‘Missing the point’: A conversation with Sonia Corrêa about the emergence and complexities of anti-gender politics at the intersections of human rights and health

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ABSTRACT
Reproductive and sexual health policies have long mobilised religious and political forces. In this interview conducted in September of 2021, Brazilian feminist activist and researcher Sonia Corrêa guides us through a genealogy of anti-gender politics showing how they have been grounded in carefully crafted discourses about rights and gender that hinge on interpretations of the ‘original’ intent as ascribed in ‘founding’ documents such as the bible. In her overview of the transnational connections and ramifications of anti-gender politics, Corrêa provides a critical analysis of their geopolitical connections and the disastrous effects they’ve had on sexual, reproductive and social rights. In highlighting the problems with naming anti-gender politics as ‘anti-rights’ and dismissing the strength and complexity of the forces behind them, Corrêa alerts us to the depth of their roots and urgent need for a shift in strategy to fight them.

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Introduction

In Latin America, fights against ‘gender ideology’ have taken centre stage in political and social debates surrounding gender, sexuality and human rights over the past decade. In his influential book on the topic, ‘Gender Ideology’, Jorge Scala (2010) defines it as a ‘political-discursive instrument’ that seeks to ‘destroy human beings in their most intimate spheres, and as such, destroy all of society’ (2010, p. 7). Dramatic in its language and far in its reach, the war against ‘gender ideology’ has mobilised the far-right and religious groups especially in Latin America and Europe against reproductive and sexual rights for decades (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Miskolci & Campana, 2017). While the term is less familiar in the United States context, the political and ideological basis on which it is built have important connections to the June 2022 US Supreme Court decision, Dobbs v. Jackson, to overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling that guaranteed the right to abortion for women in the United States. As Sonia Corrêa explores in this interview, much like the Dobbs v. Jackson majority opinion, anti-gender politics have been grounded in carefully crafted discourses about rights and gender that hinge on ideas of ‘original’ intent and meaning as ascribed in ‘founding’ documents from the Constitution to the bible.

Corrêa is a feminist activist and researcher from and based in Brazil who since 2002 has co-chaired Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW), an international policy forum analysing global trends in
sexuality-related policies and projects. In this interview conducted in September 2021 by Global Public Health Associate Editor Laura Murray for the journal’s special issue on Human Rights and Global Health, Corrêa shares her perspective as someone who has actively participated in international spaces of negotiation of sexual and reproductive health policies for over four decades and written extensively about reproductive and sexual rights (Correa et al., 1994; Correa & Petchesky, 2007; Corrêa, 1997, 2009, 2018, 2020; Corrêa et al., 2008). In her overview of the transnational connections and ramifications of anti-gender politics, she provides a critical analysis of their geopolitical connections and the disastrous effects they’ve had on sexual, reproductive and social rights. In highlighting the problems with naming anti-gender politics as ‘anti-rights’ and dismissing the force and complexity of the forces behind them, Corrêa alerts us to the depth of their roots and urgent need for a shift in strategy to fight them.

Laura Murray (LM): How and when did ‘anti-gender politics’ appear within human rights debates?

Sonia Corrêa (SC): There are discrepancies in the literature with respect to the chronology of eruption of anti-gender politics. What tends to predominate is the version that gender was attacked in Beijing at the IV World Conference on Women in 1995. Some observers, however, locate it at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and there are those who identify the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. This blurring of dates and facts is understandable because these conferences were held as a sequence of debates in the course of which novel policy definitions with respect to reproduction, gender and sexuality were discussed, and at each new stage, conservative reactions exploded.

Indeed, it is not easy to retrace these meanders without having been there, and my account of the history is based on an analysis developed by Girard (2007) and also on my personal memories. I have closely followed and participated in several of the debates in which anti-gender politics gradually took form including the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development (1992), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and the ICPD and Fourth WCW +5 and +10 Reviews (1999, 2000, 2004 and 2005).

In 1992, at the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development, neither gender, nor sexuality, nor the right to abortion was part of the official negotiation agenda. The UNCED Document included the classic definition of equality between the sexes, inherited from the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The controversies at the time revolved around notions of family planning and reproductive health, this term having entered the conversation between UN member states through the hands of the WHO shortly before UNCED. This agenda triggered a series of attacks and political manoeuvres on the part of Holy See delegates, who deliberately reactivated the long-standing North–South controversy around population control policies, feeding an opposition between poverty and the right to development, on the one hand, and fertility control on the other.

It was on the path towards ICPD 1994 that, for the first time, the term gender would be fully placed in an intergovernmental document. But, we know there was much more: the concepts of reproductive health and reproductive rights were legitimised, abortion was recognised as a serious public health problem, universal sexuality education policies were recommended, and many forms of families were fully affirmed. However, at no point in the arduous clashes surrounding these contents was the term gender the object of controversy. And although demands for inclusion of themes like non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and comments about adolescent sexuality and sexual rights were not included, the ICPD left a feeling that there was too much sex in the final document in its wake.

Things first really erupted in the preparatory meetings for Beijing. I attended the preparatory meetings in New York in 1995 and as soon as I arrived, feminist colleagues attending the session told me that gender was in brackets: that is, it was not considered to have a consensual definition.
According to Girard (2007), as soon as the terminology of sexual rights and orientation was incorporated into the text under negotiation, the Holy See, supported by Sudan, Malta and Honduras, requested that gender be put in square brackets and demanded the Secretariat provide a precise definition of its content. The Holy See affirmed that according to its view ‘gender is grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female’ and requested to exclude ‘dubious interpretations based on world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes’.

Parallel to this, gender was virulently attacked in the spaces in which civil society organisations were operating and a pamphlet ‘against gender’ that adulterated a classic article by Anne Fausto Sterling on intersexuality (Fausto-Sterling, 1993) was also distributed by a US Catholic right-wing organisation. But in the negotiation process itself, the Vatican and its allies did not openly attack gender as they did in relation to other matters.

This retreat, however, would be temporary. In 1999 and 2000, during the Cairo and Beijing Plus Five Review, gender would be attacked head-on from the beginning to the end of the negotiations. Whenever the term arose in the debates, its meaning was interrogated and the most diverse delegations – Islamic and non-Islamic – requested its elimination arguing that the term was not about women’s rights but rather a justification of homosexuality, pedophilia and other ‘sexual perversions’.

A new alliance had emerged in the UN arena that was mobilised internally by G77 Holy See allies with Islamic countries with significant political weight that we feminists have named as the ‘Unholy Alliance’. It was extremely well organised and had the flagrant political and financial support of the US religious rights. Yet despite this support and funding, the Holy See and its allies were once again defeated, including with regard to the term gender that is extensively used in the final documents produced in both reviews.

When the Plus Five negotiations took place, two founding texts of the crusade against gender had already been published – Cardinal Ratzinger’s book Salt of the Earth (Ratzinger 1997) and the seminal Gender Agenda, written by Dale O’Leary, also published in 1997 (O’Leary 2007). Yet in my view, this second round of defeats in 1999 and 2000 was what most leveraged the theological investments against gender that would take shape in subsequent years.

LM: As we were preparing for this interview, you emphasised that the global north/global south dynamic is inadequate to talk about this issue. Why?

SC: I think that it is very important to acknowledge that anti-gender politics, as it presents itself today, is a transnational phenomenon. It is transnational in its origin. I will address that dimension later on [in the interview], but for the time being, the first step is to recall that ‘gender ideology’, as a device, or straw man as we have been calling it, was first crafted in the nineties by the Vatican and its surroundings, meaning conservative, ultra-Catholic, intellectuals gathered around the Vatican and in European and American Catholic universities. The Vatican is an institution that is transnational by nature; it is the oldest transnational institution of the world. So, gender ideology is transnational by origin and it also manifests differently with different temporalities in different places.

These attacks on gender erupted concurrently in Europe and Latin America around 2012 and 2013. There are a series of coincidences that I have written about (Correa, 2020), but just to give a few examples: the Manif pour Tous – a national rally against same-sex marriage bill in Paris, the attack on same-sex marriage in Croatia, the creation of CitizenGo, a digital arm of the ultra-Catholic far-right movement HazteOir in Spain. That same year, an attack on a resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity took place at the General Assembly of the Organization of American States in Guatemala. Then in Paraguay and Brazil gender education was viciously attacked. Finally, the ex-president, Rafael Correa of Ecuador delivered a full sermon against gender theory in his weekly TV programme, ‘Sabatinas’; in other words, the mobilisation against gender was
sanctioned by a prominent Left wing figure in Latin America, which tells us quite a bit about the complexity of anti-gender politics today.

From then on, these political mobilisations continued and gained leverage. There was a clear intensification during 2017 when the anti-gender orange bus, created by HazteOir and CitizenGo in Spain, travelled across the Americas to mobilise anti-gender campaigns first in Mexico, then passed through Colombia, arriving in Chile right before the launching of the first presidential campaign of the ultra-right candidate Jose Antonio Kast. Soon after, the phantasmagoria of ‘gender ideology’ played a key role in the 2018 elections in Costa Rica and later in Brazil, and the same happened in 2019 in Uruguay. The Brazilian case is the most dramatic because after the electoral cyclone that elected the ultra-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, anti-gender politics were transported to high-level state policies, in particular in the human rights, education and foreign affairs arenas.

In addition, ‘gender ideology’ is propagated in association with another accusatory category ‘cultural Marxism’, or sometimes simply Marxism, Communism or, in some countries, Castro-chavismo or ‘Venezulization’. The same link with Communism is frequent in Eastern European societies that have experienced the tragedies of socialist authoritarianism and where it is quite easy to mobilise anti-Marxist sentiments. It is not as easy to understand how anti-Communist panic is mobilised in Latin America. This makes sense in Colombia because of the long conflict with the Farc, but not anywhere else. But the fact that it works shows that very negative perceptions of Communists still lurk and are hidden in deep layers of the region’s social imaginary.

Additionally, we also have to take into account the peculiarity of the U.S. that, on the one hand has been an exporter of these discourses, but on the other, a country where anti-gender politics did not manifest until much later. Many of the actors involved in the global propagation of ‘gender ideology’ are U.S. based, such as religious right networks like the Alliance Defending Freedom and Focus on the Family, but also ultraliberal conservative think tanks, such as the Atlas network. Yet, the attack on gender has not taken the typical form it assumed in Europe or Latin America until very recently. Right now, there is an anti-gender campaign under way in Puerto Rico that uses the same repertoire, but this is very new. Before that, in the first year of the Trump administration, anti-gender politics primarily took the form of attacks against trans rights. Initially led by the federal administration, after Trump’s defeat in 2020, this wave spread to states governed by Republicans unleashing crusades against trans-friendly educational policies, the participation of trans-women in sports and the access of trans-kids to supportive health care. But the overall features of attacks on gender do not have the exact pattern as here in Latin America or in European countries.

Shifting our focus to sub-Saharan Africa, there are also distinctions to be underlined. There is long history of anti-LGBT rights in the continent that preceded the eruption of anti-gender politics in Europe and Latin America, as illustrated by laws adopted in Nigeria and Uganda in the mid-2000s. But in the last few years, anti-gender campaigns attacking comprehensive sexuality education have been propelled across the region and some of the main global actors in operation elsewhere are also at work there, such as US-based religious rights networks and the Spanish CitizenGo. On the other hand, anti-gender campaigns do not seem to have taken form in Asia and the Pacific, in the same manner as they manifest elsewhere even though anti-feminist and anti-LGBTII+ rights forces exist everywhere.

That said, Australia is an important hub of production and dissemination of conservative anti-gender discourses. It is also a main source of anti-gender feminist streams, which constitute the main novelty of the anti-gender politics landscape. One main author of this stream is Sheila Jeffreys, who is better known in Latin America and in particular Brazil for her anti-prostitution positions. It is important to expand on this a bit more.

Anti-gender or trans-exclusionary feminist currents are not new. Their origin can be retraced back to the 1970s and 1980s (Rubin & Butler, 1994). Their voices, however, were relatively marginal until very recently. They began gaining leverage at around the same time that anti-gender mobilising erupted in the early 2010s. And then, in 2020, the launch of the Declaration on Women’s Sex-based Rights and its associated campaign contributed to an eruption of feminist configurations...
against gender and trans rights in various countries. These frays are now particularly vicious in the United Kingdom and Spain but also in a few Latin American countries (in particular in Mexico). Their discourse is anti-patriarchal and they position themselves in the progressive camp. But their critique of gender converges with the essentialist views of conservatives on sexual difference as a biological given. And, perhaps more significantly, their wider visibility and impact is a by-product of the anti-gender climate incited by ultra-conservative religious voices and the ultra-right. In the United Kingdom, United States, Spain and Brazil, some of these groups are organically linked with the extreme right side of the political spectrum. A new accusatory category has even emerged from this context: ‘transgender ideology’.

Lastly, anti-gender mobilising may sound like bottom-up politics. But, as I have described, there are many forces at work in the various battlefields. They are transnational in origin, although anti-gender formations are also grounded locally, particularly amongst conservative religious communities. They also, and this is not rare, assume vernacular expressions. But in all cases, they are plugged into transnational webs, a whole repertoire of discourses, arguments, images and policy proposals that circulate through these channels and are replicated across countries. This circulation has vastly accelerated with the digitalisation of politics.

Just to give you a few examples: the whole argument about girls using pink and boys using blue that has been extensively deployed by the Brazilian pastor and current Minister of Human rights, Damares Alves, was invented by the Manif pour Tous in France. More recently, we have seen the geometric spread of law provisions against gender-neutral language. This wave also began in France, in late 2020 and now has multiplied through dozens of similar proposals in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina.

**LM: What actors and forces (globally and locally) do you see as most benefitting from these attacks on ‘gender ideology’?**

SC: I don’t think that the term ‘benefitting’ is a good descriptor. This question must be in other terms because anti-gender politics should be read as a rhizomatic political economy. There has been a tendency to concentrate attention on neo-conservative religious forces, either ultra-Catholics or a large variety of fundamentalist evangelical forces. This is inevitable because the Vatican and its allies have indeed cradled the ‘gender ideology’ strawmen. But it is wrong to say that they are the ones benefitting from anti-gender waves because they are triggered by a complicated plethora of actors that potentially benefit from their political effects, in different ways.

In Latin America and the United States, anti-gender formations are based on older religious networks of opposition to abortion rights. And everywhere their core is religious, either ultra-Catholic in Europe, or a coalition of Catholics and evangelical fundamentalists. But they also involve a very heterogeneous range of secular (or apparently secular) actors, whose compositions change according to context. In Latin America, the list includes career politicians, members of professional corporations (especially lawyers and doctors), journalists, polemists, businessmen, neoliberal and right-wing libertarian activists, and also some openly fascist groups. In some countries, the military is involved, and in others, the Jewish right. And, as I have mentioned, voices from the ‘left’ – such anti-gender feminists – are propelling anti-gender discourses, a tendency that, quite regrettably, seems to be on the rise.

This is why I have been describing anti-gender formations as hydras, a creature with many movable heads that go in very different directions, apparently operating independently from each other and quite often feeding in contradictory ideological sources. Sometimes one head is bigger, the other is screaming more than the other, and other heads are silent or even sleeping. Whether they are competing for attention or temporarily dormant, they are part of the same animal that, as whole, moves in the same direction and is highly adaptable to context and circumstance. These features make it very difficult for observers and analysts to grasp what the animal is.
Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the hydra has a very long and complex genealogy. As I said in the beginning of the interview, the ‘Vatican gender problem’ erupted a quarter of century ago in 1995, in the passage from ICPD, or the Cairo Conference to the IV World Conference of Women in Beijing. But anti-gender politics are just one tentacle, so to speak, of a much larger manifestation of revitalised ultra-conservative politics, whose origin can be tracked to the 1970s, when the religious conservative and secular right camps started to be repaginated. In the religious world, this was seen for example in the conservative restoration of Catholicism that left the reforms made by the 1960s Vatican II Council behind, and quickly spread transnationally.

At the same time, in the United States, leaders from the Republican party promoted a confluence between more orthodox Evangelical churches and ultra-Catholic sectors surrounding the Moral Majority movement, actions that served to restore credibility in the party, which had eroded due to Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. To achieve this, they used the ‘excessive secularisation and moral degradation of American society’ as targets, painting a terrifying picture of pacifism, feminism, and the cultural and sexual revolutions and anti-racist fights of the 1960s. From this point on, these forces invested more and more systematically in the promotion of ‘cultural conservatism’. And in Europe, the Research and Study Group for European Civilization (GRECE) also elaborated critiques with respect to the ‘rebellion of ’1968’ as a symptom of the decay of Occidental culture. These ideas were replicated in the following decades, and in the United Kingdom, the conservative revolution of Margaret Thatcher created an openly favourable environment to Right thinking.

It is important to say, however, that since then, actors from other parts of the world were in dialogue with the ‘conservative revolution’ that was just beginning. The Brazilian Society in Defense of the Family, Tradition and Property (TFP – acronym in Portuguese), led by Plinio Correia de Oliveira is an example of this. And the term to be used is ‘revolution’ because these forces then abandoned a position of static defence of the established order to engage in an open fight for cultural hegemony. In the work of European scholars, this shift is described as a Gramscian turn of the Right.

Laura: How have these anti-gender politics developed, manifested and intensified in the field of human rights, specifically?

SC: The response to this question is very complex and it requires us to involve multiple historical layers, beginning with the antecedents of the human rights frames legitimised in the eighteenth-century liberal revolutions. I am not exactly a specialist on the matter, but we should keep in mind that some premises of eighteenth-century human rights frames, in both their French and American versions – which inspired the revitalisation of human rights in the 1940s – derived from previous Christian conceptions of rights, either coming from Catholic natural law or from protestant theological assumptions about human freedom.

Some authors, for example, connect Rousseau’s political theory to Catholic thinkers of the Renaissance and, in the North American tradition, these religious elements can be easily tracked in, for example, Thomas Payne’s writings. Even so, conservatives in general and the Catholic Church, in particular, adamantly abhorred the political conception emanating from the eighteenth-century revolutions, including in relation to rights. This is quite flagrant in Edmund Burke who viewed the French revolution as a rebellion against human nature. But also can be found in two key Vatican texts published in 1864: the encyclical letters Quanta Cura and Syllabus Errorum issued by Pope Pius IX (Arguedes Ramirez, 2020). A century later, in Brazil, the above-mentioned founder of TFP wrote that, since the fifteenth century, Catholicism had been viciously threatened by the same ongoing revolution, which, in his reading, had begun with the Luther rebellion against Rome which later would result in the French and Russian revolutions.

However, at that point in time, the Vatican’s view on human rights was already in flux. Since the end of the II World War, as we know, the tragedy of Nazi Fascism propelled a vigorous revival of
human rights that led to the adoption of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), the conventions that followed and the very international and regional human rights systems that exist until today. Quite early, the Church began engaging with this development, but it did it on its own terms.

For example, the same year when the UDHR was approved by the UN, the Vatican was present as an observer at the negotiations of the Charter of Organization of the American States, in Bogotá. It pressured for language on the right to life since conception to be included in the text. Interestingly enough, a number of countries – including the US, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, amongst others – blocked this inclusion arguing that it would jeopardise existing national legislation permitting abortion in some cases.

Despite losing this battle, the Holy See continued fighting for the definition and managed to get it included in the text of the 1969 Interamerican Convention on Human Rights, known and the San Jose Pact. Since after the Cairo and Beijing conferences, across the Americas, the San Jose definition has been systematically brandished by conservatives against abortion rights, even when there is solid jurisprudence establishing that this right cannot be interpreted in absolute terms. Also in the fifties and sixties, the Catholic Church was invited by Western powers to operate as their intermediary in the harsh process of decolonisation. This is how the Holy See gained its Permanent Observer Status at the UN, which also provided the Vatican with another privileged platform to engage with human rights politics.

Concurrently, the Holy See, in the context of the Vatican II reform, began seriously dialoguing with contemporary human rights frames, in what, at the time, could be eventually deemed as a progressive perspective. This investment continued after the conservative restoration that followed the election of John Paul II in 1979 but its direction has since entirely shifted. This intellectual work has gone towards developing, refining and updating natural law, which, since Aquinas in the thirteenth century, has been guiding Catholic understanding of law and rights.

Shifting towards the Evangelical camp, I do not know much about the long history of its connections with human rights thinking beyond what I have already mentioned. But, quite clearly, in the U.S., since the conservative revolution began in the 1970s, the fundamentalist Evangelical camp has been aligned with investments made to restore a peculiarly North American understanding of rights and human rights. These investments resulted in what is known today as the Orig- inalist doctrine of rights, conceptualised by scholars from distinct intellectual streams, ranging from well-known traditionalist Catholics to the Federalist Society.

A recent policy outcome of this restoration effort is illustrated by the document issued, in July 2020, by the now extinct Commission on Unalienable Rights created by the Trump administration. Significantly, the Commission was coordinated by Mary Anne Case, the well-known Harvard conservative Catholic Scholar, who also headed the Vatican delegation in the 1995 Beijing Conference and later became the US ambassador to the Vatican during the Bush administration. The Commission’s document continues to circulate, in various languages, even though the Commission itself does not exist anymore.

Lastly, to better understand the substantive shifts being pushed by conservatives in relation to human rights, another intellectual stream must also be taken into account: the writings of early neoliberal thinkers. Although their economic conceptual frame is radically adverse to state protection and robust market regulations, it is not against rights or anti-rights. Rather it carries with it the classical liberal understanding of right to property and citizenship rights as individual equality under the law. This is made transparent in the argument found in a piece of writing of Ludwig von Mises on feminism where he affirms that feminism legitimately pertains to liberal politics when it advocates for equal treatment of women under the law, but – resonating Burke’s vision about the French revolution – it becomes a Marxist monstrosity when it calls for the transformation of ‘human nature’. To recapture Wendy Brown’s analysis in her influential article, ‘American Nightmare’ (Brown 2006), neoliberal rationality narrows down the understanding of rights to prerogatives
concerning property, voting and the rights of consumers, erasing the collective dimensions and potential expansiveness of human rights.

It is crucial to understand that, in the course of the last 40 years or so, a robust network of academic institutions has been devoted reshaping human rights frames in conservative terms. This list includes the mentioned Vatican commissions, but also numerous Catholic universities such as Notre Dame in the U.S., the Flemish branch of Louvain in Belgium, the University of Navarra, this latter being a key hub in the vast web of Opus Dei funded academic institutions spread across Latin America. Another institution to be mentioned is the Collegium Intermarium, recently created in Poland by Ordo Iuris, a chapter of European TFP.

U.S. conservative think tanks and litigation-oriented institutions must also be taken into account, such as, in the Heritage Foundation, the Federalist Society, the Alliance Defending Freedom or across the Atlantic, the European Centre for Law and Justice. The same applies to less visible neoliberal academic institutions, research centres and advocacy platforms spread across the Americas such as the Atlas network, the University Francisco Marroquin in Guatemala and the Millennium Institute in Brazil. Last but not least, also across the Americas, conservative Protestant and Evangelical universities have a large infrastructure that also provides legal training. This brief mapping is just the tip of the iceberg of a powerful transnational infrastructure that, for quite a long time, has been producing and disseminating conservative legal knowledge and providing conceptual and legal training aimed at contesting human rights epistemologies and sedimenting their own vision of what these rights should be.

The impact of this conservative epistemic politics is wide and deep. It goes beyond the detrimental effects of anti-gender politics on specific domains of rights related to gender and sexuality – such as gender and sexuality education, same-sex marriage, gender identity, reproductive health and abortion. Anti-gender crusades have also been contributing to further open the space for the systematic contestations of the contemporary vision of constitutions and human rights as ‘living normative frames’, an epistemology that enabled the continuous expansion of rights on the basis of the foundational principles of equality and freedom. Anti-gender politics in its multiple manifestations has attacked this expansion as an ‘unjustifiable creation of new rights’.

These movements entail a robust project of restoration cum adjournment of old conceptions of rights that, while using human rights language, go openly against the expansiveness that characterised human rights works since the 1940s. They are intrinsically anti-democratic, but cannot be described as anti-rights per se. It is important to emphasize this because in the current environment they are increasingly portrayed as ‘anti-rights forces’.

Political forces now named anti-rights, either religious or secular, definitely oppose certain rights, ‘our rights’ so to speak. But it is not appropriate to portray them as anti-rights. They have a different conception of rights, and while it is a catchy term and useful for mobilising, calling them as such is missing the point because it does not provide a good descriptor – or a sharp tool for analysing what these forces are and what they do. In my view, what we are witnessing is the continuation of a longstanding war against the legitimacy of human rights, now waged in entirely novel terms. While in the past conservatives abhorred human rights, now they are disputing their meanings.

**Laura: Do you have a final reflection to share with us?**

In our field of work, we always look at the links between health and human rights with a double lens. One of them focuses on the structural dimensions that fundamentally refer to economic and social rights – such as the right to health and the right to education – and the other on the specific domains in which health intersects with gender, sexuality and reproduction. The literature tends to locate the sedimentation of this double lens in the late 1980s and early 2000s when the work led by Jonathan Mann on HIV/AIDS at the World Health Organization converged with feminist critique of population policies that inspired the concepts of reproductive health and rights.
This reading is not wrong, but I would like to go back in time to revisit a rather obscure UN event that took place in 1968. This was when the world was burning with protests against the Vietnam War and the sexual revolution was blooming in the U.S. and Europe, with ramifications in Latin America and other places. This event was the first International Conference on Human Rights that was held, quite significantly, in Teheran, in Iran under the autocratic Reza Palehvi regime, a decade before the Islamic revolution.

The conference ended in a deadlock because, in the highly polarised conditions of the Cold War Era, UN member states could not reach a consensus on the meaning and directions of human rights. Western countries and their allies prioritised civil and political rights, while the socialist block pushed for social and economic rights. Despite this main political failure, the final Teheran document included a paragraph defining, for the first time in an intergovernmental negotiated document, that individuals and couples have the right to decide freely about their fertility.

I am revisiting Teheran because it provides a longer view on how the intersectional politics of human rights, health, gender and sexuality began taking form and matured in UN arenas long before the 1990s. The event is important because the Teheran deadlock had to wait until the end of the Cold War to finally be diluted. In 1993, states gathered in the Vienna International Conference on Human Rights agreed, after very difficult negotiations, that human rights are integral and indivisible, which means that civil and political rights cannot be fully exercised when and where social and economic rights are not respected, and vice versa. This was made possible by the geopolitical conditions of the time but also because since 1968 substantive research and intellectual work has been done to legitimise the principle of indivisibility, a critical definition to more consistently ground the understanding that the human rights normative frame can be expanded on the basis on equality and freedom.

Secondly, the language adopted in Teheran on the right of individuals to make informed and free decisions about fertility, which also mean freely deciding about sexuality, was not trivial. It recapitulated longstanding nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminist claims, it reflected the very spirit of 1968; it contested the instrumentality of fertility control policies that prevailed at the time. It preceded by seven years the first Women’s Conference of 1975 in Mexico and is to be read as the starting point of the long and winding road that took us the 1990s UN agreements on the articulation between health and human rights but also on women’s rights as human rights, gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights. The other long journey of intellectual investment and political mobilisation that preceded these breakthroughs was deeply influenced by work done in response to eruption of the HIV epidemics in the 1980s.

On the other sombre side of this trajectory, however, as I have mentioned, since the 1940s and even more after the 1960s, the Vatican has been systematically engaging with human rights work. In the 1970s, in the US conservatives have to a large extent coalesced around an anti-Roe Vs Wade agenda to build up their conservative revolution. In the 1980s, Reagan administration adopted the Mexico City policy of 1984 establishing the abortion gag rule on US funding for NGOs and suspending the financing of UNFPA. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher adopted an ordinance prohibiting the ‘teaching of homosexuality’. And, as we know, AIDS was initially named the gay cancer and triggered a vast wave of stigma and discrimination. At around the same time, Cardinal Ratzinger, who was in charge of the Vatican core doctrinal body, was already waging attacks on feminist conceptualisation on sexuality and reproduction that, in his view, threatened the very concept of humanity.

Then came the 1990s. In the Rio 1992 Conference in Environment and Development the Vatican fiercely attacked language on the right of individuals to make fertility decisions and also the concept of reproductive health that had been recently released by WHO. In Vienna, the Vatican reacted to the proposition that women’s rights are human rights, a line that it would also adopt two years later in Beijing. And, then came the 1995 assault on gender that must also be counted as an episode of the U.S. ‘conservative revolution’ underway since the 1970s. And, as we have written in our 2008 book, this was not just an attack on gender equality, but a strike on the potential expansiveness of the
social constructivist concept of gender that opened the ground for political thinking and human rights to go beyond the binary of biological sex difference (Corrêa et al., 2008).

It is interesting to note that in the Cairo document itself, gender was never used in this expanded frame. Even so it was squarely placed in a discursive context that allowed this openness to be grasped. The ICPD document referred to multiple forms of family, and had many mentions of sexuality: sexual violence, sex education, HIV. Not surprisingly, strolling in the corridors of the conference in its last day, I heard an African delegate saying to his colleague: We did a good work, but I may perhaps say that there is too much sex in this document. Most importantly, Cairo paved the road for the concept of sexual rights to be legitimised a year later in Beijing (Girard, 2007). As I see it, the 1995 Vatican attack on gender was pre-emptive: it aimed at containing a potential revolution to be caused by gender. And, I am not using the term revolution accidentally; this is how a 1988 document issued by the Peruvian bishops described the threat posed by ‘gender ideology’.

To conclude, in 1995, the Vatican attack on gender took us by surprise. We battled this attack on the road towards Beijing, when the concept of sexual rights was agreed upon, although a fierce battle did not allow the term sexual orientation to enter the text (Girard, 2007). Later on, we once again impeded gender to be deleted from the documents negotiated in the Plus Five reviews of Cairo and Beijing. But similar battles would be revived in subsequent negotiations, as for example in the 2004 political impasse around the Brazilian resolution on human rights and sexual orientation (Pazello, 2005). Then, in the early 2010s, bottom-up anti-gender mobilisation fiercely erupted in Europe and Latin America and, despite having gone through this long and complicated road, we were once again taken by surprise.

When anti-gender politics erupted in Brazil in the debates leading to the 2014–2024 National Education Plan, activists who followed the process told me that some left-wing politicians argued that the best strategy was to ignore the attack. They did so because the issue at stake was ‘gender’ – a secondary matter, in their view – but also because they saw those propagating anti-gender discourses, such as Jair Bolsonaro – who at the time was a Congressman – as just looking for an audience. To give them attention, they argued, would just make it worse. A consequence of this was that anti-gender voices were largely dismissed as ignorant, crazy or even perhaps ‘anti-rights’. What came next showed that this was a flagrant mistake.

The message I tried to convey in this conversation is that we cannot merely ignore conservatives and the right with mobilisations and speech acts. We must fiercely contest their views, as disqualifying or ignoring them can be unproductive or even dangerous. The Brazilian experience shows that gender is not a ‘secondary matter’ in the neoconservative and extreme right strategic frame. And, as I have been exploring beneath the usually grotesque façade of their politics of mobilisation lurks a wide infrastructure of knowledge production.

We must seriously ask ourselves why we have failed to foresee what was coming? Why we have been repeatedly taken by surprise? Although there may be many other responses for this question, one of them seems to be that, by and large, we had not entirely realised the scope and scale of the ‘conservative revolution’ and how gender and sexuality are indeed – as we have said so many times – at the core of its political project. Furthermore, different from conservatives – who have steadily followed the conceptual and political developments in human rights, health and gender and sexuality thinking of the last forty years – we barely paid attention to their epistemic politics until very recently. We may describe it as a machinery of ignorance production, as suggested by Richard Parker in recent short paper (Parker, 2021), but we cannot overlook it. Our own ignorance in that respect is a gap to be urgently filled.

Notes

1. For more about Sexuality Policy Watch, see: https://sxpolitics.org/.
2. The interview was complemented by a text published by Corrêa in Portuguese in 2018, titled: A ‘política do gênero’ um comentário genealógico. cadernos pagu (53), 2018:e185301.
3. https://2017-2021.state.gov/report-of-the-commission-on-unalienable-rights/index.html.

4. As mentioned in the Introduction, a striking example of this occurred after the interview, when the US Supreme Court overturned Roe Vs. Wade in June 2022. The majority opinion recovers XVII century British and colonial America juridical arguments to affirm that the right to abortion does not exist under the US constitution. For more on this, see the Sexuality Policy Watch publication: https://sxpolitics.org/roe-vs-wade-overturned-us-supreme-court-ends-constitucional-rights-to-abortion/22513.

5. For recent analyses, see Hinson (2022).

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