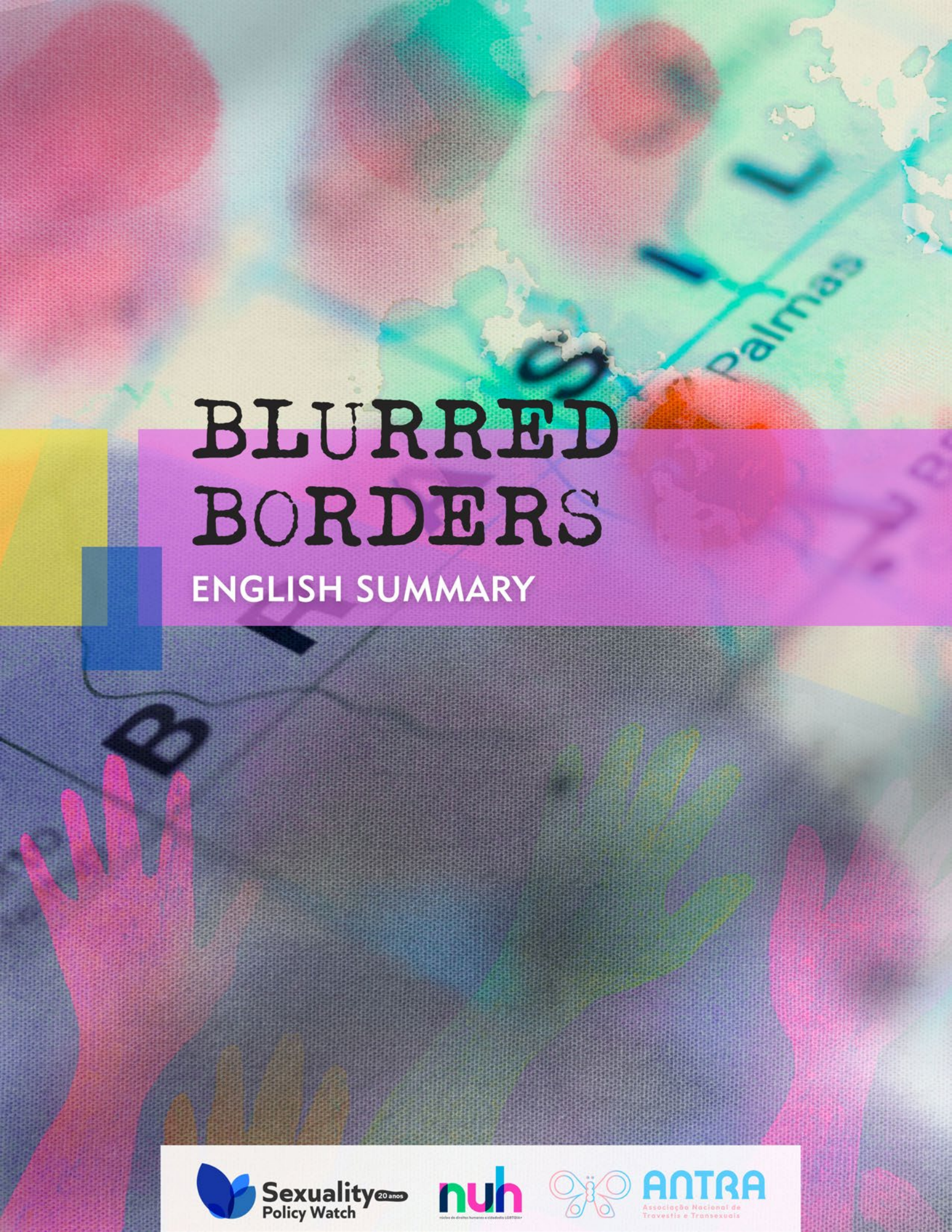

BLURRED BORDERS

ENGLISH SUMMARY

Sexuality Policy Watch 20 anos

nuh núcleo de direitos humanos e cidadania LGBTQIA+

ANTRA Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais

We dearly thank Andrea Cornwall for intensively facilitating the elaboration of this summary.

INDEX

Abstract

This paper examines the emergence, consolidation, and political effects of anti-gender and trans-exclusionary feminist currents in Brazil between the 2010s and mid-2020s, as mapped in *Fronteiras Borradas: Movimentos Feministas e de Mulheres e Política Antigênero no Brasil* (2025). Drawing on that report's empirical findings, network analyses, and interviews, this article situates Brazil's "essentialist" feminisms within the broader transnational wave of anti-gender politics that has reshaped global democratic landscapes. It argues that the Brazilian case exemplifies what Sonia Corrêa calls "the blurring of frontiers" — the diagonal crossings between right-wing, religious, and feminist actors that have rendered the gender question a central battlefield of twenty-first-century reaction.

Methodologically, the paper weaves together documentary analysis and feminist theory to interpret how anti-gender discourse migrated from Vatican doctrinal production to Brazilian state policy under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–22), and subsequently reappeared, with renewed vigor, under the guise of "feminist" trans-exclusionism after Bolsonaro's defeat. The article mobilizes insights from Judith Butler on gender performativity and vulnerability, from Sara Ahmed on the politics of affect and "the feminist killjoy," and from Callison and Slobodian's notion of *diagonalism* to analyze how ideological flows between left and right have reconfigured feminist terrains. It concludes that anti-gender feminism in Brazil operates as a confusionist hinge — a pivot that links reactionary religious moralities, secular nationalism, and feminist discourse — thereby intensifying the contemporary crisis of democracy and of feminist politics themselves.

Introduction: Gender, Anti-Gender, and the Brazilian Conjuncture

"Since the mid-2010s," begins *Fronteiras Borradas*, "we have witnessed the eruption of anti-gender cyclones that, along with other factors, have fueled far-right turns profoundly altering the political landscapes of the Americas and Europe. Brazil occupies an important place in this geography." This formulation sets the tone for an inquiry that is

simultaneously national and planetary: Brazil becomes a microcosm of a global reaction in which the notion of *gender* itself functions as an ideological scapegoat.

As the report notes, "in the early 2000s, for the first time, the accusatory category 'gender ideology' appeared in a political speech in the National Congress," a phrase that would soon circulate "through Catholic channels and social networks." By the early 2010s, debates over the *Plano Nacional de Educação* (National Education Plan, 2014–24) had ignited a vigorous campaign against the inclusion of gender in educational curricula. The anti-gender repertoire — with its familiar tropes of moral panic, child protection, and national sovereignty — became a crucial conduit for far-right mobilization. In 2018 these discursive storms "transmuted into phantasmagorias that haunted the election that brought Jair Bolsonaro to power."

The report's title — *Fronteiras Borradas* ("Blurred Borders") — encapsulates its key finding: that the boundaries between feminist, conservative, and far-right politics have become porous. Corrêa and her collaborators trace how, "from 2019 onward, anti-gender ideology was transported into the grammar of the state and public policies," reshaping human-rights, education, health, and foreign policy. At the same time, "voices and feminist collectives… began to position themselves with increasing vigor against the concept of gender, and especially against the rights of trans people."

This convergence between feminist and far-right antagonisms to gender is not unique to Brazil. It mirrors developments across Europe and the Americas where "gender-critical" or "trans-exclusionary" feminisms have acquired discursive legitimacy by invoking the language of women's rights. Yet, as Butler (2022) reminds us, anti-gender campaigns operate through *ontological capture*: they redefine feminism itself as a project of biological essentialism and exclusion. They do so, she writes, by "recasting feminist critique into a defense of nature, sex, and the family — the very categories once subject to feminist deconstruction."

In Brazil, the alignment between anti-gender feminism and far-right populism unfolded within a context marked by religious conservatism, the resurgence of authoritarian nostalgia, and digital disinformation. Bolsonaro's administration institutionalized "gender ideology" as a state enemy, while trans-exclusionary feminists — often self-described as "radical" or "gender-critical" — rearticulated this hostility in the idiom of women's

protection. The report identifies six key clusters in this emergent network:

- "Original" radical feminists, heirs to 1970s separatist traditions;
- Movements of mothers and survivors, rooted in campaigns against parental alienation;
- Neoliberals and religious ultraconservatives, primarily Catholic;
- The secular far right and Bolsonarist politicians;
- Transnational networks such as Women's Declaration International (WDI) and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF); and
- "Articulation nodes" — pivot actors who facilitate alliances across these domains.

This mapping already gestures to the paper's central problematic: the way *gender* has become the ideological glue binding disparate political projects. As Ahmed (2017) argues, affect circulates through such alliances — fear, resentment, disgust — producing "sticky" emotions that attach to bodies and concepts. In Brazil, *Fronteiras Borradas* demonstrates, these affects have crystallized around the figure of the trans woman, constructed simultaneously as threat, impostor, and symptom of moral decay.

The research underlying the report combined "a brief literature review to reconstruct the genealogy of these currents" with "three complementary empirical studies: social-network analysis using Gephi; social-media observation; and interviews with feminist activists and gender-studies scholars." This methodological pluralism permits a rare triangulation between digital ethnography and feminist theory. The authors note that their data collection concluded in early 2024 — just before two pivotal events: the formal registration of the *Mátria Associação de Mulheres, Mães e Trabalhadoras do Brasil* (October 2023), which would soon become the institutional platform of essentialist feminism; and the "return of Trump to power in the United States," whose administration in 2025 vowed to "vigorously combat gender ideology."

Thus, the Brazilian scenario must be read within what Corrêa calls "the new anti-gender world order." This conjuncture, marked by Trump's Executive Order *Defending Women from the Extremism of Gender Ideology and Restoring Biological Truth in the Federal Government* (February 2025), exemplifies the transnational diffusion of reactionary gender politics. That order, declaring that "only two sexes exist," explicitly borrowed its rhetoric — "defending women from gender ideology" — from trans-exclusionary feminist discourse.

This paper situates *Fronteiras Borradas* within three overlapping conversations. First, it engages the growing literature on the **global anti-gender movement**, which scholars such as Paternotte and Kuhar (2017) and Corrêa et al. (2021) describe as a "symbolic glue" for diverse right-wing forces. Second, it contributes to debates on **trans-exclusionary feminism** and the crisis of feminist epistemology (see Pearce et al. 2020; Butler 2022; Ahmed 2021). Third, it speaks to political theory's concern with **diagonalism** — the hybrid ideological flows between left and right that Callison and Slobodian (2023) have identified as defining our post-pandemic moment.

By reading *Fronteiras Borradas* through these lenses, the paper advances three arguments:

1. That anti-gender feminism in Brazil operates as a **diagonal formation**, blurring the boundaries between feminist activism and far-right reaction;
2. That this formation functions through **affective economies** of fear and moral panic that render trans lives precarious while claiming the mantle of women's protection; and
3. That the institutionalization of these movements — particularly through *Mátria* — signals a **qualitative shift** from digital discourse to legal and policy intervention.

The following sections will elaborate these claims, moving from the report's genealogical reconstruction to its case studies, before turning to theoretical reflection on the blurring of political frontiers.

Methodological Reflections

Fronteiras Borradas is distinctive among the growing corpus of anti-gender studies because it does not treat Brazil merely as a national case, but as a node in a transnational web of ideological production. Its methodology, as the authors explain, combined "a brief literature review to reconstruct the genealogy of these currents" with "three complementary empirical studies: network analysis using Gephi, social-media observation, and semi-structured interviews." The project was conducted between 2023 and early 2024, culminating in a detailed cartography of actors, alliances, and discursive strategies.

What emerges is not a linear narrative but an **ecology of influence**. The network map identifies six clusters — from radical feminists and maternalist movements to religious ultraconservatives, far-right parties, and transnational organizations — connected through what the report calls *nodos de articulação*, or "articulation nodes." These pivots (individual influencers, journalists, NGO founders) enable flows of discourse, funding, and legitimacy across ideological boundaries.

Such a methodology resonates with Donna Haraway's (1988) insistence on *situated knowledges* — the idea that feminist inquiry must map its own positionality within contested terrains of power. Here, mapping is not metaphorical but literal: a visualization of how ideological vectors traverse digital and institutional spaces. By tracing hashtags, reposts, and collaborative events, the study exposes the infrastructural dimension of what Butler (2004) calls "the frame of recognition" — the social conditions that determine which lives are deemed intelligible as human.

Importantly, the report does not confine its gaze to far-right actors. Instead, it interrogates how "the diffusion of essentialist feminist rhetoric within progressive spaces" complicates the conventional opposition between reactionary and emancipatory politics. As one interviewee, a trans academic, observes: "The majority of researchers would not align themselves with the transfobia of this movement, but we must recognize that they exist. Policies of alliance must be built with these scholars." This insistence on nuance underscores the authors' refusal to flatten the field into binary moralities.

Theoretical Anchors

To interpret this complexity, the report implicitly invokes three theoretical frames that this paper makes explicit.

First, **gender as a contested ontology**. Following Butler's (1990, 2004) theorization of gender performativity, anti-gender politics can be read as a backlash against the ontological pluralization that feminism and queer theory have unleashed. The insistence that "woman = adult human female" — a formula repeated incessantly by Brazilian trans-exclusionary collectives — functions as an *ontological reclosure*, an attempt to re-stabilize sex as the foundation of political order.

Second, **affective economies**. Sara Ahmed's (2017) analysis of how emotions "stick" to bodies and signs helps illuminate the visceral tone of anti-gender discourse. Fear of erasure, disgust toward trans embodiment, and nostalgia for maternal purity circulate as affective commodities, creating what *Fronteiras Borradas* calls "an avalanche of comments transfóbicos" on social media. These affects bind disparate actors — mothers, academics, religious conservatives — into a community of sentiment.

Third, **diagonalism and confusionism**. Drawing on William Callison and Quinn Slobodian's (2023) concept of *diagonalism* — the ideological slippage whereby right and left converge around conspiratorial or anti-liberal worldviews — the report identifies a similar "borramento de fronteiras" (blurring of borders) within feminism itself. As Corrêa notes, "these actors create bridges between left, right, liberal, and ultraright; between broad feminisms, maternalist groups, and trans-exclusionary voices." The result is what sociologist Philippe Corcuff (2021) calls *confusionism* — a vortex of contradictory discourses that ultimately consolidates reactionary power.

Together, these frameworks enable us to read *Fronteiras Borradas* not merely as a national diagnosis but as a contribution to global feminist theory: a call to analyze how anti-gender formations function as both epistemic and affective infrastructures of authoritarianism.

The Brazilian feminist landscape has long been heterogeneous. Yet, as *Fronteiras Borradas* demonstrates, "since the early 2010s, when the campaigns against 'gender ideology' in education began, currents of essentialist feminism have found new vitality." The report traces this genealogy through three overlapping waves.

1. Early Essentialisms (1970s-2000s)

The first wave comprises "original radical feminists," heirs to second-wave separatism who grounded women's oppression in sexual dimorphism. These actors, while historically marginal in Brazil, maintained small academic circles that valorized "the female body as the site of resistance." Their discourse, though not explicitly anti-trans, was predisposed to biological determinism.

By the 2000s, the institutionalization of gender policies under the Workers' Party (PT) — such as the *Secretaria de Políticas para as Mulheres* — generated friction between feminist NGOs aligned with state feminism and autonomous radical currents. The latter accused the state of "bureaucratizing" feminism and diluting its revolutionary essence. This tension, as the report suggests, laid the groundwork for later alliances between radical feminists and anti-state libertarians.

2. The Anti-Gender Moment (2013-2018)

The second wave emerged amid the "moral panic around 'gender ideology'" that swept Latin America after 2013. Echoing Vatican and Evangelical campaigns, Brazilian conservative blocs denounced gender education as "indoctrination." Feminists who had previously critiqued patriarchy from a materialist standpoint began to adopt similar tropes, reframing gender theory as an elitist imposition.

As Corrêa et al. (2021) note, the anti-gender crusade served as "a metapolitical glue" linking neoliberals, nationalists, and religious fundamentalists. In Brazil, it coincided with mass mobilizations against President Dilma Rousseff (2015–16) and paved the way for

Bolsonaro's rise. During this period, the anti-gender lexicon expanded: "gender ideology" became synonymous with moral decay, sexual corruption, and foreign interference.

The *Fronteiras* report observes that by 2018, "these campaigns had transmuted into phantasmagorias haunting the election that brought Jair Bolsonaro to power." What had begun as ecclesial propaganda was now a state narrative. Bolsonaro's speeches, often citing "the defense of children," resonated with feminist maternalism — a convergence that would later crystallize into the movements of "mothers and survivors" central to contemporary trans-exclusionism.

3. Post-Bolsonaro Essentialism (2022-2025)

The third and most recent wave — the focus of *Fronteiras Borradas* — emerges paradoxically **after Bolsonaro's defeat**. The authors note a "frank intensification" of transphobic offensives since 2023, as right-wing actors sought new discursive vehicles for their agenda. Essentialist feminisms filled that void.

"Although most visible in the far-right ecosystem," the report writes, "these offensives also appear to the left of the political spectrum, where they manifest more subtly, usually subsumed under critiques of 'identity politics.'" This is a key insight: anti-gender feminism thrives on the diagonal. Leftist intellectuals decry "fragmentation of struggles," echoing far-right denunciations of identitarianism. As one political-party voice quoted in the report laments: "The right has five points — abortion, LGBT issues, communism… and they repeat them constantly. We, on the left, are fragmented."

This rhetoric mirrors what Fraser (2013) termed the "progressive neoliberalism" backlash — the accusation that feminism and diversity politics diverted energy from economic justice. In the Brazilian case, such critiques intertwine with the trans-exclusionary turn, producing what the report calls "echoes of anti-identitarian attacks within the left itself."

Narratives and Affects

Central to these convergences is the affective narrative of *threat*. Essentialist feminists claim to defend women from the encroachment of "men identifying as women,"

reproducing colonial and patriarchal tropes of invasion. As *Fronteiras Borradas* documents, when the Ministry of Women posted a message celebrating trans inclusion — "the ministry is 'for all women, because they are diverse and plural'" — it triggered "an avalanche of transfobic comments." The most common refrains were that "the Ministry had become the 'Ministry of Men'" and that trans inclusion constituted "the erasure of women."

Ahmed's (2021) notion of *feminist melancholy* helps elucidate this dynamic: the sense that feminism has "lost its object," that women as a political category are disappearing. Trans-exclusionary discourse converts this melancholy into ressentiment, channeled against trans women as symbols of feminism's supposed betrayal.

The report details how such narratives quickly moved from comment threads to organized campaigns: a *Change.org* petition demanding "a Ministry of Women Exclusive to Women" amassed over a thousand signatures within days. This escalation exemplifies what Ahmed calls "affective economies of repetition": the looping circulation of outrage that consolidates identity through opposition.

Digital Infrastructures of Hate

The *Fronteiras* team's social-media mapping reveals how these affects are algorithmically amplified. Influencers with tens of thousands of followers deploy ironic memes, "awards" like the *Oscar TERF* and *Tia Lydia Brasil* (mocking feminist and governmental figures), and viral videos that expose or "misgender" trans activists.

These tactics, the report argues, mirror those of the far right: "profiling of public enemies, deturpation of documents, and massive comment spam." The convergence is not merely stylistic but infrastructural. The same platforms — Instagram, Telegram, X (formerly Twitter) — host both Bolsonarist and trans-exclusionary networks, often sharing content verbatim.

This digitalization of reaction recalls Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) analysis of networked authoritarianism: the capacity of decentralized digital publics to mobilize moral panic while disavowing institutional responsibility. In the Brazilian case, the porous boundaries between feminist and far-right networks exemplify the "confusionist" vortex described by Corrêa: an ecology where ideological signifiers lose coherence but gain virality.

The Ministry of Women as Target

If the anti-gender wars in Brazil have a symbolic epicenter, it is the Ministry of Women (MM). Created in the early 2000s and revived by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2023, the Ministry became, within months, "a lightning rod for transphobic mobilization." The report situates this offensive within a sequence of coordinated digital campaigns that reveal "the amplification and diversification of the essentialist feminist field."

The initial spark was banal: a social-media post on 26 January 2023 showing Minister Aparecida Gonçalves receiving representatives of the *Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais* (ANTRA) and their annual *Dossiê Assassinatos* e *Violências contra Travestis e Transexuais Brasileiras*. The caption declared: "The ministry is 'of women' because they are diverse and plural."

Within hours, "an avalanche of transfobic comments" flooded the post. The report documents over 2,800 comments, the majority claiming that "woman = female human," accusing the Ministry of "erasing women," and branding it "the Ministry of Men." Others urged followers to demand, via Brazil's *Lei de Acesso à Informação*, the Ministry's "definition of woman."

These semantic assaults reframe bureaucracy as ideology: by forcing the Ministry to "define" womanhood, anti-gender actors sought to expose the absurdity of gender inclusivity. Within days, a *Change.org* petition titled "For a Ministry of Women Exclusive to Women" circulated, garnering more than 1,000 signatures.

The pattern mirrors transnational strategies identified by Paternotte and Kuhar (2017): manufacturing administrative crises to delegitimize gender policies. Here, the Ministry's attempt to recognize trans women's citizenship became proof of feminist betrayal.

The Paradox of Engagement: Cida Gonçalves Meets the Essentialists

In May 2023, Minister Gonçalves agreed to meet virtually with a group of self-identified "radical feminists" — including influencers who had participated in the January attacks. Officially, the meeting aimed to discuss "the underrepresentation of women and political violence." Yet the participating collective, *Raízes Feministas SC*, reframed it online: "We had the opportunity to tell the Minister what common women, radical feminists, and gender-critical women have suffered since gender self-identification policies have been implemented."

This reframing turned a gesture of dialogue into an act of legitimation. As the report notes, "among the attendees was a prominent digital influencer currently facing prosecution for transphobia." The episode encapsulates the dilemma faced by feminist institutions in democratic contexts: whether to engage anti-gender actors under the banner of pluralism, or to isolate them and risk accusations of censorship.

From a Butlerian perspective, this encounter dramatizes the tension between deliberative inclusion and the limits of recognition. When the political field itself is organized around the denial of certain subjects' legitimacy, "dialogue" risks reproducing that denial (Butler 2015).

The "Brasil Sem Misoginia" Campaign

A few months later, in October 2023, the Ministry launched *Brasil Sem Misoginia* — a broad campaign against gender-based violence involving government agencies, civil society, and cultural figures. While the initiative sought to foreground structural misogyny, trans-exclusionary groups seized upon ANTRA's participation as evidence of state "capture." One collective posted a meme reading: "Den of wolves joins the Ministry of Sheep." Hashtags included #MulherNãoÉSentimento ("woman is not a feeling") and #SexoNãoÉGênero ("sex is not gender").

Here again, language becomes weapon. By redefining misogyny as exclusively cisgender, essentialist feminists positioned trans women as patriarchal agents rather than

targets of sexism. The inversion illustrates what Ahmed (2017) calls “the willful misreading” that sustains reactionary affects: feminism itself becomes the perceived oppressor.

The "Tia Lydia" Awards and the Gamification of Hate

By January 2024, hostility toward the Ministry had become performative entertainment. A prominent trans-exclusionary Instagram account launched the *Oscar TERF 2023* and *Prêmio Tia Lydia* (named after the enforcer of female subjugation in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale). Categories included “Best TERF Page,” “Worst Page for Women’s Rights,” and “Tia Lydia Brasil 2023.”

Nominees for “Tia Lydia Brasil” included feminist intellectuals (Sônia Corrêa, Vera Iaconelli), leftist politicians (Fernanda Melchionna), and Minister Cida Gonçalves, accused of “refusing to define what a woman is.” Gonçalves “won” by popular vote.

The irony of adopting Atwood’s dystopian icon to mock pro-gender feminists underlines the cultural inversion at play. As the report observes, “these digital rituals of shaming transform feminist recognition into a spectacle of betrayal.” They replicate the far right’s meme politics: humor as dehumanization.

"Video-Denúncia" and the Weaponization of Surveillance

The campaign escalated on 29 April 2024, when an influencer with over 100,000 followers posted an unauthorized audio recording of a Ministry staffer stating, “a trans woman is a woman — that is not debatable.” The post demanded her dismissal and that of the Minister, tagging Lula, Janja da Silva, and major media outlets.

By June, the video had 32,000 likes and nearly 3,000 comments — an archetypal case of digital vigilantism. A week later, the same account released further recordings linking the Ministry to the postponed UN mission of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Reem Alsalem. The narrative of “state censorship of real women” thus fused domestic and international arenas.

CEDAW and the Internationalization of Hostility

When Brazil appeared before the CEDAW Committee in May 2024, essentialist collectives leveraged the global stage to accuse the delegation — led by Minister Gonçalves and including trans activist Symmy Larrat — of "erasing women." One Instagram post declared: "The Minister doesn't know what a woman is, and the Secretary only thinks she is one."

As *Fronteiras Borradas* notes, "these attacks coincided with a broader transnational offensive," with Brazilian activists liaising with European and North American anti-gender networks. The overlap of hashtags and talking points confirms the circulation of scripts: *women erased, trans tyranny, censorship of dissent*.

In this sense, Brazil's CEDAW appearance became both symptom and stage — a demonstration of how national gender politics now unfold through transnational feedback loops.

Reem Alsalem and the UN's Gender Crisis

Few episodes illustrate the global entanglement of anti-gender feminism better than the controversy surrounding Reem Alsalem, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG). Appointed in 2021, Alsalem gradually adopted positions aligning with "gender-critical" feminism — opposing self-identification laws and distinguishing "women at risk of male violence" from trans women.

By 2023, her views had made her a heroine to the anti-gender right. When the Brazilian government postponed her planned mission, she responded "using unorthodox procedures," convening an online meeting with 85–90 Brazilian activists, many from essentialist networks. She defended "careful approaches" to gender identity that preserve "spaces reserved for women," insisting her stance "does not incite hate against any woman."

However, as *Fronteiras Borradas* records, "the chat comments did not follow the same etiquette," overflowing with open transphobia and denunciations of gender theory. Alsalem later gave interviews to the ultraconservative *Gazeta do Povo*, claiming to have been "cancelled, attacked, and defamed." The paper subsequently ran pieces accusing Brazilian officials of "persecuting" her and "silencing women who question gender ideology."

Diagonal Alignments: From Geneva to Curitiba

The *Relatora affair* exemplifies what Corrêa terms "diagonal crossings." On one hand, Alsalem positions herself within the UN human-rights apparatus; on the other, she echoes talking points of far-right media. This ambivalence mirrors what Callison and Slobodian describe as *diagonalism*: "the collapse of left and right distinctions through shared epistemic distrust of institutions."

In Brazil, this distrust fuels alliances between self-proclaimed feminists and the religious or nationalist right. The report lists the Gazeta do Povo (aligned with the Catholic

Gandra Martins family) alongside global think tanks like the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), Heritage Foundation, and Atlas Network as key nodes of connection. Through these circuits, essentialist feminists gain access to resources and visibility that far exceed their numerical size.

Trump's Second Coming and the "Anti-Gender World Order"

The culmination of these transnational links arrived with the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in January 2025. Within days, he issued the Executive Order *Defending Women from the Extremism of Gender Ideology and Restoring Biological Truth in the Federal Governmen*t, proclaiming that "only two sexes exist."

As *Fronteiras Borradas* observes, "the language adopted in the title — 'defending women from the extremism of gender ideology' — comes directly from the lexicon of feminist essentialists and transphobes." A week later, Alsalem publicly praised the decree, asserting that it sent "a clear message that the rights of women and girls in female-only spaces matter."

Judith Butler (2025) has described this moment as "an inexhaustible outpouring of sadism," in which gender becomes the totem through which authoritarianism performs moral purification. Corrêa connects this to the Brazilian situation: "the new disorder inaugurated by Trump has a direct connection to the dynamics analyzed in this study."

In this sense, the Brazilian field is both participant and laboratory in a planetary reaction. The anti-gender feminism that emerged from Brazilian digital publics now finds affirmation in the world's most powerful state — completing the circuit from local confusion to global order.

From Networks to NGO: The Birth of Mátria

The most consequential development documented by *Fronteiras Borradas* is the formal registration of *Mátria – Associação de Mulheres, Mães e Trabalhadoras do Brasil* in October 2023. This NGO, the report states, "marked a new scale of visibility, capillarity, and impact of trans-exclusionary positions." Previously dispersed collectives now "orbit around this platform, even when not formally affiliated."

Mátria exemplifies what Fraser and Honneth (2003) call "the institutionalization of recognition": the transformation of affective grievance into bureaucratic form. Yet here recognition is inverted — directed not toward marginalized subjects but against them. Through petitions, *amicus curiae* filings, and letters to state agencies, Mátria has become the juridical arm of anti-gender feminism.

Strategic Litigation as Weapon

The report lists multiple instances of Mátria's legal activism:

- **Requests to the Prosecutor-General, CNJ, and Supreme Court** challenging official data on trans violence;
- **Petitions under Brazil's Access to Information Law** demanding that ministries define "woman";
- **Legal interventions** defending the Federal Medical Council's restrictive resolution on trans healthcare; and
- **A constitutional complaint (ADO 2.920/DF)** against the CNJ for publishing ANTRA's data on trans life expectancy.

In April 2025, Justice Dias Toffoli dismissed the complaint as "technically unfounded," declaring that the petition "constitutes a true unjustified attack on a vulnerable social group (transsexuals and travestis)." Yet the very act of litigation fulfills its purpose: to generate publicity and to frame trans rights as an elite imposition subject to judicial correction.

Academia and the Battle for Epistemic Authority

Mátria's activism extends beyond courts. As *Fronteiras Borradas* notes, the organization "encourages students and academics to apply for grants to study inequality based on sex (not gender)" and collects testimonies from women who claim to have been "persecuted for defending sex-based rights."

This epistemic offensive parallels the creation of "alternative think tanks" in the U.S. and U.K. that seek to displace gender studies with "biology-based feminism." It is an attempt, as Corrêa writes, "to erode normative and cultural consensus regarding gender identity rights." In the Foucauldian sense, it is a struggle over *regimes of truth*: who defines the real?

By transforming transphobia into a scholarly paradigm, Mátria blurs the distinction between activism and academia — another instance of diagonalism, where reaction adopts the idioms of critique.

The Feminist Front of the Culture War

What distinguishes Mátria from earlier conservative NGOs is its explicitly feminist self-presentation. It claims to fight "for the protection of women and children," positioning itself as the rational center between "the misogynistic right and the identitarian left." This rhetorical centrism allows it to collaborate with both Catholic conservatives and secular libertarians, mirroring the "diagonal crossings" that *Fronteiras Borradas* identifies.

As Corrêa observes, "these actors are diagonalist managers of confusion — a vigorous confusionism that ultimately benefits the ultraright." The NGO's name itself — *Mátria*, the feminine counterpart of "Patria" — encapsulates this paradox: maternal nationalism as feminism.

Diagonal Politics and the Feminist Confusion

The analytical category of *diagonalism* (Callison & Slobodian 2023) helps explain the uncanny resemblance between certain left-wing and right-wing discourses about gender in Brazil. *Fronteiras Borradas* observes that "currents of feminist essentialism operate across the spectrum—from left to ultraright—forming bridges between maternalist movements, liberal actors, and religious conservatives." This is not simply ideological eclecticism but a reorganization of the political field itself.

Callison and Slobodian describe diagonalism as the "collapse of the left–right distinction through shared opposition to institutional liberalism." In the Brazilian feminist context, the shared enemy is *gender*: the supposedly abstract academic category that, to both camps, epitomizes the alienation of elites from "ordinary women." Essentialist feminists portray gender theory as an imposition of "identitarian bureaucracy," while right-wing populists frame it as a "globalist" plot. The resonance is affective before it is logical: both feed on suspicion toward mediation and expertise.

This convergence reveals what Corrêa (2025) calls *confusionismo* vigoroso—a "vigorous confusionism" that performs pluralism while consolidating reaction. Feminist influencers who proclaim to be "neither right nor left" adopt the language of children's protection, bodily integrity, and maternal sovereignty. The same tropes appear in Bolsonarist propaganda. Their circulation illustrates what Ahmed (2021) calls "the elasticity of feminist affect": the ease with which care and fear slip into each other.

The Affective Infrastructure of Diagonalism

Affective economies sustain these crossings. The emotional grammar of anti-gender feminism is saturated with fear (of erasure), disgust (toward trans bodies), and nostalgia (for maternal innocence). These affects bind antagonistic subjects together, creating what the report describes as "a chorus of ordinary women" united against "ideology." Ahmed's The *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2017) provides the theoretical vocabulary for this dynamic:

emotions do not belong to individuals but circulate between them, forming "sticky" collectivities.

The essentialist insistence that *sex is real* operates as what Lauren Berlant (2011) would call a cruel optimism: a reassuring fantasy of stability that depends on the reproduction of violence. The fantasy of the immutable female body promises coherence in a world of precarity, yet it perpetuates insecurity for those whose bodies deviate from the norm. In this sense, anti-gender feminism functions as a coping mechanism for neoliberal anxiety—a way to locate social chaos in the figure of the trans intruder rather than in structural inequality.

Diagonal Media Ecologies

Digital infrastructures amplify these affective logics. The same Telegram channels that circulate Bolsonarist conspiracies about "communist vaccines" also distribute memes mocking "gender ideology." *Fronteiras Borradas* shows that anti-gender influencers appear as guests on podcasts of libertarian entrepreneurs, Catholic priests, and left-leaning "anti-identitarian" YouTubers. The network map produced by the study visualizes dense connections between hashtags #IdeologiaDeGenero, #MulherNaoESentimento, and #MãesContraALAP. In this diagonal media ecology, ideological coherence matters less than engagement metrics.

The *performative contradiction* of this ecosystem, to use Habermas's term, is that anti-gender actors accuse feminists of censorship while weaponizing cancellation against trans activists. "Video-denúncias," fake awards, and online petitions simulate participatory democracy even as they discipline dissent. The communicative form of social justice—hashtags, transparency demands, petitions—is repurposed for reaction. As Tufekci (2017) noted of networked movements, digital affordances reward outrage regardless of orientation; anti-gender feminism simply exploits that affordance.

Epistemic Diagonalism

Diagonalism also operates epistemically. Essentialist feminists borrow from radical-left critiques of neoliberal academia to attack gender studies. They denounce "the industry

of identity" and the "capture of research funds," presenting themselves as defenders of empirical science against ideology. Yet their notion of empiricism rests on biological essentialism and moral panic. This mimicry of critique recalls Gayatri Spivak's (1999) warning about *strategic essentialism*: what was once a provisional tactic of the oppressed becomes a weapon of reaction.

The outcome is epistemic relativism masquerading as realism. When Mátria files lawsuits claiming that trans-violence statistics are "false because not official," it performs what Latour (2004) calls the *politics of reference*: shifting from critique of authority to production of counter-facts. Diagonalism thrives on this epistemic fog, where every truth claim is suspect and every suspicion politically useful.

The Return of Violence

The most immediate effect of essentialist feminism is material violence. Brazil remains, as the report reminds us, "the world champion in the murder of trans people." The amplification of transphobic rhetoric by actors claiming feminist legitimacy intensifies vulnerability. When public officials or influencers insist that "trans women are men," they invite harassment, doxxing, and physical attacks. The *Fronteiras Borradas* authors note that "the escalation of online hate has been accompanied by the multiplication of cases of political violence against trans legislators, particularly Erika Hilton and Duda Salabert."

Butler's *Frames of War* (2009) offers the conceptual lens: by questioning whether trans women count as women, anti-gender feminism withdraws them from the frame of grievability. To be unrecognizable as a woman is to be unworthy of mourning. The slogan "defend women" thus conceals a necropolitical logic (Mbembe 2003): defining which bodies may die.

Institutional Paralysis and the Feminist Divide

At a second level, the diffusion of essentialist discourse has fragmented feminist institutions. As one activist interviewed in the report admits: "We have responded little, perhaps not at all. What we do is use trans-inclusive language and support trans organizations, but no one disputes the essentialists head-on." Another adds: "Our strategy of responding is ineffective; we need a political cordon of isolation." The sense of paralysis is palpable.

The anti-gender offensive thus achieves its goal even without numerical dominance: it *occupies the conversation*. Feminists expend energy debating definition rather than policy. The resulting fatigue mirrors what Sara Ahmed (2017) calls "feminist killjoy fatigue"—the exhaustion produced when one must continually justify one's own inclusion. The absence of a coherent counter-narrative allows diagonal actors to present themselves as the voice of common sense.

The De-Democratization of the Feminist Public Sphere

Fronteiras Borradas situates this paralysis within a broader "process of des-democratização." During Bolsonaro's presidency, anti-gender ideology became part of state grammar; after his defeat, it persisted as a social common sense. The transition from authoritarian government to democratic restoration did not dislodge the anti-gender imaginary—it redistributed it. Essentialist feminism occupies the space vacated by the state, translating authoritarian resentment into civil-society activism.

Nancy Fraser's (2022) notion of "progressive reaction" is useful here: movements that adopt emancipatory language to oppose emancipation. By invoking women's rights, anti-gender feminists convert patriarchal protectionism into feminist form. This dynamic fractures the feminist public sphere, forcing inclusive movements to choose between silence (to avoid feeding polarization) and confrontation (which risks further fragmentation). Both options strengthen the confusionist vortex.

Transnational Reverberations

The diagonal logic extends beyond borders. Brazilian essentialists collaborate with global networks such as Women's Declaration International (WDI) and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), sharing petitions and attending conferences sponsored by the Heritage Foundation. These interactions produce what *Fronteiras Borradas* calls "zones of dense transnational connection." At the 2025 Pan-African Conference for the Family in Nairobi—organized by Family Watch International and the Political Network for Values—Brazilian actors appeared alongside European and U.S. far-right figures. The anti-gender crusade has become, quite literally, a foreign policy.

This transnationalization transforms gender into a global litmus test for sovereignty. When Reem Alsalem praised Trump's executive order, she effectively endorsed the replacement of international human-rights standards with national "biological truth." For Corrêa and her co-authors, this marks the advent of a *new anti-gender world order*, one that connects Washington, Warsaw, and Brasília through shared mythologies of protection.

Knowledge, Ignorance, and the Reproduction of Misunderstanding

The durability of anti-gender politics depends on what *Fronteiras Borradas* calls "the inert conservatism of gender." Across the ideological spectrum, ignorance about gender theory persists—even among self-identified feminists. The authors urge "urgent investments in the production and translation of critical knowledge." Without such translation, gender remains, for many, a "phantasmagoria," easily inflated into a menace.

This epistemic gap echoes Eve Sedgwick's (1990) insight that ignorance is not the absence of knowledge but its political organization. The anti-gender movement cultivates ignorance as identity: to reject gender theory is to perform authenticity. Overcoming this requires not only pedagogical but affective work—what Ahmed calls "creating the feeling of belonging for trans people." *Fronteiras Borradas* ends on precisely this note, urging feminists "to breathe deeply and understand better what is happening in order to respond effectively."

Feminism at the Edge of the World

The trajectory traced in *Fronteiras Borradas* — from Bolsonaro's moral panic to Trump's "biological truth" order—reveals the planetary scale of the gender backlash. Brazil exemplifies how anti-gender politics mutate: from clerical campaigns against education, to digital populism, to feminist articulation, and finally to juridical institutionalization. Each mutation deepens the paradox that Corrêa names in her final paragraph: "these dynamics should not be reduced to mere intra-feminist conflicts, nor to marginal situations affecting only trans people; they belong to the dark landscape of de-democratization and neo-fascism."

In this landscape, anti-gender feminism functions as both *symptom* and agent of democratic crisis. It thrives on disinformation, epistemic distrust, and the commodification of outrage—features common to contemporary authoritarianism. Yet it does so in the name of feminism, proving that reaction no longer needs to reject emancipation; it can inhabit it.

Reclaiming the Meaning of Gender

If the problem is epistemic and affective, so must be the response. Feminist theory, often accused of abstraction, must re-enter the public sphere as translation. Butler (2022) reminds us that "gender is not what one is but what one does with the norms that govern one's existence." To defend gender is to defend the capacity to question normativity itself. The challenge, then, is to reconnect this critical grammar with the everyday lexicon of rights and belonging.

Corrêa's call is pragmatic: "It is urgent that inclusive feminisms and other democratic actors expand their knowledge about essentialist currents — their trajectories, strategies, and effects." Such expansion requires alliances across disciplines and movements, investments in feminist journalism, and institutional courage to confront hate disguised as debate.

Toward a Politics of Clarity

What *Fronteiras Borradas* ultimately demands is clarity—not in the sense of definitional closure ("what is a woman?") but of analytic discernment. To unblur the borders is to recognize that confusion is a strategy. The feminist task is therefore double: to protect trans lives and to defend the epistemic conditions of democracy. This is not a matter of purity but of survival.

Ahmed (2017) writes that "to be a feminist is to cause a problem." In times when feminism itself becomes the problem for both right and left, the task is to remain troublesome—to insist on complexity, solidarity, and the unfinished work of gender. The Brazilian case teaches that the struggle over gender is never only about identity; it is about the meaning of politics itself.

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