The deconstructing of the interpretative repertoires and the types of derogatory misogynist and sexist discourse involved in public insults or disqualifications made throughout the entire mandate of a populist right-wing president also needs to be performed.

Corresponding to such a pressing need to investigate violence against women journalists perpetrated by elite power holders, this study unpacks the anti-media gendered-based assaults by a right-wing populist from the Global South while in office. Irrespective of a long history of sexist attacks and appeals “to the most virulent strains of *machismo*” before being elected, Jair Bolsonaro inaugurated a trend of systematic anti-media assaults not seen before during democratic times in Brazil (Ozawa et al.,

2023; Waldron, 2019). Once elected, he converted women journalists into one of his favorite targets while constantly attacking the press (Author 2022, 2024; Nemer, 2022; RSF, 2020).

The explorative analysis revealed a unique pattern of gendered-violent discursive interpretative repertoires of a sexist and mental nature sided with attacking the reputation and morals employed by Bolsonaro against Brazilian female journalists throughout his mandate simply for being women and reporting on his presidency.

Aiming to offer a comprehensive assessment of Bolsonaro's anti-media gendered-based violence, we first provide the theoretical and conceptual framework of our work by reviewing past studies into gender violence against women in journalism and populist anti-media and conservative sexist or misogynist ideology. Next, we present an overview of the mixed qualitative methodology and the data materials from which the categories of interpretative repertoires emerged. Lastly, we discuss the findings and the implications by addressing the complexity of gendered-based violence displayed towards women journalists in Brazil during Bolsonaro's term in the presidential office.

### **Literature review on (gendered) violence against journalists**

Although journalism safety has been a topic of public debate and academic interest for decades, there is growing research on gendered violence against female journalists. Besides dwelling on its causes, the extant literature has identified the perpetrators involved in the assaults, focused on its forms or manifestations, and assessed the coping strategies in response.

Among the likely factors that account for causing the (increasing) violence against journalists is the decline in democracy or the undermining of democratic norms (Desjardins et al., 2023). Although journalists have always faced public scrutiny and a share of negative criticisms from outside actors, even in countries that safeguard journalistic freedom and autonomy, ‘discourses of antagonism’ toward the press have varied in nature and become increasingly hostile in recent years (Carlson, 2018; Cheruiyot, 2022; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Shin, & Joo, 2021).

The upsurge of populist power holders in different world places prompted an environment conducive to media professionals being more subject to several threats and attacks in their work (Relly, 2021; Van Dalen, 2021; Waisbord, 2020). Indeed, the strategic assaults against the media by (right-wing) populist politicians are to be blamed for adding pressure to the press and for the existing risks associated with the journalistic performance to have reached a critical juncture (Author, 2024; Bhat & Chadha, 2020, 2023; Beiler & Kiesler, 2018; Carlson et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Koliska & Assmann, 2021; Koliska et al., 2020; Lischka, 2019; Macaraig & Hameleers, 2022; Meyer-Gutbrod & Woolley, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2018; Shin & Joo, 2021; Tapsell, 2022; Waisbord, 2020).

### **Women as dual targets of right-wing populist assaults**

Attacks against journalists and the attempts to discredit and delegitimize the press is a well-known strategy from far-right leaders to dictate the public discourse and to legitimate their uncontested authority (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Lischka, 2019). Being anti-establishment, populists depict journalists as belonging to the ‘corrupt’ elites as opposed to the ‘virtuous’ people (Mudde, 2017).

Accordingly, they reproduce the ‘us’ in narratives fuelled by resentment at the demeaning roles left to beleaguered members of the “should-be dominant nation” by condescending or corrupt elites (Mostov, 2021:1).

To the point of the vilification of journalists through the typical right-wing populist mantra of portraying them as internal enemies of the state (Author, 2022; Carlson et al., 2021; Meeks, 2022;). Besides Trump’s ‘lying press’ accusations or the Alternative for Germany “Lügenpresse” dictum directed at the press as an institution and not at specific individuals, female news professionals become immediate targets because of the political power derived from their professional occupations (Koliska & Assmann, 2019; Krämer, 2018, Mudde, 2019).

Furthermore, the intersection of cultural risk factors regarding gender identity and misogyny aggravates press hostility toward women as a defining political risk factor derived from the populist anti-elitism stance. Beyond building on the difference between ‘the people’ and the journalists as members of ‘the elite,’ right-wing populist nativist discourse demonizes additional groups of inside or internal ‘others’ who also pose a threat (Löffler et al., 2020). Women invariably feature among those ‘others’ demarcated in the right-wing populist ideology used to mobilize support and promote national unity against a common enemy (Mostov, 2021:3).

Notwithstanding a degree of contradictory gender ideological views, right-wing populists generally employ the empty and hegemonic signifiers of gender and anti-feminism as a tactical tool by emphasizing gender roles associated with heteronormative and an essentialist understanding of the traditional family as a core institution of society (Akkerman, 2015; Eksi & Wood, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Payne, 2023). Out of such conservative views on the ‘gender subject,’ they oppose feminism and gender-equality measures and fiercely criticize those ‘traitors’ who advocate for them (Graff &

Korolczuk, 2022). In the extreme, they further strategically explore deep-seated anti-genderism or gender equity beliefs of considerable parts of the society. They do this by portraying men as victims of feminism and presenting themselves as saviors who promise to re-establish sovereign masculinity as the basis for cultural hegemony and political power (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Sauer, 2024).

Also, based upon such established gendered logic, right-wing populist expectations do not contemplate ascribing feminine news reporters the traits necessary to cover politics (Acker, 2012; Eksi & Wood, 2019). By simply reporting on the topic - aggravated if performed in a critical or negative orientation - female journalists experience “status incongruity” (for acting contrary to role expectations) and are likely to face backlash by populist power-holders for further challenging their prevailing patriarchal and sexist cultural expectations on gender identity (Barão da Silva et al., 2023; Geertsema-Sligh & Vos, 2022; Rudman et al., 2012; Schoch, 2013; Sreberny, 2014). What is worse, if women fail to display appropriate behavior while reporting politics, they face multifaceted violence that is designed to show them their place (Kaul, 2021).

And despite being locally adapted to context-specific spectral attributes, anti-women journalist discourses repeat formulas, slogans, and tropes that seem to travel transnationally (Author, 2022). Populist power holders usually resort to a dual strategy of denying anti-feminism and anti-media while circulating messages enhancing the normalization of hostile rhetoric against women journalists as both the causes and objects of violence through demeaning, threatening, or stigmatizing expressions often based on intolerance and hatred. In turn, such affective rhetorical blaming strategies also fuel an atmosphere of “stochastic violence” that justifies and naturalizes further gendered hostility and aggression against them (Saresma et al., 2020).

Taken together, all these peculiarities stage gender as an omnipresent mark in right-wing populist discursive strategies to canvass the population's support against journalism and women news professionals as a central target. Unsurprisingly, thus, deviant and disinhibited right-wing populists power holders often feature amidst the multiplicity of potential perpetrators of violence against women journalists external to the news institutions (Barão da Silva et al., 2023; Bhat & Chadha, 2023; Macaraig & Hameleers, 2022; Meeks, 2020; OHCHR, 2021; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023; Sreberny, 2014; Van Dalen, 2021; Waisbord, 2020).

### **Gendered-based threat manifestations and journalistic responses**

Prior attempts to categorize threats to journalists' occupational safety into distinct conceptual frameworks have generally identified political, verbal, physical, psychological, legal, digital, financial, and access limitations (Author, 2022; Holtz-Bacha, 2022; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Previous studies have also found noticeable gender differences among news professionals, such as digital harassment of women journalists to be disproportionately severe in terms of its nature, intensity, and impacts compared to those directed at male journalists (Abraji, 2021; Adams, 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Gardiner, 2018; Lewis et al., 2020; Megarry, 2014; Posetti et al., 2021).

Extant works have identified verbal attacks as a form of gendered violence or "hate speech acts" defined as aversive or derogatory statements directed to individuals that criticize, threaten, stereotype, attack, and denigrate "others" because of their gender or based on their belonging to the journalistic class and the news content produced while performing the distinctive role associated with the job (Abraji, 2021; Hawdon et al., 2017, p. 254; Popitz, 2017; Posetti et al., 2021; Konow-Lund & Høiby, 2023).

Gendered harassment of women journalists is constantly laden with abusive sexist and misogynistic remarks, differently from attacks against male counterparts that might share a degree of profanity, insults, and name-calling (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2021).

This overt attempt to “put women in their place” is a manifestation of misogyny as the “system that punishes, dominates, and condemns” women perceived as “an enemy or threat to the patriarchy” (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Manne, 2018, p.34). Moreover, such a prejudiced antipathy and aggression toward women also indicates a hostile sexism built on conservative patriarchal grounds that objectifies women by denying them autonomous human agency and reducing them to acted-on objects (Doyle, 2011; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Megarry 2014).

A final new line of attention on gendered violence against female news professionals investigates the coping strategies and responses for dealing with the threats to their safety (Baroni & Marinho, 2023; Barão da Silva et al., 2023; Ozawa et al., 2023; Posetti et al. 2020). The relatively few past studies revealed a muddled pattern of discrepant findings between “maladaptive” or “avoidance” responses that led to exit or leave the job to “adaptive” problem-oriented coping strategies by displaying “resilience” or “compliance” (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). In the case of the latter, the journalistic responses ranged from “submission” – through self-censorship, avoiding specific assignments, sources and social media altogether, or the use of pseudonyms - to “resistance” with the resulting “catalyzing effects” of more coverage or persistent reporting in the face of criticisms and threats (Barão da Silva et al., 2023; Ozawa et al., 2023; Posetti et al. 2020; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

Against this background, our explorative study raised the research question:

What gendered violent discursive narratives are embedded in Bolsonaro's attacks on Brazilian female journalists and how do they reveal his entrenched sexist and misogynistic attitudes toward women reporting on the presidency?

### **Materials and methods**

This explorative study employed a mixed qualitative methodology in analyzing the former president's attacks against women journalists to foster the understanding of the gendered violence by right-wing populists. It departed from the perspective of those female journalists experiencing and denouncing it publicly to expand conceptual discussions on the topic by offering empirical evidence on recognized patterns strengthened with relevant context (Terry et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To that end, it adopted the “most likely” case design logic for selecting Brazil and Jair Bolsonaro’s presidential mandate as relevant objects of study (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

To begin with, the most populous country and a leading economy in Latin America has a poor past record of international gender equality assessments and violence against women. Brazil had one of Latin America’s largest gender gaps, ranking 22nd out of 25 countries in the region, and almost 90 places behind Nicaragua the region’s best performer (World Economic Forum, 2022). The 2023 report by the Brazilian Forum for Public Security also revealed that around 18 million women had suffered from violence in the country - 50 thousand victims per day. Likewise, Brazil is historically one of the most dangerous countries in the region to work as a journalist.

The situation worsened following the election of a well-known misogynist and sexist, a staunch opponent of gender as Brazil's first right-wing populist president in democratic times (Löffler et al., 2020). Coming to power riding a wave of discontent

against the establishment and corruption, Jair Bolsonaro's formula for rescuing the country comprised of a neoliberal, moralist, and anti-feminist agenda while uniting otherwise fragmented and incompatible groups behind a heteronormative agenda (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020). And predictably so, given the hardline ideology of "attacking liberal ideas" and "the elites who espouse them" - media included - marked the political career of the former military (Abdalla, 2020; The Economist, 2020).

As a result, misogynist discourse and attacks against female politicians, for instance, have rapidly increased since the election of Bolsonaro in parliaments, on the streets, and above all, on social media (Ávila, 2022). And journalists were no exception. Bolsonaro's presidency marked the institutionalization of violence against journalists, with the systematic practice of discrediting the press and attacking its professionals. This practice is proven by numbers: 208 cases of violence against journalists were recorded in 2019 (54% more than in 2018); an explosion in the number of cases in 2020 to 428 (an increase of 105%); a new record was set was at 430 incidents - and the year of most violence against journalists since FENAJ inaugurated its series in 1999; and a decrease to 376 cases registered in 2022 mainly Bolsonaro remained silent, after of the October electoral defeat (FENAJ, 2023:4). Over the four years of his presidency, Bolsonaro was the main aggressor, personally carrying out "570 attacks on media outlets and journalists" and encouraging his supporters to supporters to imitate his violence (FENAJ, 2023:5).

By posing new risks and threats to journalism in the country, Bolsonaro took the conflictual relationship with the press to unprecedented levels of contempt and aggression towards journalists. Verbal and physical assaults featured alongside frequent cases of online harassment, most of them against women journalists. (Leão, 2022; RSF 2021a). In fact, a recent report confirmed the "chasm between the treatment of women

and men” in cases of online harassment with “explicit gender-related aggression using appearance, sexuality, sexual orientation, or stereotypical personality traits as instruments of offense” (Abraji, 2021). His trademark style of insulting, denigrating, and humiliating “journalists seen as too critical,” along with “sexist and misogynistic attacks” against female journalists, he made the work of the Brazilian press “exceedingly difficult” (RSF, 2021a).

In sum, Jair Bolsonaro provided an appropriate case study for being especially likely to observe gendered violence against female journalists while performing his strong-man style of political leadership.

### **Data set and categorization**

The empirical data was sourced from the yearbook compilations by the Brazilian National Federations of Journalists (FENAJ), one (if not) the most reliable monitoring platform on the violence against journalists and press freedom in the country frequently cited or employed in press reports and academic research (Author, 2022, 2024; Barão da Silva et al., 2023; Baroni & Marinho, 2023; Lubianco, 2020; Ozawa et al., 2023).

We manually searched through the 2019-2022 FENAJ yearbooks and identified over 230 instances of verbal gendered violent assaults against female journalists. Our goal was to identify every direct attack by the president against individual journalists where women were dismissed, disrespected, or ridiculed. This involved reviewing verbatim transcriptions of the assaults within the president's speeches, public appearances, interviews, and social media posts during his term.

Next, we adapted a critical discursive (psychology) methodology for the analysis of the resulting material. We borrowed the concept of “interpretative repertoires” to outline the narrative construction of Bolsonaro's aversive speech toward female

journalists from meanings which prevail in a wider social and cultural context of the Brazilian society and culture (Edley, 2001; Fish 1980; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984) “Interpretative repertoires” are here understood as a set of discursive resources that allow for “a relatively coherent way” of “talking about objects and events in the world” produced in historical and societal contexts to serve particular socio-political functions (Edley, 2001, p. 198, 210; Wetherell, 1998).

More concretely, we used a method for analysis that builds on previous research about right-wing populism and gender (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Pettersson & Sakki, 2023). We carefully examined the content to find the most common rhetorical strategies and resources Bolsonaro uses to attack Brazilian journalists, and to understand their social and political impact.

Two patterns of macro-interpretative repertoire categories emerged from the preliminary analysis of the material: derogatory gender-related offenses and attacks on the reputation and morals of female journalists. The former comprised stereotyped personality traits associated with women – such as “crazy” or “gossipy” – and the mental or cognitive abilities questioned - “stupid” and “imbeciles.” In what concerns the latter, it ranged from provocations of an ideological bias – “communists” or “leftists” – to insinuations about exchanging sexual favors for obtaining otherwise disclosed information or overcoming the competition in breaking news stories.

After re-checking all of Bolsonaro’s assaults against women journalists to enhance the reliability and validity (Riffe et al. 2014), the analysis was further refined and nuanced to capture only assault references that emphasized women journalists being treated differently from their male counterparts (Jalalzai et al.,2022). "Bias" allegations or "lying" accusations, for instance, were dismissed for being repertoires known to be used to target both their male counterparts and the news institutions (Author, 2022;

Krämer, 2018; Panievsky, 2022). Finally, we also examined the social and political impact of gendered violence against female journalists.

We worked closely together to analyze the data, continually discussing, reflecting on, and comparing our interpretations. Both authors are native Portuguese speakers, with one being Brazilian, which allowed us to understand the meanings of idiomatic expressions or slang in the original data. This helped us capture the interconnected context and the relevant subject positions involved.

## **Findings**

Overall, attacks against the press and women journalists in Brazil increased exponentially during the mandate of Jair Bolsonaro compared to any previous government leader since the re-democratization of the country in 1989. Besides perpetrating most of the 570 attacks on news outlets and journalists over the four years, Bolsonaro also encouraged his allies and supporters to become aggressors (Fenaj, 2023:7). The “systematic practice” of “discrediting the press and attacking its professionals” via the “harassment, insults, vilification and humiliation” of journalists marked the “institutionalization of violence” against the press (Fenaj, 2023:5; RSF 2022).

Interestingly, although women were not the most frequent victims of Bolsonaro’s assaults (26% attacks directed at women against 60% men), despite being the majority of the journalists in Brazil, they still became a preferred target as a result of their gender or professional practice. In general, the results showed that Bolsonaro specifically switched between derogatory gender-related offensive repertoires – of a sexist or mental nature - and attacks on the reputation and morals of women journalists.

## **Derogatory gender-related offenses**

Bolsonaro directed one of his hallmark gender-derogatory repertoires at the female bodies or stereotyped personality traits associated with women. In December 2019, he alluded to “some mean little fat women” from São Paulo who criticized him (Bolsonaro, 2019). Then he singled out the political journalist Eliane Catanhede for “saying nonsense” and “gossip” when implicating him as morally responsible for the shooting of senator Cid Gomes in a stand-off with members of the military police strike in the north-eastern state of Ceará (Fenaj, 2021:21).

Another gender-stereotyped-laden variation of Bolsonaro’s repertoire consisted of exploring the emotional predisposition of women and playing with the stigma of mental illness. In May 2021, he ridiculed Miriam Leitão for going after him with questions as if she was “delusional” or “out of her mind” (Fenaj, 2022:19). During an event in July 2022, Bolsonaro called another journalist “crazy woman” when she asked whether he would pass the presidential sash to the winner if defeated in the forthcoming election (Fenaj, 2023:55).

More often than not, he also questioned the cognitive abilities of female journalists. In March 2020, he perpetrated another assault on Miriam Leitão. On that occasion, Bolsonaro called her “a press genius” in response to a published news piece while making it explicit that it was “with a J” for meaning the opposite (Bolsonaro, 2020). The Portuguese word “gênio” is written with a “g” similar to “genius” in English. However, the word “jégue” (meaning “donkey” in English) is spelled with a “j”. When the former President Bolsonaro called the journalist “a press genius... with a “j”” - very offensive in Brazil, especially in professional contexts - he was essentially calling her “idiot,” “dumb,” or “ignorant.” He displayed a similar pattern to Júlia Afonso for being

unaware of the presidential role in passing a secret budget and to another unidentified journalist' unpreparedness in questioning him about the purchase of properties in cash by members of his family when it had been in currency, which the news professional was unable to differentiate (Fenaj, 2022:39, 41).

In June 2021, Bolsonaro focused his violence on journalist Adriana de Luca, who asked him about the alleged scandalous contract to acquire the overpriced 1000% Covaxin vaccine from India. Besides dismissing the question, considered "stupid" and "ridicule" Bolsonaro sent the journalist "back to college" and "to be born again" (Fenaj, 2022:24). Likewise, Bolsonaro also insulted her *CNN Brazil* colleague, Daniela Lima, whose statement he had taken out of context, for being "quadruped" - connoting the irrational characteristics of animalesque brainless creature (Fenaj, 2022:21).

Alternatively, he probed the mastery of the Portuguese language of *Folha de São Paulo's* journalist, Mônica Bergamo, by correcting the verb tense in her news text about prospective government nominations ahead (Fenaj, 2022:21). Or, when asked another reporter whether she had studied Portuguese and was familiar with figurative sense for literally interpreting his comment made as a candidate during the 2018 presidential campaign of "shot all colored people" or "expatriate them to Venezuela" where they were going "to eat grass," in Acre -in the Northern Rio Branco region of Brazil (Fenaj, 2023:34). Ultimately, Bolsonaro did not doubt in silencing women journalist, such as telling Laurene Santos, a local reporter affiliated with *Globo*, to "shut up" and stop questioning him for having arrived at a public event without wearing a mask during Covid 19 pandemics illustrates (Fenaj, 2022:24).

Finally, in this particular domain, offensive sex content expressions were also a customary discursive resource employed by Bolsonaro. When Sylvia Colombo, working for *Folha de São Paulo*, asked him about a foreign policy issue involving

diplomatic relations with Venezuela, back in July 2019, Bolsonaro said: "I'm in love with you." Then, tired of getting asked whether he had gotten Coronavirus during a press conference, in March 2020, Jair Bolsonaro got angry and answered: "Why would you like to know that? Do you sleep with me? Do you sleep with me?".

Under the same framework, but on different grounds, during the live Presidential campaign debate at *Bandeirantes* network in August 2022, he attacked political journalist Vera Magalhães for flirting after she questioned him about Brazil's COVID-19 vaccination rate. Bolsonaro evaded the question by answering: "I think you go to sleep thinking about me. You have a crush on me" (Fenaj, 2023:30). Implying some fetish of the journalist with him aimed avoiding answering the question. Before that, he ironically and implicitly accused *Folha de São Paulo's* senior reporter, Patrícia Campos Melo, of being an "incompetent slut" blending the sex remarks with doubts about her competency as a journalist (Fenaj, 2021:20).

In fact, sex inuendo remarks advancing into the journalists' private lives were also a trademark feature of Bolsonaro's attacks on reputation and morals of female journalists.

### **Attacks on reputation and morals of female journalists**

During an interview in February 2020, Bolsonaro used a journalistic expression with double meanings – sexually perverting the journalistic jargon "give the scoop" into the "journalist who gives the hole" – to reiterate an unfounded disinformation accusation against Patricia Campos Melo, a reporter at *Folha de São Paulo* (Fenaj, 2021:43; Martins, 2020). His attack came in response to her long article that exposed a scheme of businessmen linked to Bolsonaro illegally funding a negative campaign via mass

forwarding of WhatsApp messages during the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections to attack the Labour Party candidate, Fernando Hadad. Had it been true, insinuating herself sexually with a source to obtain disclosed information against Bolsonaro, would be an ethical transgression and a blow to her reputation. Suing and winning moral damage against President Bolsonaro and his son for the claim did not prevent her from enduring a “very aggressive” torrent of online attacks, falsified pornographic images of her, deep fake videos portraying her as a “prostitute journalist” and rape threats (Posetti et al., 2021).

In addition, Bolsonaro spent attention attacking the reputation of female journalists by labelling them as corrupt or suggesting corruption by behaviour. He provoked a storm of protest in March 2019 for twitting fake news to attack Constança Rezende, a reporter at the *Estado de São Paulo* who has covered a money laundering scandal involving a former aide of his son Flávio. The president accused her of seeking his impeachment and wanting to “ruin” the life of his son Flávio, whereas in the original audio excerpts, Rezende conveyed that the case against the president’s son was “ruining” Bolsonaro and could lead to the president’s impeachment (Fenaj, 2020:17). To strengthen his case, Bolsonaro established a connection with Rezende’s father, Chico Otávio – an investigative journalist from rival paper *O Globo* - in wanting to “defeat the government with blackmail, disinformation and leaks” (Phillips, 2019). Such a circulation, repetition, reiteration, and appropriation of violent expressions led to attacks on social media by the president's supporters “and conservative blogger Allan dos Santos even published fake tweets under Rezende’s name to incite the virtual lynch mob (Felinto & Grusin, 2021).

Another good case in point occurred in March 2021, involving Mariliz Pereira Jorge, also from *Folha de São Paulo*. Bolsonaro complained about her article, in which

she listed a series of (194 to be precise) negative adjectives about him (Jorge, 2021). Seizing the opportunity to raise the issue of the Brazilian Supreme Court annulling all sentences against former President Lula da Silva and restoring the political rights that allowed him to run for the presidency in the 2022 election, he implied that Mariliz Pereira Jorge was attacking him for Lula to win and financially save her newspaper (Fenaj, 2022:19).

Equally, the former president resumed the attacks on Mirian Leitão but aimed at disqualifying her moral character on this occasion. During breakfast with the foreign press at the presidential Palace, Bolsonaro accused her of “having taken part in an armed revolutionary group during the military dictatorship” and being arrested while heading to join the Araguaia Guerrilla (Fenaj, 2020:15). Furthermore, he claimed she lied about being tortured and placed in a dark room with a snake. However, as reported in her testimony in an audit at the time of the events, she was arrested hundreds of kilometers from the Araguaia region while on the way to the beach and placed in a dark room with a boa constrictor snake (CSTJ, 2019; Fenaj, 2020:15).

## **Discussion**

Gendered violence alongside journalism safety and populism have been extensively theorized separately, but there has not been sufficient study of the way that gendered-based violence against female journalists undergirds populists while in power. This explorative work responded to the urgency to overcome such a blind spot of the literature by unpacking the critical but hardly ever discussed interpretative repertoires involved in gendered-based violent public insults or disqualifications made by a populist right-wing president of the Global South throughout his entire mandate. It also

constituted a stepping stone in shedding light on the societal factors comprising political and cultural risks behind those attacks.

The findings permitted us to answer the research question through the revealing of the full range of discursive narratives embedded in Bolsonaro's exclusive gendered-based assaults against Brazilian female journalists in line with previous findings. Firstly, he targeted their bodies and thereby perniciously reduced them to sexualized objects. Secondly, he also explored stereotyped personality traits associated with women's emotional predisposition mingled with the stigma of mental illness to belittle and humiliate them further. Calling them "crazy" and "delusional" or insinuating that they were not normally reacting, besides describing women journalists in a wrongheaded or badly, also detracts from the content of their reporting, given that nothing of what they say can be trusted.

Thirdly, Bolsonaro dehumanized female news reporters and detached them from their professional work or intelligence when questioning their cognitive abilities to perform journalistic professional roles and functions. In his right-wing populist heteronormative schemata, women are presumably less smart than men and not suited to be engaged in political reporting - a status incongruity that backlashed female journalists. Fourthly, aware that female journalists depend on credibility to work as news professionals, Bolsonaro often employed explicit and implicit offensive sex remarks and innuendos into their private lives intertwined with attacks on their morals and reputations. And finally, he showed no qualms in resorting to unfounded allegations, historical revisionism, and fake news in crafting his assaults and in defending regressive heteronormative gender roles. Such customary discursive resources that Bolsonaro employed to damage the credibility of female journalists as

well as to question or diminish their competence and reinforce a strategy to induce fear and impede negative news coverage.

A holistic characterization of Bolsonaro's attacks against Brazilian female journalists also revealed his misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes around women beyond a mere comprehensive typification of verbal online and offline threats. The main attributes of Bolsonaro's gendered violence against Brazilian female journalists were that it relied on the victim's gender and status incongruity to assault them. Indeed, he attacked them on two fronts: as women and out of simply working as news professionals and critically reporting on his presidency.

Such a double targeting of Brazilian female news professionals made it harder for them to work as journalists in the first place and to navigate the complex terrain of political reporting. Drawing on ideologically rooted and culturally shared gender stereotypes, Bolsonaro discursively conveyed interpretative repertoires and constructed different identities for Brazilian women journalists to serve the political function of sending a message to all other women (and men) journalists who intended to write anything critical or negative against him.

Notwithstanding some expected national variances due to cultural factors, such an intersectionality of gender and journalistic identities is nevertheless not unique to Bolsonaro. Similar discursive narratives - as active political statements that circumscribe what women journalists should do and the lines they ought not to cross - are observed in the communication playbook of other populist right-wing misogynist leaders from the Global North (Trump) or the Global South (Modi and Duterte) seeking to uphold a patriarchal status quo. As elsewhere, anti-feminism and anti-media coalesce in the right-wing populist powerholders' attempts to condition, censure, and silence unruly and critical women journalists (Bhat & Chadha, 2023; Dietze & Roth, 2020;

Fejős & Zentai, 2021; Macaraig & Hameleers, 2022; Meeks, 2020; Saresma et al., 2020).

As in every other work, this study has limitations. For instance, the one concerned with the fact that the assaults publicly denounced by FENAJ are usually the "tip of the iceberg" since the majority of incidents of gendered-based violence against female journalist are presumably never reported out of fear of the repercussions on their careers. Another limitation is the generalization of the findings of the case study. Bolsonaro's pattern of gendered-based hostility toward Brazilian female news professionals that faulted them for both their gender and journalistic identities may or may not reflect the behavior of similar right-wing populists in power elsewhere. More so, bearing in mind that populism seems to travel transnationally despite coming in many forms and interactions and gender-based violence and journalism safety can be culturally and context-specific. Hence, subsequent studies could endeavor to engage in cross-national comparisons with other right-wing populist powerholders elsewhere or across gender and time in Brazil by contrasting Bolsonaro's violence against female versus male journalists or opposing it to left-wing populist Lula da Silva's previous mandate prior to his recent return to the presidency in 2023.

Despite these shortcomings, this study still constitutes a valuable departing point for the categorization of verbal online and offline threats of populist power holders against female journalists. Because they were assaulted for being women and in retaliation for belonging inside journalism or working as news professionals and critically reporting on his presidency, this work is also suggestive of Bolsonaro's need to maintain cultural heteronormative gender norms of a state and to deactivate the monitorial performance of the press when in the highest position in Brazilian politics.

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