



WOMEN IN POLITICS:
from domestication to adjacency, between first ladies and tradwifes

MULHERES NA POLÍTICA:
da domesticação à adjacência, entre primeiras-damas e *tradwifes*

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Abstract: This essay details three strategies of the contemporary far right to reduce the gender cleavage in elections: the devaluation and persecution of practices, studies, and discourses to mitigate gender inequalities and sexual rights; media campaigns to return women to the domestic space; and the instrumentalization of women as adjunct to male candidacies and policies. For this, it proposes to analyze the scenic productions of tradwife influencers (such as domestication campaigns) and the use of adjunct women (especially first ladies) in the 2022 elections as a spectacularization of the construction of binary and stereotyped gender places for women in micro and macropolitics in an associated way.

Keywords: Women; Gender; political performativity; first lady; tradwife.

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Resumo: Este ensaio aborda três das estratégias da extrema direita contemporânea para diminuir a clivagem de gênero nas eleições, a saber: a desvalorização e perseguição às práticas, estudos e discursos de mitigação das desigualdades de gênero e dos direitos sexuais; as campanhas midiáticas de retorno das mulheres ao espaço doméstico; e a instrumentalização das mulheres como adjacentes para candidaturas e políticas masculinas. Propõe-se, para isso, a analisar as produções cênicas de *influencers tradwives* como campanhas de domesticação e o uso de mulheres adjacentes, em especial, as primeiras-damas das eleições de 2022, como espetacularização da construção de lugares binários e estereotipados de gênero para as mulheres na micro e na macropolítica, de forma associada.

Palavras-chave: mulheres; gênero; performatividade política; primeira-dama; *tradwife*.



millions and millions of years ago
she stood on two paws
the angry and dirty woman barked
angry and dirty she barked
because an angry woman
is not a good woman
and a good woman
is a clean woman
millions and millions of years ago
she stood on two paws
she does not bark anymore, she is tame
tame, and good, and clean
(Angélica Freitas, 2014)¹

In several countries (such as Brazil, Spain, France, Chile, Argentina, and the USA), female voters have been pointed as one of the main barriers to the advance of the current far right. Researchers have paid attention to this datum, but less so than the far-right political groups interested in minimizing their rejection. Most of the Brazilian population consists of women as they comprise 53% of the current electorate and almost half of political party affiliates (47%). Still, they compose a minority majority as they still receive little prominence in party campaigns and occupy few elected positions. Recent research indicates that Brazil has the second worst female representation in Chamber of Deputy seats out of all G20 members (only 14.8%) (Dias; Zajdenweber, 2024). Moreover, female elected candidates to the Brazilian legislative and executive branches (especially female activists and Black and trans women) face great political violence. Women's votes have received increasing interest because of these demographic issues — greatly impact their number— and a furthering of a gender cleavage in voting intentions in the last elections hitherto unheard of in these countries. Women of all segments (age, class, race, regional, religiosity, etc.) have recently shown a profile unlike that of men, establishing different voting patterns between genders and more greatly rejecting the extreme right across all electorate groups. In 2018, women largely rejected Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy. In the last Brazilian presidential elections in 2022, Lula maintained a significant advantage in votes among female voters, especially among Black women (Barbon, 2022).

Male votes predominantly tended toward the right in regional city hall elections. Brazilian state capitals evinced such behavior more clearly (resembling that in recent presidential races in countries such as the United States and Argentina) as candidates in line with Bolsonarism faced left-wing opponents or those with anti-Bolsonaro alliances better liked by women (Mello, 2024).

Rosana Pinheiro-Machado (2024) argues that this rejection by women of candidate and former president Jair Bolsonaro largely stems from his violent image and misogynistic speeches and proposals (causing women to reject him). Flávia Biroli complements this perception, indicating that,

¹ This poem is featured in Angélica Freitas' *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* (A uterus is the size of a fist). In 2019, Social Liberal Party parliamentarians, supported by members of the Christian Social Party and their party colleagues, made a motion of repudiation against her work and its presence on the list of mandatory reading for the 2020 unified entrance exam at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina and Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul.



although changes in labor legislation have regressed everyone's rights, they have harmed women more than men. Women have faced a great precariousness of their jobs and increasing difficulty in reconciling paid work and care, an activity that predominantly lies at the responsibility of women in homes given the sexual division of labor:

We have a situation, in recent years, of a lot of precariousness associated, for example, with households headed by women. Women's employment is more precarious, and, in socioeconomic terms, their homes, those in which they are the main providers, are more impoverished [...]. Women are also those who have been most affected by a series of recent processes. Even before COVID-19, we have reason to understand that changes in labor legislation, which have regressed rights, have harmed women more than men (Flávia Biroli em entrevista a PAES, 2022).

We also stress that, as per researcher Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, this rejection has gradually decreased:

The female rejection of Bolsonaro was higher in 2018 than in 2022. More than twenty years after the creation of Bolsa Família, the daughters and granddaughters of the first generation that had their lives transformed are already losing the memory of this daily revolution.

From the last presidential election to now, the phenomenon of digital marketing has grown, and there were not a few women from the periphery that we found saying they reject Bolsonaro, deeply admiring Marçal as someone "from the family," who inspires in the dream of extra income for a more prosperous life. Neo-Pentecostal churches are also advancing in the country, offering shelter to women in various ways (Pinheiro-Machado, 2024).

The difficulty far-right political parties and groups face in capturing female votes gave rise to growing efforts to win over this electorate and thus increase their electoral competitiveness and social roots. However, as Brazilian politics remains predominantly male², these projects often include women in adjunct rather than in leading roles — either as candidates' wives or occupants of vice positions (vice governors, mayors, and presidents) (Biroli, 2022).

Superior Electoral Court data evince this strategy due to the record number of female candidates in the latest elections: 9,415 (33% of the total). However, most of these women ran for vice positions in executive elections. This phenomenon partially stems from the 2018 decision of the Federal Supreme Court, regulated by the Superior Electoral Court, that required the allocation of at least 30% of the resources of party electoral funds to female candidates. In response, many parties have channeled these resources to tickets in which women occupy the position of vice president, taking advantage of a loophole in the legislation.

Another relevant strategic factor in this context refers to the instrumentalization of women to soften and legitimize the image of male candidates. Whether by the choice of female vice-presidents

2 The broad masculine character of Brazilian politics echoes in structural issues that are even reflected, for example, in the architecture of public spaces (such as the lack of women's bathrooms in the Senate until 2016) and in laws (such as the late standardization of maternity leave for mayors, which only took place in 2024).



or the marked presence of wives and spouses, these campaigns aim to establish an identification with the female electorate. Michelle Bolsonaro's central role in the 2022 presidential campaign clearly exemplifies this strategy. Her participation aimed to mitigate Jair Bolsonaro's aggressive and misogynistic image, especially among evangelical women, a topic this study will address below.

These data evince a wide range of strategies from the extreme right to consolidate power and overcome the gender cleavage in electoral elections. We highlight three of them: the first one refers to the intense attacks on feminism and discussions of gender and sexuality issues under the use of the phantasmagorical term "gender ideology," which aims to curtail the rights of political minorities and increase the control of their bodies. Such a strategy demoralizes and reduces the scope of public discussions and the elaboration and application of laws of democratic expansion on the subject. The second strategy this study will analyze involves the intense campaign to have women return to the home, disinteresting them in the public and political spaces. Flirting with advertising objectives, these pieces shift the place of women's self-realization to the return to the domestic space and to the domestication of their imaginaries as circumscribed to the private and family space. The third strategy refers to the use of adjunct women to soften and legitimize male candidates in elections, especially executive ones. Such analysis considers the use of women as first ladies composing a unity that prioritizes the place of male power. The extreme right also sometimes uses women in seeking a greater identification with this voting public and democratic legitimacy, supporting women's candidacies but in line with a patriarchal, authoritarian, and reactionary policy, as in the recent elections in Germany, France, Italy, and Peru.

These three strategies, although active in different forms and fields, are interrelated, reaffirming stereotyped and binary gender roles and safeguarding the space of politics for the interests of a male hegemony, even if apparently defended by female social actors.

1 Gender and power: anti-gender policies and projects to confine women to the domestic space

"Gender" has recently become a transversal component to the various segments of the contemporary right and central theme in several important elections around the world, including Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, France, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Scotland, Ecuador, and Germany. The discussion on gender issues has especial relevance in authoritarian regimes, such as in Hungary, which abolished the Gender Studies department of the Central European University and moved it to Vienna. The Spanish far-right Vox party has incorporated anti-feminist rhetoric into its platform, referring to a supposed "gender ideology" as a social danger, brokering terms such as "gender jihadism" and "feminazis." Similarly, Turkish President Erdogan has attacked LGBTQIA+ rights advocates by labeling them as "cultural terrorists" (Butler, 2024, p. 64). In his recent second term, Trump and his vice president JD Vance defended a broad and explicit trans-exclusionary policy against women's labor rights and reproductive autonomy in the US.



In Brazil, the Bolsonaro government presented the idea of nation and masculinity as threatened by a “gender ideology” it considered a harmful foreign influence. Sonia Corrêa notes that anti-gender movements emerged with greater force in the 2000s, and in 2013, Catholic and evangelical groups joined forces to eliminate any reference to gender from the Brazilian National Education Plan, passing hundreds of municipal and state laws against gender education. In his inaugural speech in 2019, Bolsonaro reaffirmed his commitment to eradicating “gender ideology” from schools, aligning himself with a global movement of anti-feminist legislation and discourse, trans-exclusionary offensives, and the effects of racism and coloniality (Kalil; Correa, 2020; Butler, 2024, p. 67). Butler categorically states that one is unable to understand the struggle against fascism without gender politics and vice versa, emphasizing that:

Although interpreted as a reaction to progressive movements, anti-gender ideology is driven by a stronger desire, that is, the restoration of a dreamed-of patriarchal order in which a father is a father; sexual identities never change; women, considered “women from birth,” resume their natural and “moral” positions within the home; and the white population holds an undisputed racial supremacy (Butler, p. 25).

Fostering a desire to restore male privilege serves many other forms of power, but it constitutes a social project of its own, namely: to produce an ideal past whose reanimation will reach, or even eliminate, sexual and gender minorities. This dream seeks not only to restore a legitimate place for patriarchal authority, conceived as part of a natural and/or religious order, but also to roll back progressive rights and policies to make marriage exclusively heterosexual, to insist that the sex assigned at birth be immutable, that abortion be prevented because it is the state that knows what limits should be imposed on the body of pregnant people. The retaliation we see against “gender” is part of this broader restoration project that seeks to strengthen authoritarian regimes as legitimate forms of paternalism, the dream come true (Butler, 2024, p. 26).

Anti-gender ideology reflects a deep desire to restore an idealized patriarchal order that places the father as the central figure of the family, fixes gender identity from birth, and return women to their traditional positions within the home, preferably in heteronormative and mononucleated relationships. This discourse also reinforces an implicit racial supremacy. The insistence on the restoration of male privilege serves various forms of power, promoting a social project that seeks to reverse progressive advances. This retaliation against “gender” is linked to (and can be considered the result of) the consolidation of authoritarian regimes that legitimize themselves by reinforcing traditional, violent, and excluding patriarchal and moral standards.

Butler also points out that, in this ideology, “women are defined as those whose freedom must be limited by the State,” reflecting a gender theory that imposes fixed and subordinate roles on women (Butler, 2024, p. 29). This imaginary finds echoes in Betty Friedan’s classic analysis (2020), pointing to the manipulation of the social construction of women’s role to restrict their possibilities, aspirations, political participation. If the imaginary of what it is to be a woman is built from the idea of



When woman was seen as a human being of limitless human potential, equal to man, anything that kept her from realizing her full potential was a problem to be solved: barriers to higher education and political participation, discrimination or prejudice in law or morality. (Friedan, 2020, p. 76).

Thus, taking the discussion to the political field. But if there exists a campaign to conceptualize women only in terms of “natural sexual roles,”

the barriers to the realization of her full potential, the prejudices which deny her full participation in the world, are no longer problems. The only problems now are those that might disturb her adjustment as a housewife. So career is a problem, education is a problem, political interest, even the very admission of women’s intelligence and individuality is a problem. (Friedan, 2020, p. 76).

Thus, the concept of women indicates their field of action and their tendencies to defend participation in public and private fields. The imaginary constructing what it is to be a woman in such a way as to consider her a human being and an individual with subjectivities and broad interests necessitates seeking the political field to solve the barriers that prevent them from achieving their potentialities and participation in many fields. However, if the imaginary constructs them, rather than a subject, based on the domestic function, all efforts must take place against the factors that take her away from the home, be it education, work, or even political participation. Thus, the dispute over the construction of imaginaries of what it means to be a woman is also central to her (non) political participation.

Butler agrees with Friedan in considering that this obsession with sexual and gender politics may actually constitute a dangerous symptom of growing male anger and general frustration about economic anxieties, job and social life insecurities, and urban violence, serving as ghosts that channel contemporary dissatisfactions and fears due to the intensification of capitalism (fears about climate change, environmental uncertainties, precariousness of life, wars, economic insecurity, restrictions on access to social goods, etc.). In other words, the instrumentalization of legitimate anxieties of destruction that the rhetoric of the contemporary far right mobilizes channels into a phantasmagorical enemy widely coined as “gender ideology.” The sexual and gender policies the far right mobilizes feed politics of hate and mask the real threats, contributing to a project of reaffirmation of a racist and misogynistic policy of financial and resource monopolies and environmental destruction that once again makes women and LGBTQIAPN+ populations its scapegoats.

These policies generate old family campaigns that cyclically resurface to reaffirm patriarchal, racial, and exacerbated nationalism values. We currently face another wave of this phenomenon, which necessitates a collective effort to resist this attempt to make life more precarious, this campaign to control bodies and limit rights that engenders an authoritarian project of power. Note the media pieces of these campaigns that directly dialogue with the discussion of women’s occupation in public and, therefore, political spaces. This study will focus on the “tradwife” (short for “traditional wives”) movement that has grown on social media, promoting a home-oriented view of women, submission to traditional values, and support for their husbands. Note that the term that designates



this phenomenon and its participants (tradwife rather than tradwoman) stems from a function linked to a man, i.e. “wife.” Discursively, rather than referring to traditional women — tradwomen — it elicits traditional wives, linking them to an implicit husband and to a family and domestic function supposedly inherent to this condition. These influencers generally reject feminism and praise a female role based on domesticity, motherhood, and emotional support for men as family leaders.

During the 2022 elections, this speech found echoes in Michelle Bolsonaro’s public image. Its media representation was built on Christian and traditional values, reinforcing the idea that women should configure the base of support for their husbands and guard their family’s moral values. This approach resonated with female voters who identify with the tradwife movement and evangelical voters, who often values female submission and the role of women as maintainers of family order.

Interest in media content that represents an approximation to a supposed “traditional” lifestyle, responding to well-demarcated gender roles, has grown among the youth, including in Brazil. In Instagram and TikTok, hashtags such as #tradwife and #feminidadetradicional (traditionalfeminility) gather millions of views, indicating a growing interest in this narrative. The influence of this movement also takes place in the popularization of discourses that reaffirm female subservience as something positive and desirable. In the political context, this view can directly affect women’s participation in power. Studies show that countries that widely accept traditional gender ideals tend toward lower female representation in political positions, as we will discuss below. The low presence of women in Congress and in executive positions reflects the permanence of cultural and structural barriers that limit their participation. For example, data from the United Nations Development Programme shows that half of the population worldwide believes that men are intrinsically better political leaders than women and that more than 40% consider that men are better business executives. These beliefs significantly contribute to the female underrepresentation in leadership positions (PNUD, 2023).

In Brazil, the stagnation of the presence of women in spaces of political representation stems from multiple factors, including cultural conditioning factors and values linked to the idea of rights and citizenship. The perception that men and women belong to different social spheres — the public and the domestic — influences party logics and political-electoral recruitment processes, resulting in a lesser female participation in politics (Araújo, 2016). Cultural practices that discourage the presence of women in public life, such as the overload of domestic work, and the structural barriers in parties and electoral systems that mostly consist of men, also reinforce this inequality (Cosmelli, 2020).

Several studies corroborate the relationship between the acceptance of traditional gender ideals and the low representation of women in politics. The qualitative survey by the DataSenado Institute (2020) found that factors such as sexism, the pressure of the political-party system, and the unequal division of domestic responsibilities discourage women’s political participation,



contributing to the low female representation in elections. Similarly, the study “Cultural aspects that make it difficult for women to participate in electoral politics and the relationship with the public-private spheres” analyzes how the historical exclusion of women from public spaces and cultural factors results in their low participation in politics (Lollato, 2019). Again, the dichotomy between the public and private spheres is pointed out as a factor that limits the political representation of women. These surveys show that the persistence of traditional gender norms and associated cultural factors contribute to female political underrepresentation, highlighting the need for affirmative policies and structural changes to promote gender equality in politics. A high expenditure of time in the domestic space and a culture of belonging to the home hinder women’s political participation. In other words, if women are busy taking domestic responsibilities, they are unable to occupy political positions in large numbers and spaces of power in which they could structurally change this condition, creating a vicious cycle of non-political action. These seemingly harmless short videos and posts by tradwives³ act to perpetuate the advertising of this status quo, maintaining and fostering the domestic space as the only place for women’s self-realization.

The tradwife movement promotes a conservative view of gender, encouraging women to prioritize their homes, husbands, and children, often in opposition to feminism. These influencers share domestic routines and anti-feminist messages to rescue supposedly traditional values. Although we found no research that indicates the direct action of tradwife influencers in women’s voting preferences, we should consider studies on the factors that influence their electoral choices⁴. Exposure to content that promotes traditional gender ideals can impact their political views and their adherence to ideological and voting option fields.

2 Tradwives: domestication scenes

The domestic space holds a mystical idea of happiness that has been repeatedly raised from time to time — as Betty Friedan pointed out in “The Feminine Mystique,” a study published in 1963 and republished in 2020. Ideas have suggested that the nature of women belongs to the private space of the home, finding their placid and correct place in the world in it. Today, after

3 This study focused on content from Brazilian influencers. For ethical reasons and to avoid fostering engagement and views of such content, we chose to avoid mentioning the names or social media profiles of the influencers that produce such videos.

4 For example, journalist and writer Rebecca Traister notes that single women in the United States tend to vote less for conservative candidates than married women, possibly due to their independence from patriarchal power. (Cf. ALONSO, Marita. Rebecca Traister: “Las mujeres solteras tienen menos probabilidades de votar por los conservadores.” *El País*, [S. L.], 2024. Available at: <https://elpais.com/smoda/feminismo/2024-12-13/rebecca-traister-las-mujeres-solteras-tienen-menos-probabilidades-de-votar-por-los-conservadores.html> . Acesso em: 11 jun. 2025). Ester Solano’s research in Brazilian offers another example, such as her article “Mulheres de extrema-direita: empoderamento feminino e valorização moral da mulher” (AR RIGHT WOMEN: Female Empowerment and Traditional Moral Standards) (Solano; Rock; Sendretti, 2023) or the Costa, Rocha, and Solano’s book “Feminismo em disputa: um estudo sobre o imaginário político das mulheres brasileiras” (Feminism in dispute: a study on the political imaginary of Brazilian women) (2022).



common sense has partially assimilated feminist studies and women have massively entered the labor market and gained access to education, the argument states that the permanence or return of women to the home and their social and economic submission to their husbands and patriarchy occurs voluntarily (rather than as imposition as before). Their choice is also broadly anchored to an erosion of the capitalist promises toward the entry of women into the labor market: most women obtained none of their dreamed full autonomy, happiness, and decent subsistence conditions. On the other hand, most women faced poorly paid overload, increasingly precarious salaried work, and the accumulation of domestic chores and care (for which they remain mostly responsible).

Faced with this scenario, many media productions strengthen an imaginary of the aesthetic return to a mythical time in which women could peacefully go back to the domestic space in which they would submit to a male provider. These productions defend the voluntary enclosure of women in unpaid domestic activities, the care of children, and obedience to male orders, building an imaginary of the ideal woman based on an image of delicacy, abnegation, elegance, discipline, and sacrifice in favor of a simple and joyful life, achieving happiness by surrendering to the family. In the deliberate defense of an imaginary “by which man and wife are one, and that one is the husband” (Friedan, 2020, p. 116).

Beautiful young women whose bodies follow the aesthetic standard: most are white, some have tattoos; they usually wear vintage clothes. Videos and photos emanate the fullness of life, retro soundtracks mentioning the mid-20th century, these texts reaffirm a decision of exclusive voluntary dedication to the home and family as a choice of peace and happiness. Several such productions mention the importance of faith and divine purposes. They often question feminism or the “oppression” of a culture that tries to convince them to independence and work outside the home. They often oppose a status quo that would prevent them from following their true vocations of happiness: the home and family. In this rebellious performance against a culture that would force them to work and take social roles, these women stage a daily life in which they sell their image, link products, earn money, become professionals in the internet, and try to convince their followers to depend on their husbands rather than becoming professionals. Short videos, catchphrases, and images of a placid, harmonious, and happy life in their homes: thusly act tradwives, a current version of a campaign to return women to the domestic space.

Their content echoes contemporary voyeur desires to see the intimacy of the other, the private space, the supposedly real house: the reality of another under one’s curiosity. It also constitutes a supposed way of learning to live, a way of building an imaginary that socializes and shows what it is like to live within one’s own privacy, legitimized by a common and shared action with that other who is followed on media. In this sense, such content works well for those with less experience, for those who can convince themselves that taking care of a house and children can be idyllic and peaceful with time-intensive tasks without complications. Making a loaf of bread for hours, cooking without getting dirty. They teach that taking care of the house as a voluntary and exclusive task configures a total realization of the being. These videos have a special appeal for those with no



experience of an exclusively domestic life and, while they serve as an affirmation for those who have chosen this path, they above all operate to construct young women's imaginaries.

In other words, these productions, which currently mobilize a significant amount of money as advertising and sponsorships, cast female influencers on social media who produce content that supposedly shows their daily dynamics in their homes. These female influencers, by producing and monetizing videos showing their supposed domestic lives, contradictorily enter a highly profitable market and disseminate an idea of enclosure to the domestic space to their followers while taking an already very professionalized job that can pay very well. These influencers (who are very active in social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook) are excellent craftsmen. In a careful aesthetic construction, they act as housewives in well-produced short videos (most of which include professional teams and mostly exuberant props and costumes). They put an aesthetics of the real to work (Costa, 2019), reconstructing an aura of adherence to the daily and 'true' life of these women. The real is decoded to become a documentary aesthetic that portrays a single-person filming without a production team or photography, giving the impression of home productions. However, despite their "self-filmed" aesthetic without crews or professionalization, most of these productions, especially those that obtain greater engagement on social media, include a great deal of visual glamour (in the served food, decorative objects, household utensils, and their costumes: most are young women wearing makeup and designer brands).

They also usually show time-intensive tasks being carried out very calmly and in well-decorated spaces/scenarios (usually in beautiful kitchens or living rooms). Less glamorous tasks, such as more dedicated cleaning of a home, such as laundry areas or bathrooms, often receive no attention. They also fail to inform where they are or who would be taking care of the young children (if any) during these time-consuming tasks as this usually configures a concern of those who dedicate themselves to the care of children. One can even question the need for such glamour to represent and defend the exclusive dedication of women to the domestic space. We consider the growing emphasis on glamour of these productions as a symptom: the housewife wears makeup while kneading a loaf of bread with her hands (indicating an advertising campaign to give "prestige" to housewives in direct competition to another possibility of life outside the subjection to patriarchal orders in the domestic sphere)⁵. In the retro aesthetic most such characters/influencers use, they prefer artisanal culinary or home care processes. Sometimes, they even dress in costumes that characterize certain past eras and use background music that has been recorded in the 1950s/1960s. The current strategy of the glamorized homecoming campaign and its aesthetic proposition is far from new, as Betty Friedan shows by analyzing a similar phenomenon of the 1960s in the USA in women's magazines and television productions. It seems unsurprising that most of the current productions of the genre target this era.

⁵ We must also consider that these videos make up a large advertising market that monetizes content and disseminates brands and products to generate interest in their audience toward consumption. Brands related to household items, makeup, clothing, and the like show growing interest in sponsoring and inserting their products in tradwives' videos.



The campaign to live up to this proposition — defending domestic care as women’s exclusive and defining responsibility — depends on a reversal of history to bring women back home without forcing them — as the Nazis did⁶ —, valuing the idea of return and conservation. The recent reactionary campaign for “family values” mostly attacks women’s rights and autonomy to try and return to the “male order” (Friedan, 2020, p. 588). The tradwives’ world replaces the individuality of women with the mythical construction of a subversively submissive companion, i.e., one who decides to go against a current feminist tendency that is considered massive and oppressive. “That is [what this movement considers] counterculture and a life of ease and love for white men. It is a dream she wants you to have and believes you already have” (Tebaldi, 2023, p. 12).

This media market manipulates the weight of women burdened with the problematic division between the genders of care work and the growing precariousness of the paid labor market. They instrumentalize this discomfort against feminist discourses, accusing them of causing women’s current exhaustion. By failing to question the sexism and patriarchy that structure family and work relationships, these productions redirect current dissatisfaction toward feminism, indicating a return to a time when women supposedly needed to worry only about domestic work as an exit. Terms such as “masculine energy” and “feminine energy” once again gain space to construct demarcated places of gender and expected behaviors under a binary perspective of gender. These demands for docility, selflessness, and discipline from women also require them to take care of the house and their appearance and to totally dedicate themselves to their families. These productions dispute a construction of the feminine imaginary that largely responds to a trend of the current extreme right in the world⁷. These productions, many aimed at a young audience, compete to create imaginaries that, in turn, guide our constructions of future desires, impacting the projection of expectations of fulfillment and occupation of places as women in a patriarchal society. The probable gain of men in this project is easy to see: the maintenance of public places and power. But, on the other hand, women receive the promise of happiness by occupying their “natural” place in the family and domestic space.

This phenomenon aims to normalize white patriarchy and make far-right politics seem desirable and subversive. Traditional wives realize an idealized femininity that represents a pure nation, tradition, and family, elements that are central to the seemingly banal construction of tradwives and current far-right policies⁸. Ester Solano *et al.* (2023) points to the impacts of the consumption of conservative content from influencers in the female electorate:

6 I stress the German concept *KKK* (*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*: “Children, kitchen, church”), widely used in campaigns during the Nazi period to relate women to kitchen, childcare, and church spaces.

7 Cf.: Redação G1. ‘Acho que a energia masculina é boa e a cultura corporativa estava fugindo dela’, diz Mark Zuckerberg. G1 tecnologia, Rio de Janeiro, 2025. Disponível em: <https://g1.globo.com/tecnologia/noticia/2025/01/11/acho-que-a-energia-masculina-e-boa-e-a-cultura-corporativa-estava-fugindo-dela-diz-mark-zuckerberg.ghtml> . Acesso em: 11 jun. 2025.

8 Some more direct American tradwives promote a campaign so women defend the family and the ‘production’ of white babies to ‘repopulate’ the nation as patriotic duties.



Female empowerment based on the moral valorization of women, carried out from a binary gender structure, enables **the far right to appropriate agendas in defense of women (making themselves more attractive and palatable to the female electorate) and transmit their values to a wider range of women.** [...] In this way, far-right groups can claim a return to traditional gender roles as a celebration of women's empowerment (Solano; Rock; Sendretti, 2023, p. 14, emphasis added).

We also highlight, in Solano *et al.*, the impact of this content on the appropriation by the extreme right of women-related agendas, twisting them to strengthen traditional and binary gender places and roles and making them more attractive to the female electorate, even if they act against their rights, autonomy, and direct political participation, thus celebrating “gender defeats” as achievements: another discursive knot of the extreme right.

3 Adjunct women: Michelle Bolsonaro and Queen Ester

This narrative from tradwives and other ultraconservative media productions finds resonance in the way a past electoral campaign in Brazil represented Michelle Bolsonaro, linking her image to the defense of the traditional family and the role of women as the basis of emotional support for male leaders. Michelle's association with biblical characters and her role as a mediator and “softener” of Jair Bolsonaro's image exemplify this logic in which women play a strategic role without claiming a direct political leading role. Thus, Michelle Bolsonaro, by reinforcing this traditionalist view, aligned herself with a discourse that resonates with part of the conservative electorate and finds support in the popularity of tradwife influencers.

One of the most notable aspects in the construction of Michelle Bolsonaro's image refers to her recurring association with the biblical figure of Queen Esther (Costa, 2023). During his husband's campaign, Michelle and her supporters evoked Esther's story as a parallel to her own trajectory, presenting her as a woman God chose to intercede and protect his people. Christian tradition deems Esther as an example of female courage and influence in politics as she used her strategic position as a wife to save the Jews from destruction. This analogy strengthened Michelle's connection to the evangelical electorate, suggesting that she played a providential role in defending religious principles and fighting against forces deemed contrary to Judeo-Christian values. The media aligned with Bolsonarism widely reflected such representation, reinforcing its importance in the electoral narrative of the then president:

Again, in the campaigns for the 2022 presidential election, the biblical appeal is an important component of his dissemination as a candidate for reelection. In addition to the comparisons between Bolsonaro and the Messiah, who must create the kingdom of God on Earth, his wife, Michelle Bolsonaro, has been compared to Esther, an important female character in the Bible who, despite the improbable, becomes queen when she marries King Ahasuerus and receives the mission of saving the Hebrew people from death [...]. The reference to Queen Esther, this figure who unites politics and religion, seeks to consolidate the image



of a woman of faith who intercedes for the people, just like the biblical heroine, and redeem Bolsonaro's image with the female electorate, in which he finds his main rejection. Often, the comparison is accompanied by the photo of the first lady, the colors of the Brazilian flag and allusions to religious elements or poses. The comparative images have even been disseminated by members of the government, such as the [then] minister Damare Alves (Costa, 2023, p. 97-98).

Michelle Bolsonaro also played a strategic role in softening Bolsonaro's image, who was often criticized for his aggressive statements and posture deemed unempathetic, especially toward women. Just as Queen Esther interceded with King Ahasuerus, Michelle became a kind of mediator to humanize and legitimize her husband's discourse and make it more palatable to segments of the electorate that rejected his combative rhetoric. Her conciliatory tone and defense of Christian values helped to soften the president's negative perceptions among the female and religious electorate.

During the 2022 campaign, alongside her husband and then president running for reelection Jair Bolsonaro, Michelle Bolsonaro said that "a woman must be her husband's helper," a phrase she repeated shortly after the celebrations of International Women's Day in 2024 (Uol, 2024), referring to a division of distribution of demarcated gender roles of great appeal and use among evangelicals. Stating her feminine but not feminist politics, she stressed:

"We are here to be helpers; it is our role as wives. We want to make a collaborative policy, we don't want to compete with you," Michelle told a mostly female audience. "We love you, men," "We don't need to scream, we don't need to burn bras, we don't need to challenge the male figure," he added. "We love our husbands, we value our husbands, we are here to support" (Uol, 2022).

Also at this event, the first lady said: "Here we have a man who is perhaps a little more technical but here we also have a spiritual woman. So, I think one completes the other, right? It must be so, my dears. Women must be their husbands' helpers, isn't that right? We are the ones who bear the brunt, right?" (Uol, 2022). This indicated her role as a bridge between the candidate and the female public, using endearing expressions such as "us" and "my dears."

Rosângela da Silva, Janja⁹, the wife of candidate Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, promptly opposed this expression — her husband's helper —, marking another difference in the 2022 electoral campaign and its direct clashes between the two wives of the candidates, such as a dispute between representations of a female model, embodied in the two women who could occupy the place of first lady. Both possible first ladies established an antithesis between them as Michelle configured a complement to the figure of her husband, the then candidate for the presidency. While Michelle appealed to religious issues and a specific family model (a maternal place supposedly protected at home under male command), Janja presented herself as a financially independent woman who

9 Cf. PEDRA, Luana. Em comício de Lula, Janja provoca Michelle: "Não sou ajudadora," *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 2022. Disponível em: https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2022/09/16/interna_politica,1394394/em-comicio-de-lula-janja-provoca-michelle-nao-sou-ajudadora.shtml . Acesso em: 05 jun. 2025. At that time, Janja answered: "I'm not going to help you, no, I'm not going to be a helper. I will be together by your side fighting so we can give Brazil back hope that this wonderful people deserve."



decided to have no children (thus breaking obedience to maternal destiny) and who dedicated herself to political activism, art, bohemia, and the public space. Media outlets insistently placed the two representations side by side, occupying much of the attention during the electoral dispute and rivaling the female representational model for the first lady: the maximum model for a woman in a country that managed to elect one of them as president only once.

The 2022 election widely used images of the wives of the then main candidates via graphic materials, their pronouncements, or by disseminating their profiles in newspapers and magazines. The public discussion around the female model that would provoke relatedness with the female electorate seemed at that moment to battle for the very acceptance of the models of ‘acceptable women’ in the national project in dispute. The Brazil that had recently rejected with explicitly misogynistic protests, speeches, and practices¹⁰ its only female president voted, at that moment, for a national project based on choosing a man for the highest executive position and a model of woman the country was willing to accept as its own (even if outside a position of real political power), a woman who would remain as an adjunct to her husband (thus corroborating previously collected data).

The “beautiful, modest, and homely”¹¹ model Marcela Temer took and Michelle Bolsonaro followed in appearance but not in practice opposed Janja’s image, which the right sometimes used as criticism by signaling her non-motherhood or her bohemian life and which Lula’s campaign reaffirmed as a sign of respect for female autonomy and independence. Note that Michelle Bolsonaro uses a discourse of adherence to traditional gender roles that restricted women to the domestic and family space. However, she acted politically in electoral campaigns, made pronouncements, created a perfume company, and currently coordinates PL Mulher, a section of her party that encourages the adherence of female voters to the principles of the extreme right.

The media representation of first ladies in the 2022 elections markedly differed between Michelle Bolsonaro and Janja da Silva. While portraying Michelle as a supportive figure who emphasized religious and family values and played a role in softening Jair Bolsonaro’s image, Janja emerged as an active political partner associated with progressive agendas. However, despite her politically active stance, the media often portrayed Janja in a light that stressed emotional and affective aspects rather than her political attributes. Her figure also served to humanize and soften Lula’s image, a common resource in politics that places women as mediators of the emotions and

10 See: SALOMÃO, Thiago. Adesivo com Dilma sendo “penetrada” por bomba levanta a questão: isso é protesto?, *Infomoney*, São Paulo, 2015. Available at: <https://www.infomoney.com.br/colunistas/blog-da-redacao/adesivo-com-dilma-sendo-penetrada-por-bomba-levanta-a-questao-isso-e-protesto/> . Acesso em: 05 jun. 2025.

11 In the much-debated text that praised the new first lady shortly after the deposition of the first elected president Dilma Rousseff, its author highlights the beauty, youth, and modesty of the “first lady of the home.” She would make the then president Michel Temer “a lucky man” by ignoring politics and scarcely appearing publicly. Political groups in line or against this submissive understanding of the female model in the political field widely debated or appropriated this feminine model opposed to Dilma Rousseff. See: LINHARES, Juliana. Marcela Temer: bela, recatada e “do lar,” *Veja*, São Paulo, 2016. Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/brasil/marcela-temer-bela-recatada-e-do-lar> . Acesso em: 05 jun. 2025.



behaviors of male leaders. Janja da Silva also proposed to transform the perception of what it means to be a first lady, bringing to light fundamental discussions about female empowerment and representation in spheres of power still within positions of adjacency (in this case, via marriage). This phenomenon shows that even progressive narratives can still reduce the female figure to adjunct performances and stereotypes as caregivers and emotional supporters of men, thus reinforcing traditional gender dynamics.

4 Final considerations

It seems important to emphasize the strong interrelation of the three strategies the contemporary far right uses to circumvent the gender cleavage highlighted in the latest elections in this study: the devaluation and persecution of practices, studies, and discourses to mitigate gender inequalities and sexual rights; campaigns praising the return of women to the domestic space; and the instrumentalization of women for male candidacies and policies in varying fields and languages, building a hostile terrain for female participation in political leadership positions and in structural changes that mitigate gender inequalities. These strategies reaffirm binary understandings of gender, stereotyped behaviors, and dichotomous places between men and women, separating the public and the private.

In view of these strategies and an understanding of the significant advances in gender equality, we question the functioning and efficiency of this strong resistance to greater participation of women in politics and the strengthening of equal rights policies. This phenomenon reinforces the perception that female participation in society still includes expectations and models of behavior that greatly resist the active participation of women in public spaces, especially in politics. Why do campaigns to remove women from politics continue to find such fertile ground with the population and especially the youth? Why do we still witness the growth of phenomena such as the tradwife movement (showing the persistence of the defense of the retrograde role of women as support for the male leader)? Why scenes that promote the confinement of women to the domestic space still echo and gain appeal among young people? What place do women have in a masculinist project of power; one as adjunct women?

The three strategies in this study aim to remove political and economic power from women and reinforce the idea of women as the gender that supports men in the patriarchal structure whether in macropolitics (as in the case of adjunct women) or in micropolitics (as in the campaigns for women to voluntarily dedicate themselves exclusively to their homes). These macro- and micropolitics operate imaginaries for future generations who, if they fail to react, will see their spaces and tools to fight against this logic of submission and binarism of gender roles increasingly dwindle. This articulated policy of enclosure of the present affects the now and the future, building imaginaries that will bear fruit in the next generations (perhaps as more deprived spaces, such as



those of schooling and political action). Moreover, finding echoes and repetitions in the present of the phenomenon Friedan analyzed in the 1950s and 1960s is very worrying.

It is inevitable to think that these scenic productions (very close to advertising campaigns linked to a large market) find so much appeal due to the immense exhaustion of imaginaries of the future we currently face. The exhaustion in the face of a violent neoliberalism generates anxieties the extreme right greatly capitalizes, which, far from proposing real solutions to the politics of destruction, proposes policies to accentuate environmental, labor, and care inequalities and exploitation, using our few achievements as a scapegoat, i.e., furthering its policy of environmental and economic destruction and exploitation, the far right channels dissatisfaction into the notion that progressive ideas cause our probable catastrophic end as a society and as humanity. Such proposition finds echoes in the biblical narrative, which deems an apocalyptic end as a departure from the values of genesis. Moreover, its aesthetic and moral proposal puts forward a return to a mythical time with well-defined gender roles.

The analysis of scenes that reaffirm demarcated gender roles, defend familism, and confine women to the domestic space and distance them from politics — as tradwives' glamorized productions — or the performative instrumentalization of women in politics as adjunct agents (whether as vice-presidents or as first ladies) still has much to do to dismantle the seductive machine maintaining and furthering inequalities.



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