

Examining Brazilian politics and culture to reveal their influence on women's political representation and self-perception

Chiara Anaïs Matarazzo

BSc Global Responsibility & Leadership

Capstone Thesis 2025

Word count: 10484 words

Keywords

Brazil, culture, feminism, gender, intersectionality, institutions, laws, politics.

Acknowledgements

I would like to specifically acknowledge the Brazilian women interviewees that enthusiastically agreed to help me with my thesis and give me wonderful content to write on. As well as my thesis supervisor, friends, and family for guiding me and motivating me throughout this process.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
1.1. Brazilian Politics.....	4
1.2. Brazilian Gender Inequality.....	5
1.3. Research Question.....	7
1.4. Aim of the Thesis.....	7
2. Literature Review.....	9
2.1. Theoretical Frameworks.....	9
2.1.1. Feminist Institutionalism.....	9
2.1.2. Critical Mass Theory.....	10
2.1.3. Intersectionality.....	11
2.2. Institutional Barriers.....	11
2.3. Societal and Cultural Barriers.....	12
2.4. Implications and Impact.....	13
2.5. National Efforts.....	14
3. Methodology.....	15
3.1. Research Design.....	15
3.1.1. Case Study Analysis.....	15
3.1.2. Semi Structured Interviews.....	16
3.2. Limitations.....	17
3.3. Ethical Considerations.....	18
4. Exploring Dynamics Within Brazil’s Political Structure and Social Norms.....	20
4.1. A System Built for Others: Institutional and Structural Barriers.....	20
4.1.1. Brazil’s Electoral System Design.....	20
4.1.2. Ineffective Gender Quotas.....	21
4.1.3. Lack of Funding.....	22
4.2. Invisible but Present: Gendered Social Norms and Cultural Barriers.....	23
4.2.1. Cultural Expectations.....	23
4.2.2. Media Portrayal.....	25
4.3. Double Burden, Triple Filter: Intersectionality Barriers.....	27
4.3.1. Race, Regional Identity and Sexual Orientation.....	29
4.3.2. Afro-Brazilian Women.....	31
5. The Effects of Institutional and Cultural Barriers on Brazilian Women’s Political Self-Perception.....	33
5.1. Brazilian Women’s Self-Perceptions in Politics.....	33
5.1.1. Represented From a Distance.....	33
5.1.2. Abortion Laws.....	34

5.1.3. Women Against Women.....	36
5.2. Seeds for Change: Recommendations from Local Experts (Interviewees).....	37
5.2.1. Change in Electoral System.....	38
5.2.2. Gender Quotas.....	39
5.2.3. Intersectionality.....	40
6. Critical Reflection on Research Findings.....	42
6.1. Discussion.....	42
6.2. Conclusion.....	44
7. References List.....	45
8. Appendix.....	50

Abstract

Women’s political representation in Brazil has been a huge topic of discussion yet and a growing issue for women of all backgrounds in the country. Despite continuous national efforts, women in Brazil keep suffering from an increasingly small political representation which infringes on their political self-perception. The partial representation of women within Brazil’s National Congress only accounts for a specific group of women that most of the time don’t fight for intersectionality-oriented decisions in order to fully represent the Brazilian diversity in cultures, ethnic/geographical backgrounds, economic status, sexual orientation and age. Having intersectional and inclusive policies were found to be incredibly beneficial not only for the political world but also the rising conservatism, exclusive and gendered Brazilian society. With the help of a case study analysis on Brazil and interviews with Brazilian women experts, institutional, cultural and social factors were found to be of great importance when analysing the barriers that enable women from participating in politics. This thesis therefore examines these factors and the extent to which they affect women’s leadership careers in the private and public sphere. Final recommendations are offered in hope of more research and action on such a crucial topic for Brazil’s political and social development.

1. Introduction

1.1. Brazilian Politics

Being one of the major democracies in the world, Brazil has a complex political structure that is shaped by social, historical and economic variables. Brazil has a federal system of government with an executive, legislative, and judicial branch of which are all crucial to the formation of the country's government (Ray et al., 2025). The way in which Brazil's political system operates is through federal presidential representative democracy with a bicameral National Congress, which consists of the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate (Mainwaring, 1991). The Chamber of Deputies is elected through an open-list proportional representation system, where voters select individual candidates instead of full party lists. Nevertheless, elite, male-dominated networks continue to rule Brazilian politics in contradiction to the country's democratic system. These networks have historically prevented women and other marginalised groups from fully participating in politics and despite recent developments, women are still incredibly under-represented in elected and appointed roles in Brazil (Wylie, 2018). Many factors prevent women from effectively participating in decision-making processes and roles which are reinforced by the country's political structure and a gendered socio-cultural environment (Tavares, 2022).

Considering its late independence of 1822 compared to its neighboring Latin American countries, Brazil's democratic system has been continuously criticised for its exclusion and underdeveloped characteristics. It is important to keep in mind that after its independence from the Portuguese empire, Brazil endured a military dictatorship of 21 years not even a century after claiming its freedom. The coup d'état of 1964 was supported by the United States' government

as well as almost all high-ranking members of the military, along with conservative sectors in society, like the Catholic Church and anti-communist civilian movements among the Brazilian middle and upper classes (Eaglin & Granville Widener, 2023). During those years, many human rights violations were publicly being carried out and the conservatism domination, sexist and racist politics was at its peak (Eaglin & Granville Widener, 2023). Although the dictatorship was surpassed in 1985, its core characteristics and societal dynamics can still be found in some of Brazil's political structures and social norms. Today, the rise of conservatism and extremism not only within politics but also society is something that alarms Brazilian political scientists and especially feminist as it is quickly gaining public attention and political support (Burity, 2021).

1.2. Brazilian Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is highly present in Brazil from politics, work, culture, social roles and education. Even with national and international efforts to encourage more diversity in the country, the political world in particular has continued to hinder gender unity (Tavares, 2022). In order to diminish this inequality, legislative measures like gender quotas have been put into place but due to institutional barriers within the political parties and weak reinforcement, their impact has been little. Brazilian women's individual access to political roles is further set back by socioeconomic limitations, gender-based discrimination and cultural values (Moisés & Sanchez, 2016).

Historically, Brazil has only had one female president in the years of 2011 until 2016 known as Dilma Rousseff. Despite political disruption and economic downturns during her term, the media played a significant role in how Brazilians saw her politics. In contrast to Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, her predecessor, who continued with a strong media narrative of charismatic

leadership even with countless corruption allegations, Rousseff was subject to more intense and personal media attacks (Ray et al., 2025). Rousseff was regularly gendered in her leadership, being portrayed as too emotional and incompetent to lead the country. Research shows that these sexist stereotypes on her appearance, manners and expressions were used to deliberately damage her reputation (Ray et al., 2025). During her impeachment process, framed around allegations of economic mismanagement (which was a frequent occurrence in previous male presidents) the media showed to have opposing views all while downplaying comparable activities from male leaders. To this day, Rousseff is still criticised for her leadership and impeachment whilst Lula remains idealised as Brazil's political savior from the forecasted downfall. This only further confirms that Brazilian women suffer from way more than low political representation as the hurdles to leadership remain robust.

In their 2020 study, Hessami and Da Fonseca emphasise that the under-representation of women influences policy outcomes and results in a governance framework that regularly ignores gender-based problems (Hessami & Da Fonseca, 2020). This not only has an effect on women's political representation but it holds a deeper meaning in women's self-perception within their influence and role in the public and private spheres. As women's political representation is hindered, so is their will to participate in politics therefore adding to the positive feedback loop of gender inequality in Brazil. Additionally, according to Moisés and Rodrigues Sanchez and their 2014 study, the low level of female political engagement has harmful effects on Brazil's democracy and strengthens a political structure that fails to sufficiently represent the interests and opinions of more than half of the country's citizens (Moisés & Rodrigues Sanchez, 2014). Given the current gender inequality in Brazilian politics, a more precise analysis of the barriers preventing women from holding leadership and political roles is deeply needed.

1.3. Research Question

This research therefore aims to answer the following question;

“Which factors act as barriers preventing Brazilian women from being politically represented and how do these barriers affect women’s perception of their own political role?”.

This question offers a case study analysis focusing on Brazil and its political system to understand the different types of factors that act as barriers for women to achieve political engagement and representation. Continuously, the question follows a more qualitative direction in examining the extent to which Brazilian women actually feel represented in the country's politics and if this feeling connects to quantitative research and analysis. This research will close the gap between empirical information on women’s political representation in Brazil and their own individual experiences in the sector by combining an analytical and qualitative approach.

1.4. Aim of the Thesis

The primary objective of this thesis is to examine how different factors act as barriers to women’s political representation and their implications on their political self-perception. The research question consists of two parts; examining the current factors that act as barriers to women’s political representation followed by understanding the effects of such underrepresentation on women’s political self-perception. These two dynamics are further developed and analysed to reveal an overarching theme. This thesis will follow the reasons for Brazilian women’s continued political under-representation as well as the particular elements that support this exclusion. The research’s identification and analysis of these struggles will help understand the inconsistency between data showing current gender discrimination and the political actions aimed at developing Brazilian women’s political representation.

The structure of this thesis consists of a literature review laying out the theoretical frameworks, the institutional and societal barriers that women experience in Brazil, the resulting implications and impact of said barriers and finally the national efforts that have been done to address these barriers. The next section is the methodology explaining the research design, its limitations and ethical considerations before revealing the findings. Parts 4 and 5 display and examine the findings that were found in the case study analysis together with the interviews to reveal the factors that act as barriers to women's political representation in Brazil and how these barriers affect women's political self-perception. The findings section also contains recommendations for future research based on the research and interviews. The final section is a critical reflection on the research findings where the recommendations are discussed together with a final conclusion to answer the research question.

2. Literature Review

There are many layers to why Brazilian women are negatively affected in the country's politics. The political underrepresentation of Brazilian women remains a significant problem in the country that affects women of all backgrounds. Even today, women still face notable obstacles to achieve meaningful representation in the political decision-making world, despite their strong presence in the country's population (Wylie, 2018). This strong political representation gap between women and men has a strong impact on social justice, policy results, and democratic government. Addressing such structural injustice and promoting a more inclusive political system however requires an understanding of the hurdles enabling Brazilian women's political representation (Moisés & Sanchez, 2016). This literature review combines relevant academic research on the institutional, societal and cultural factors that act as barriers in limiting women's political representation in Brazil. Key theories are also discussed in order to bring a more theoretical framework in place and bring clarity to this issue. Additionally, this literature review examines the substantive impacts of women political representation on policy-making, emphasising recent growth and obstacles.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1.1. Feminist Institutionalism

Hessami and Da Fonseca (2020) wrote a paper on the *Female political representation and substantive effects on policies* that covers the increase in women representatives yet slow to none increase in overall women political representation. It uses the framework of feminist institutionalism to understand the impact of such under-representation. Feminist institutionalism

is a framework that explores the way in which political institutions strengthen gendered power relations by influencing policies and actions they undertake and the make-up of the elected representatives they contain (Thomson, 2018). In other words, this framework analyses how institutions and their policies are shaped by gender norms and power dynamics and vice versa. Continuously, it underlines the importance of the resistance political institutions uphold towards positive gendered change and how applying the concept of “critical actors” together with this theory could further the understanding of why some institutions resist change (Thomson, 2018). Because political institutions are often shaped by male-dominated norms, it remains challenging for women to access political leadership roles (Hessami & Da Fonseca, 2020), which limits their broader representation.

2.1.2. Critical Mass Theory

The critical mass theory is often used in gender political studies to assess the relations between women and men substantively. It is defined as the critical number of people needed to affect policy changes not as the tool but as an influential body (Childs & Krook, 2008). This framework connects to this thesis as it examines how women and change need a minimum level of support and action in order to actually make an impact on legislative processes. However, according to a study conducted in 2014 by Moisés & Rodrigues Sanchez, Brazilian women still make up a very small portion of Congress, which therefore limits their overall ability to advocate for gender-sensitive legislation and push for more political representation. Using the critical mass theory allows for a bridge to be formed between the quantitative values and the more practical ones in order to achieve change.

2.1.3. Intersectionality

Many studies underline the importance of intersectionality when talking about women's political representation since it looks at the broader ideas and effects of feminism issues. The concept of intersectionality goes further in looking at influential factors to reveal the multi-layers present in gendered issues (Hughes, 2011). Factors that at first don't seem influential to certain issues yet reveal themselves being of great effects, such as race, age, culture, geographical and ethnic location, etc. In the field of political representation, intersectionality acts as an asset in understanding how political marginalisation is aggravated by overlapping social identities such as gender, race and socio-economic class (Sader & Bernhard, 2023). In Brazil's specific case, many of these factors can be seen in the country's diversity and therefore wide range of cultural backgrounds. Dual discrimination is also something that reveals how Afro-Brazilian women severely suffer from political engagement and therefore lowered representation as a whole (Sader & Bernhard, 2023).

2.2. Institutional Barriers

In Brazil, women's access to political power is severely hindered by institutional structures (Wylie, 2018). Female candidates are strongly disadvantaged by the nation's open-list proportional representation electoral system that prioritises individual campaigns over party support (Moisés & Sanchez, 2016). According to a research conducted by Wylie (2018), women who frequently lack the same financial and political support as male candidates find it harder to get winnable positions on party lists because the election system encourages rivalry within parties. This not only has an effect on the broader political representation of women, but also hinders on the inter-party collaborative dynamics.

According to the 1995 gender quota law, which is now unsuccessful, at least 30% of candidates on party lists must be women (Tavares, 2022). The reason why 30% is the minimum comes from the previously mentioned critical mass theory, stating that without 30% of people advocating for a change, it won't be effective. However due to parties' weak enforcement mechanisms and superficial compliances, this policy had very little success in Brazil. Instead of giving women a real chance in winning elections, many political parties only register them to tick off legal criteria and therefore fail to actively support female candidates (Scheidweiler & De Sousa, 2023). This is only worsened by the lack of public support and funding for female candidates who struggle to finance their campaigns in a political environment dominated by men (Wylie, 2018).

2.3. Societal and Cultural Barriers

On top of institutional barriers, cultural attitudes and societal conventions are important factors that continuously sustain gender inequality in Brazilian women's political representation. Women today are still confined to the private realm due to traditional gender norms which trap them from pursuing political careers. These social norms are strongly embedded in Latin American cultures and are therefore very hard to avoid, as some women aren't even aware of the impact these values have on their professional life (Wylie, 2018). Stereotypes that portray politics as a male world continue to shape public opinions of female politicians, which therefore lowers women support in candidates (Moisés & Rodrigues Sanchez, 2014).

The perception of female politicians in Brazil is also greatly influenced by the media as women are depicted and examined in every way possible when in a political position (Sader & Bernhard, 2023). A female political leader will receive more media attention on their personal

life and appearance rather than on their policy stances which only strengthens the inequality in the political-media world. This negative media representation of female politicians perpetuates gender biases and therefore deters women from entering the political sphere (Sader & Bernhard, 2023).

Continuously, offline and online misogyny is a growing major problem in Brazil. Many women are discouraged and put down from participating in political campaigns due to the hostile environment created online (Koch et al., 2024). The proliferation of digital platforms together with political events have strongly increased gender-based harassment of female politicians and therefore decrease the chances of women being politically represented (Koch et al., 2024).

2.4. Implications and Impact

This female political under-representation in Brazil has serious consequences for democracy and policies as it hinders for a more representative and equal decision-making process. Research indicates that women are more likely to support laws pertaining to social welfare, education, and gender equality when they are in elected offices (Hessami & Da Fonseca, 2020). If applied to Brazil, such enforcements would lead the country to a stronger and more effective development. Yet the effectiveness of these initiatives is strongly constrained by the continued under-representation of women in Brazilian politics.

In their study, Moisés and Rodrigues Sanchez argue that female representation and stronger democratic political quality not only guarantee a more inclusive decision-making but are also strongly correlated (Moisés & Sanchez, 2016). However, due to the low number of women in Congress, many gendered-focused legislation in Brazil aren't given the urgency they deserve and have a direct impact on the broader scale of Brazilian women (Tavares, 2022). Without more

extensive systemic changes to raise the proportion of women in decision-making positions, the presence of a few female legislators isn't enough to bring substantial change to the country.

2.5. National Efforts

Despite the challenging matter on women's political representation in Brazil, there have been some national efforts in reducing such inequality. In a significant step towards equality in politics, election finance reforms currently require for 30% of public campaign funds to go to female candidates (Scheidweiler & De Sousa, 2023). Advocacy organisations and women's movements have likely been influential in advancing political changes that support gender equality in the field. Groups such as the Bancada Feminina (Women's Caucus) have strongly helped women's rights legislations advance and fight for stronger gender discussion in the political world. In the area, other countries are to learn from; Argentina has substantially bettered their female political representation due to introducing gender quotas and strong enforcement measures (Kjellén & Institute of Latin American Studies, 2018). As said in their paper, Sader and Bernhard "mentorship programs and leadership training initiatives for women can help address some of the structural and cultural barriers that hinder political participation" (Sader & Bernhard, 2023). Increasing the number of women participating in grassroots politics would not only have a positive effect on gender national equality, but also push Brazil to a brighter and more fair future (Hessami & Da Fonseca, 2020).

3. Methodology

As this is a research thesis looking to answer a complex research question, it is necessary to have a strong research methodology in order to rightfully and ethically, gather relevant data with the sole purpose of answering the research question with a set base of analysis. This section explains the research methods chosen for this thesis as well as reasoning why they are best suitable for this type of research.

3.1. Research Design

The research design for this thesis is divided into two different methods; case study analysis centred around Brazil together with semi-structured interviews with three Brazilian women experts in the field of female political representation in Brazil. The combination of these two research methods allows the research question to be answered in all its integrity. These two different research methods are strongly complementary as one allows for a quantitative approach based on numbers, statistics and previous research whilst the other offers a qualitative approach dependent on experiences, primary data and local expertism. Combining the two helps for a deeper understanding between the how and the why as well as discovering the extent to which women feel represented in their country's politics compared to the data and research on their systematic political representation.

3.1.1. Case Study Analysis

This part of the thesis focuses on understanding Brazilian women's political representation and its implications today. Data reports, articles, books and online websites were used as the foundation of this section to understand how different factors act as barriers for

Brazilian women's political representation. The reason why a case study is best for this sort of research is because it allows for relevant and up to date data to be gathered and then analysed. This section therefore follows a case-study-like structured analysis therefore divided in different thematic parts; each inline with the theoretical frameworks established in the literature review.

3.1.2. Semi Structured Interviews

Continuously, this research includes a qualitative research methodology, incorporating interviews with women experts and researchers in the field. With these interviews, the possibility to investigate how women evaluate their political representation is assessed together with the thoughts on the current political programs and policies that are meant to address gender inequality in Brazil.

The contacts of the interviewees were gathered after completing my minor abroad at the University of São Paulo, where I went on exchange as part of my bachelor's degree. Two of the women were my professors in Feminism, Gender and Politics studies and the other one is from a contact list I was given. Together with the previous analysis, this second section adds a more relevant and specific point of view on the country's efforts and its effectiveness in trying to get more women representatives in the Brazilian political world.

The interviews were held online, due to geographical reasons, as well as in Portuguese since the professors were not all comfortable with the English language. Each interview was consensually recorded to be granted the possibility of going back to the answers and topics discussed. The interviews followed a guide that consisted of general questions and topics for the interviewees to follow and stay on track (can be found in the appendix, document 1). As the point of semi-structured interviews is for the speakers to freely talk about the topic discussed without having to strictly answer small answer questions, the interview questions weren't all

fully answered. The guide was only used to keep following a structure in finding the ways in which Brazilian women feel politically represented. Furthermore, the interviews were manually transcribed and coded as well as translated with the help of Deepl.

This research structure does not only help to capture Brazilian women's viewpoints, but also allows for a deeper analysis of the institutional, cultural and structural obstacles that Brazilian women face when wanting to be politically represented and engaged. This dual approach will bring a human-centred perspective on the ways in which these factors are influential to the country's politics in combination with their effects on Brazilian women themselves.

3.2. Limitations

The limitations in the chosen research methods are important to keep in mind when gathering and analysing the data. Limitations have to be addressed in order to keep the research thesis relevant and honest as well as providing future research and information. In this research thesis, the limitations can be found in the literature gap in terms of provided data on women representation in Brazil and the actual level in which women are politically represented. It is important to acknowledge that the way in which data is gathered can be considered exclusive and not effective as women make up more than 50% of the Brazilian population. Continuously, Brazil is such a big country that mentioning data from all parts of the country wouldn't be possible for a research project of this size. Some areas don't offer data on such advanced research due to uneven access to resources and education which therefore infringes on the inclusion and realness of the data analysis. Additionally, this thesis (only) interviewed three women in this research field, meaning that (only) these three points of views are included in the

analysis of the effectiveness of Brazil's efforts in trying to have more female political representation. Additionally, the transcription and translation of the interviews might have effects on the quality and clarity of the participant responses as the interviews were in Portuguese, and the translation to English was sometimes difficult. Language shortcuts and limited translation were part of the translation process.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

The case study analysis didn't require any ethical considerations as it consisted of present data collection taken from already gathered data. To ensure a fair and plagiarism free case study analysis, each source was carefully chosen, annotated and appointed to different sections of the thesis.

However the semi-structured interviews required some ethical foundation as they involved gathering data from primary sources being people. A consent form and ethics approval wasn't necessary for such small-scale research. Yet written and verbal consent for the participation and recording of the interviews was given by all members through the interview and email communication. As some of the interviews touched on sensitive and difficult topics, the participants were reminded of their right to withdraw not only during the interview, but also as the writing process took place. Continuously, the importance of anonymity has been taken into consideration which is why the participants names have been protected and each one has been given the titles of participant 1 (P1), participant 2 (P2) and participant 3 (P3) in the following sections. Moreover, the transcripts and recordings of the interviews will be deleted by September 2025.

4. Exploring Dynamics Within Brazil's Political

Structure and Social Norms

The following section is divided into coherent themes that stood out from both the case study and the interviews. Each section focuses on a barrier to Brazilian women's political representation; institutional, cultural and social, and concludes with the interviewee's individual perception of their national political representation.

4.1. A System Built for Others: Institutional and Structural Barriers

4.1.1. Brazil's Electoral System Design

When it comes to barriers to Brazilian women's political representation, a major factor comes from the electoral system design of the country. As mentioned in both literature and the interviews, Brazil's political institutions and system have timely been structured in a way that implicitly excludes women with its restricted electoral system as an open-list representation system (Mainwaring, 1991). Brazil's open-list PR system, forces voters to select and vote for individual candidates rather than party lists (Hughes, 2011). While this is supposed to create a sense of democratic choosing and opportunity, it hinders gender equality not only between different party representatives but also inter-party representatives. "This then creates an unnecessary competition between candidates within the same party" as discussed with P2, and internal dynamics tend to prioritize men with greater recognition, financial capacities and political networks (Goyal & Sells, 2023). This not only discourages the promotion of underrepresented groups, but it also obscures women from being seen as party leaders and

contributes to the positive feedback loop of women being slightly represented in Brazilian politics. All three interviewees agreed that the open list system stops women from being seen and heard in the Superior Electoral Court and therefore infringes on women-supportive and focused policies. One of the interviewees, P1, specifically talked about the impact of only having an open-listed election for seats in the Superior Electoral Court as it is the highest body of electoral justice and therefore requires more election diversity. Continuously, all three interviewees agreed on the fact that in combination with the (unsuccessful) gender quotas, the open-list election system is the biggest institutional and structural barrier for Brazilian women in politics (Sacchet, 2018).

4.1.2. Ineffective Gender Quotas

As mentioned before, gender quotas in Brazil haven't been efficient nor of significant change. Gender quotas usually legally require political parties to include a certain minimum of women candidates on their list in order to push political parties to a more equal and representative list of candidates (Hughes, 2011). In Brazil, the 30% gender quota was introduced in 1997 in order to increase the number of women occupying political seats, pushing political parties to support women candidates. However it wasn't until 2009 that the law mandated parties to fill (rather than just preserve) these quotas and yet even with this change, small to little impact has been seen (Hughes, 2011). In one of the interviews, P2 stated that "from 1997 until 2010, the parties didn't have to fulfil the quota. [...] It was only after 2010 that there was a reform in electoral legislation, with the intervention of the TSE [Tribunal Superior Eleitoral: Superior Electoral Court], which began to monitor the electoral lists". According to P2, women today don't even account for 20% of seats in Congress, which is around 90 women, revealing that even with the 30% gender quota, something in the political and institutional structure needs to change.

Yet it has been a recurring trend that political parties often nominate women just to fulfill the wanted amount but don't actually provide sufficient support for women to even come close to the so-called mandatory 30% quota. Women are therefore either marginalized or instrumentalised when active in the political field leading to what some researchers call a "symbolic trap", which is the illusion of progress without substantive change (Goyal & Sells, 2023). This superficial practice is referred to as "laranjas" (oranges) to describe "dummy candidates" as in candidates that are chosen to only act as placeholders and not actual representatives (Wylie & Madison, 2015). P3 shared in her interview that these women politicians are actually used as oranges as they either believe that women are less worthy than men or don't see the way they are being used. The fact that this (only) symbolic choice has been awarded a name in the Brazilian political world only reinforces the notion that the Brazilian gender quotas are un-monitored and therefore act as institutional tokenisms¹ undermining the purpose of gender quotas resulting in women's exclusion from politics.

4.1.3. Lack of Funding

Finally, the lack of funding that women candidates receive compared to men candidates can only be described as the "cherry on top" when it comes to institutional and structural barriers to women's representation in Brazilian politics. P2 mentioned that even when women are officially placed on party lists, they are never given the same access to support and funding as their male colleagues. If a woman candidate manages to breach the barrier of being elected within a political party, the chances of being appointed as party leader or representative is incredibly slim on top of the reduced funding (Pereira & Aguilar, 2021). P2 specifically focused

¹ The practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce.

on talking about the connecting bridge between financial support and elections; she said that “within the political parties, the main positions[;] president, treasurer, vice-president, are held by men”. And as “they’re the ones distributing the money, which in Brazil is an important factor for a political campaign, because if you have money, you can run a good political campaign, a political campaign with great visibility, but if you don't have access to that money, your campaign won't be as successful”. This reveals how intertwined finances, gender quotas, and women’s representation are not only according to data and past laws but also Brazilian women (Pereira & Aguilar, 2021). This combination of weak to no quota enforcement, intra-party competition, and lack of funding leads to a structural disadvantage for Brazilian women that can only be solved through institutional recognition. These institutional and structural barriers limit women’s chances of elections and therefore their political representation and influence which all together reinforces Brazil’s persistent gender inequality in politics.

4.2. Invisible but Present: Gendered Social Norms and Cultural Barriers

4.2.1. Cultural Expectations

On top of the institutional and political structure, gender norms that are deeply rooted into Brazilian culture present yet another barrier to women’s political representation within the country. In Brazil, the notion that women must stay at home and occupy domestic roles is still thought of to be a pillar of the divided societal roles (Wylie, 2018) and therefore restrict women’s political participation. Due to historical reasons, the cultural expectation that women must prioritise their family responsibilities over public (and therefore political) engagement is something that stops many women candidates in Brazil. This is further aggravated by the double burden of work and domestic life that most Brazilian women suffer from (Näsman & Hyvönen,

2016) and was something that repeatedly came up during interviews. When asked about the impact of Brazilian cultural norms on women's political representation, interviewees all agreed on the fact that it is a huge barrier for women. P2 shared that these societal pressures are internalised and therefore lead to women self-removing themselves from politics as they doubt their qualifications and fear public judgment. P3 recognised that women's underrepresentation is something that happens everywhere yet "in the case of Brazil, [...] there's this issue of a very conservative society in some respects, with a religious issue also very present [...] and this division between what is public and what is private has also always been present in our society". Continuously, she stated that "this more conservative cultural dimension, more religious, of a traditional role for women in the family and everything else, is part of the explanation as to why women are not very present in Brazilian politics". This identification between the public and private sphere can be related back to foundation feminist theories where the main argument was for women to break out of the private and domestic sphere in order to have influence and participation in the public sphere. Continuously, P2 said that "politics [are] still a very masculinised space and the women who manage to access these spaces still suffer from sexism on the part of these men" revealing how normalised sexism and discrimination against women is within the political world. P3 also expressed that "the reason why Brazilian culture and politics are so dominated by men is due to historical milestones that allowed for women to be seen as less important than men". P3 further reasoned that historical milestones such as the strong presence of the catholic church in Brazilian culture can still be seen today.

Continuously, party leadership remains incredibly male dominated and therefore constructs another barrier for women to break when in the professional world. The political culture in Brazil is incredibly rooted in the country's national culture yet is discriminative

towards women. P3 explained “that when a man runs for office and he's a married man with children, it's beneficial to his candidacy so people, society interprets that he is better suited to the position”. On the other hand, “in the case of women, a married woman with children, this is seen in a detrimental way. So this is just the tip of an iceberg, the tip of a very structural dimension of the way Brazilians see politics” as said by P3.

Without women occupying leadership positions, there is limited advocacy for internal reforms to support women and therefore they end up being systematically excluded from decision-making processes (Wylie, 2018). This then results in women feeling political alienation especially the ones within the political world. In her interview, P1 expressed that “in the beginning, it was very difficult [...] [as she] felt like [she] was talking to [herself], few people in the international relations course were studying this subject [feminist studies]” revealing how much more effort women have to put in order to succeed in the political world. Once again this was something that was strongly agreed on over the interviews expressing that the formal rules may suggest inclusion, but the informal practices continue to support men dominance.

4.2.2. Media Portrayal

Together with the cultural norms that Brazil keeps pressing on women, the media and its influence on how women are perceived creates yet another barrier to women's political representation and negatively affects their own perception. The gendered aspects of the media and how harmful it can get towards individuals is something that can be seen everywhere, yet it is disproportionately aimed towards women (Koch et al., 2024). In Brazil, the media plays a crucial role in reinforcing gender stereotypes that are the majority of the time aimed at women in political positions. In P2's interview, she pointed out that women politicians are more often scrutinised for their general appearances, personal lives, and life choices rather than compared to

men who are usually criticised on their policies, leadership and decision-making. This alone reveals an underlying gender gap in how the media portrays political candidates and how differently they are compared to men's online critiques. This media bias does not only shape public opinions on women candidates but it deeply affects women's self-perception and therefore political confidence.

Additionally, P2 talked about Dilma Rousseff and her impeachment in 2016 after serving as president of Brazil for only 5 years following Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Ray et al., 2025). Rousseff's case is the perfect example in showing how gendered and sexist the media can be, especially during court cases and processes; "the media played an important role during this whole process, because not only did they report on the impeachment process, but also all the attacks that Dilma suffered, and they even took a position of being critical of her" as informed by P2. She continued by asserting that "at key moments the media plays an important role not only in the perception of women who want to access these spaces, but also in public opinion itself, to take a position and say, are we against or are we in favor?" emphasising the fundamental role that the media plays in shaping the perception of public opinion on women in leadership positions and politics. In a study performed by Koch et al in 2024 where 10 million tweets directed at women candidates in the Brazilian 2022 elections were analysed and constantly monitored, it was found that young and left-wing candidates and candidates with higher visibility were the ones to receive most online misogynist attacks. Moreover, an increase in misogynistic online attacks in the leading week was found to be associated with a decrease in those women candidates' tweets in the following week. This can highly threaten women's online and public participation and results in silencing women's voices in political debates (Koch et al., 2024).

This cultural resistance to women's leadership in politics and gendered media hate creates a political environment in which women are not only statistically underrepresented but also discriminated against symbolically. It further validates that not only institutional barriers, but also Brazil's societal attitudes have a significant role in excluding Brazilian women from politics. This exclusion doesn't just affect women's participation and representation in politics, it has a deeper influence on their overall self-perception in their private lives. Together with gendered social norms and the misogynistic media portrayal women political candidates experience in Brazil, it gives them little to no mental confidence in either running for candidates or even sustaining any sort of leadership role whether in their professional or private life (Näsman & Hyvönen, 2016).

4.3. Double Burden, Triple Filter: Intersectionality Barriers

Intersectionality is a foundation concept in feminist and progressive discussions as it entails looking beyond simple lenses of analysis and examines the interconnected factors that affect women in their everyday lives. Intersectionality takes into account, gender, age, race, cultural background, sexual orientation, etc, to find out the complexities of inequality and where it is rooted from. Dr Marlise Matos is a Brazilian political scientist that focuses on gender studies. In her research on women's political representation in Brazil, she came up with a hypothetical 5 stages of women's political representation; eligibility, aspiration, candidacy, election, representation. Each stage has its own challenges and implications and helps understand the entanglement between various factors along the progression (Matos, 2011). The eligibility stage consists of the legal and formal qualifications required to run in a political context, yet it examines the drawbacks of discriminatory laws, lack of citizenship rights, and age restrictions on

women candidates. Following is the aspiration stage which is about the personal ambition and motivation that women seek for political office, identified barriers are societal norms, lack of role models, and internalised gender roles that stop women from fighting for political positions. Third comes the candidacy stage where individuals actively run for political office and experience the challenges of securing party nominations, lack of funding and media bias. The fourth stage is about women's elections and the overall process of being elected through public voting, but the barriers are voter biases and unsupportive electoral system structures. Finally comes the 5th stage; representation stage, when once elected, women must strive for the ability to effectively influence policy decisions, but might face marginalisation within political institutions, limited access to leadership and finding difficulty is gender-sensitive advancement. Addressing the obstacles identified at each stage is crucial for women's political representation and its enhancement (Matos, 2011). Mato's 5 stages of women's political representation reveals how women aren't just politically underrepresented, they suffer from different factors that together create an ongoing barrier to their full political potential. These factors can be seen in different variations such as institutional and legal dimensions that enable women from pursuing political careers and therefore infringing on women's political self-perception.

4.3.1. Race, Regional Identity and Sexual Orientation

As intersectionality proved to be an important research framework for this study, it was also something that was found crucial in the interviews. Taking race, class, regional identity and sexual orientation into account is crucial for the understanding of possible barriers to women's political representation and their broader implications. The inclusion of marginalised voices in Brazilian politics has been a topic of continuous debate over the years as policies and decisions that affect these groups and communities do not actually include them nor represent them during

the processes. As previously mentioned, Brazil is home to a wide diversity of people and groups which also means that it requires intersectional policies; yet that is not the case.

The indigenous tribes and communities of Brazil are at constant risk of political exclusion and land invasion yet they reside in most areas of the country (see appendix, figure 1) (Guajajara, 2023). In the 2022 elections, indigenous candidates were the only group that was able to record growth in election votes (8%); 256 indigenous candidates were elected mayors, vice mayors and city councilors (Mendes, 2024). Unfortunately, from those numbers, a massive gender gap can be identified; “indigenous women accounted for just one mayor of a total of nine indigenous mayors elected, four vice mayors of a total of nine, and 36 of a total of 234 councilors” (Mendes, 2024). Notable mentions from these elections are Joênia Wapixana who was the first indigenous woman elected for the Chamber of Deputies and is currently serving as chair of the National Indigenous People Foundation and Célia Xakriabá who was the first indigenous woman in the Federal Congress, and continues to prominently advocate for indigenous rights and education.

Again, in the 2022 elections, a milestone was hit for Afro-Brazilian women as the record number of black and brown women were elected as federal deputies for the Chamber of Deputies (Carriconde, 2023). Nevertheless, only 8% of the National Congress seats are occupied by black and brown women whilst they represent more than 55% of the population (Carriconde, 2023). Adding to this, the LGBTQ+ community faces unique challenges in fighting for equal political representation as well as advocating for a safer environment. Once again the 2022 elections marked a huge step towards recognition as LGBTQ+ individuals were elected securing 20 positions in the first round. Within those, 16 were women and 2 were transgender women which marked a historic election of Erika Hilton and Duda Salabert (Rodriguez, 2022). In her interview,

P3 talked a lot about the importance of intersectionality in Brazilian politics and its current implications for communities. According to her, Erika Hilton's election from the PSOL (*Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* - Socialism and Liberty Party) was a big step towards black women in Brazil but it wasn't enough as "PSOL still has a very small bench". She explained that bigger political parties are aligned with the right, so they naturally have more conservative agendas and therefore assign women in silenced positions. "When women who actually push forward proposals to strengthen women's rights are given little capacity for articulation and influence, which makes it difficult to get a majority of votes, pass a proposal, and actually have an influence on the political party" P3 continued. Even though LGBTQ+ women represented just 2.1% of nearly 10,000 women candidates in the 2022 election, they accounted for 5.3% of all elected women (Rodriguez, 2022). Continuously, violence against LGBTQ+ women is the highest they've ever been, accounting for a total of 257 in 2023, and 30% of targeted registered gender-based political violence (Cruz, 2024). This dissatisfaction with what was publicly portrayed as a huge milestone not only for women but for black and trans women only reveals the multi-layered aspects of intersectionality and how the road to equal political representation is long.

4.3.2. Afro-Brazilian Women

When talking about Brazilian women's right to vote, P3 explained that even though women received the right to vote in 1932, this right was only given to white, rich women and therefore didn't embrace all women. She continued by saying that "black women were able to vote, to participate in politics, from the 1988 Constitution onwards, which was a Constitution in which social movements, especially the black movement and the feminist movement, played a major role". This expresses how black women didn't only differ from the neutral (men) but also

from the other (women); black women had and continue to suffer from a triple filter that is forged around race. Continuously, she talked about the notion that as most women that are elected or granted political power come from more privileged social backgrounds, their willingness to represent marginalised women's voices are less prominent. Consequently, this gap between representation diversity and substantive advocacy results in women feeling alienated not only from mainstream male politicians but also female political elites.

When talking about the representation of Afro-Brazilian women within the political structure, P3 used Marielle Franco's example to illustrate the triple filter that black women have to endure when active in politics. She informed that Marielle Franco was a human rights defender who was most voted and elected as councillor in Rio de Janeiro and was a confident speaker against the police brutality and extrajudicial killings in Brazil (Rogerio, 2024). In 2018, after a year of being in office, Marielle Franco was murdered driving back from delivering a speech in Rio de Janeiro, shot by 2 murderers travelling in a nearby vehicle (Rogerio, 2024). P3 followed; "she is a great example of Brazil's hostility to the presence of women in politics" and that "her death led to many other women running in her name, to honor her memory. And with that, from 2018 onwards, [Brazil] had an increase in black women interested in politics, understanding that this is a space of dispute, of dispute not only ideologically, but also physically. We need to be physically present in these spaces".

These continuous exclusions show how intersectionality is a crucial aspect in understanding the full scope that barriers can hold to women's political representation. Addressing gender inequality in Brazilian politics requires a nuanced and layered approach that considers the overlapping systems of oppression that affect different groups of women.

5. The Effects of Institutional and Cultural Barriers on Brazilian Women's Political Self-Perception

As this research doesn't just focus on the case study analysis and how different factors of Brazil's politics and culture affect women's representation in politics, the following section looks into women's self-perception of their political representation in Brazil. This findings section suggests that the perceptions of political representation of Brazilian women are not only shaped by institutional realities but also by emotional and psychological experiences linked to recognition, respect and participation. There were three main themes that were identified in the interviews that helped categorise this following section; the feeling of not being represented on a broad scale, abortion laws and women politicians infringing on feminist driven politics.

5.1. Brazilian Women's Self-Perceptions in Politics

5.1.1. Represented From a Distance

When asked about women's actual political representation in Brazil, none of the women shared deep agreement with the current political systems and how representatives they may seem. It became clear that this disconnection between formal representation and personal perception highlights the limitations of numerical representation as a metric for success. Looking into the politics of Brazil and the women's responses, it is clear that the political initiatives targeting women are often top-down and disconnected from their realities (Wylie, 2018). Policies may exist on paper, but they are poorly implemented (institutional and structural barriers) or even fail to address the root causes of gender inequality (cultural barriers). When asked about

feeling represented within the politics of Brazil, P2 shared that she and her colleagues feel heard when politicians who support progressive, feminist and left-wing causes, which are closed to their views. However she recognised that this “more aligned group who has this specific political discourse is a minority”. This reveals how the small number of women that actually feel represented within their country’s politics can only count on specific candidates to truly advocate for their rights and therefore don’t feel represented by the majority. This then contributes to a perception of political tokenism and performative inclusion where Brazilian women are only fully represented and fought for on a party-based level (Hessami & Da Fonseca, 2020). The sense that Brazilian women “are seen but not heard” resonates deeply with women across different backgrounds and only emphasises its urgent need for action. Continuously, P1 talked about the lack of acceptance and pride in women candidates; “in political science, [...] it's still very difficult to say that you're a feminist, it's still difficult to say that you study gender, because most people understand that this is a form of political activism and not a way of doing academic research, and make a career out of it”. This quote shows the importance of not only having stronger institutional opportunities for women but also establishing a stronger cultural perspective towards women in politics and diminishing hate and undermining.

5.1.2. Abortion Laws

Another recurring topic in the interview with P1 was the abortion laws in Brazil and how interconnected they are to women’s political representation in Brazil. Today, in Brazil, abortions are only legalised under three cases: rapes, life-threatening conditions for the mother and anencephalic fetuses (FIGO, n.d). P1 expressed that “as this is something that directly affects women, it should be a topic managed within women political leaders” and not contradictory in the hands of men.

Continuously, due to this power imbalance, the rise of conservatism and religious driven politics enable abortion laws and thus women to access safe and sustainable health care. As P2 mentioned in her interview; “many legal abortion services have been closed in various cities in Brazil because of the advance of this more conservative perspective [...] this is a reproductive right that is very basic for women and that in Brazil today it is being threatened”. When asked about abortion laws, P2 said that “in Brazil [it] is very difficult to pass abortion legislation [...] no matter how much women push for it, progressive women, because [for] deputies who are religious, evangelicals, abortion will never be an issue.” The rise of conservative and evangelistic political influence in Brazil is something that greatly affects social and institutional structures and therefore the abortion laws are at stake (Burity, 2021). According to P2, “it's difficult for a right-wing evangelical MP to support an initiative like this, and even left-wing MPs whose agenda is abortion can't pass legislation like this because of the profile of the legislators, who are also more conservative”.

Furthermore, the access to abortion in Brazil isn't something that is only jeopardised by rising conservative ideologies but also social class and race inequalities. In her interview, P1 said that “women who are entitled, who have a higher income and access to resources, are able to have safe abortions. [On the other hand] women who are poor, black, from the peripheries, end up dying because they have this procedure done in an unsafe way, which puts their lives at risk”. The inequality that rises from privatising and controlling abortions is something that research doesn't dive into as it is fairly new yet incredibly important in understanding the different power dynamics that are at stake due to women's political underrepresentation. Once again, the concept of intersectionality is incredibly beneficial in comprehending the complexities of abortion laws as for example “black women have less access to safe and legal abortion and today they are the

group that suffers the most from mortality, issues and the implications of abortion” as explained by P3. Moreover, abortion discussions are “still about whether it's right or wrong, whether it can or can't, and not about whether the state should promote safe conditions for abortion to take place” continued by P3. Having a stronger and more representative female leadership within the political world of Brazil, would not only allow women to feel represented but also have a direct impact on their lives and well-being.

5.1.3. Women Against Women

The final overarching theme that was repeated throughout the interviews was that Brazilian women don't feel like current women political figures actually advocate for women supportive policies and discussions. This was something that P3 and P2 were most informed and experts on but it was also mentioned in P1's interview. P3 particularly noted that “simply having more women in office is insufficient if those women do not advocate for gender equity, social justice or marginalised communities”. This quote reveals that representation is not about presence; it's about alignment as well as the collaboration between those in power and those who are affected by said power. She continued by saying that “looking at the number of women elected, there are few who actually defend feminist agendas, who defend women's rights. Many women, with the advance of legislation, have been used as oranges” going back to the famously known expression of women candidates becoming dumb and naive ‘oranges’. Moreover, P3 shared that “these are women who, [are] elected, [are] defending male interests or interests that go against women's own rights. So they don't really have an interest in political life, they aren't the protagonists of their political mandates” emphasising how unfair and fragmented Brazil's political system is towards women. P3 assured this leads to a huge distortion in representation as the few women who actually defend women's interests suffer a great deal of political persecution

(life threats, virtual bullying and violence). Furthermore, P2 gave the example that as “we look at political deputies who are left-wing and progressive, why would a right-wing deputy speak out against women's rights, or who is anti-feminist, who supports Bolsonaro, who is anti-LGBTQIA+ groups”. This continues to make the field of feminist studies and gender equality something that keeps on being perceived as ‘un-serious’ as seen in the previous section. The imbalance in how women represent other women is something that hits deeper than just frustration and discouragement, it affects women’s overall idea of themselves in their everyday life. As women don’t see other women taking leadership roles or giving up on women concerned topics, their own perception of capabilities is dramatically fractured (Näsman & Hyvönen, 2016). Women are therefore less likely to support one another, try breaking the career ladder and this affects their internal self-perception while unconsciously giving in to the oppressive system.

5.2. Seeds for Change: Recommendations from Local Experts (Interviewees)

This final section focuses on the recommendations and changes that were proposed in the interviews as well as research findings to back up these policies. It is important to examine these recommendations not only from a political point of view but, as found in the research findings, cultural aspects are incredibly influential in determining women’s accreditation. These recommendations can be considered points for future research and action in order to minimise women’s political underrepresentation in Brazil.

5.2.1. Change in Electoral System

The first recurring recommendation was about the need for drastic change in Brazil's political system and more specifically its electoral system. The following recommendations focus on interviewee's proposed necessary change within Brazil's political system.

- ❖ **Reformulating the electoral code** by removing the open list voting system and introducing a list system in which parties are obliged to have women instead of having the current reserved percentage for women.
 - Taking the example of councilors' elections, parties launch more than 100 candidacies, so initially 30% might seem enough. Yet if only 15 are elected, the disproportion between women and men is still too high to have enough women represented (P3, personal communication, 2025).
- ❖ **Legislation change in adopting gender parity** mandatory for all parties instead of going forward with the Senate's proposal of reserving 20% of seats for women.
 - Brazil should "follow the example of other Latin American countries, such as: Bolivia, Mexico and Argentina which have all adopted gender parity" (P2, personal communication, 2025).
- ❖ **Changing bills' proposals in politics** by introducing new forms of bills proposals making sure all women support gender-sensitive topics.
 - Having more progressive proposals advocating for women's political representation.
- ❖ **Manage electoral funding** so that women are not only given money but enough and equal amount to men as well as support on using said money.

5.2.2. Gender Quotas

- ❖ **Challenging and reinforcing current gender quotas** to go beyond the critical mass theory (30% minimum to make a change) as it has shown to not be enough in Brazil.
 - The percentage of women is much lower than the necessary 30% in all levels of government, meaning there needs to be structural change to this approach (P2, personal communication, 2025).
 - The Senate is currently proposing a 20% seat reservation for women and therefore abolishing the current 30% gender quota. However this would stagnate advancement as women currently occupy almost 20% in Congress and therefore wouldn't be encouraged to run for more seats resulting in unsuccessful political influence and representation (P2, personal communication, 2025).
- ❖ **Establishing internal gender quotas** so that parties are obliged to put down women in leadership positions allowing for reverberation in women's political representation.
 - Encourage women to lead committees within legislative houses and manage political resources.
 - Transform the TSE's current 'recommendation' for parties to have internal quotas into an obligation following PT's (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, Workers' Party) internal quota (P2, personal communication, 2025).
- ❖ **Stronger punishment** for political parties that fail to meet the gender quotas.
 - Strengthening the way the TSE questions electoral lists without gender quotas' fulfillment.

5.2.3. Intersectionality

- ❖ **Intersectional gender quotas** allowing for all groups of women to participate in politics.

- Establishing a gender quota mechanism linked to racial quotas to ensure more black women participate in legislative positions (P1, personal communication, 2025).
 - Offer stronger support (funding, media, resources, facilitation) to women from marginalised groups (P2, personal communication, 2025).
- ❖ **Politically covering cross-effective areas** that allow for a more harmonious and collaborative society.
- Areas such as education, public health (sexual and reproductive health), environment, and kindergartens are necessary assets in constructing a more equal society (P2, personal communication, 2025).
- ❖ **Solidarity between women in politics** to strengthen relations and establish a critical yet supportive and respectful environment (P1, personal communication, 2025).
- Diminishing the hate, fear and violence that women in politics receive to protect their physical, mental and emotional health (P3, personal communication, 2025).
 - Uplifting younger generations in fighting for stronger political representation.
- ❖ **Encouraging men** to support women candidates and women-sensitive topics in politics to form coalitions.
- If women want to achieve a strong enough level of political participation and representation, collaboration with men is essential for becoming an equal representative and not a minority (P1, personal communication, 2025). “If we don’t get men’s support in this feminist struggle, we’ll keep talking amongst ourselves, being a minority and not advancing our rights” (P1, personal communication, 2025).

6. Critical Reflection on Research Findings

6.1. Discussion

The research findings illustrate that institutional, cultural and intersectional barriers that keep Brazilian women from achieving significant political representation are all closely linked. The starting research aim was a simple investigation in finding what keeps Brazilian women from being represented and how this impacts their sense of political self-perception revealed to be multi-layered and part of a wider range of complexities. The following part allows for the research question to be answered in all its fullness.

Firstly, Brazil's institutional structure continuously infringes on women's political representation as seen with its open-list proportional electoral system and the inefficiency of gender quotas. These factors create a toxic political atmosphere between parties in which women are substantially excluded, yet symbolically included, as gathered from the interviews. Brazil's gender quotas which are supposed to be progressive instruments, are in reality turned into bureaucratic items as expressed with the idea of 'laranjas' candidates. Furthermore, it is important to closely look at the influence of culture and gendered social expectations in Brazil. The rise of conservative and religious ideologies in the country are a huge asset in reinforcing the idea that women must confine themselves to the home and private sphere. As expressed from the interview, this then blocks voters from supporting female politicians and infringes on the persuasion of their leadership careers. Taking intersectionality into consideration, women from marginalised groups suffer even more from this as they experience both the double burden of being a woman and the triple filter of being a (e.g.) Afro-Brazilian woman. Whilst they have been some historically made exceptions, such as Erika Hilton, these are still excluded

occurrences rather than signs of change. Following Dr. Marlise Mato's theory on the five stages of women's political representation, the political journey for women is interrupted at each stage adding to their constant battle.

As gathered from the interviews, the mental cost of this exclusion from politics is what answers the second part of the research question. The interviewees reported a sense of political alienation as well as sentiments of frustration and defeat towards institutional constraints. It was found that although women might be present in an overall political setting, their opinion and objectives are regularly silenced or deferred. As said by one of the interviewees, this emphasises the symbolic nature of women's political representation in Brazil as women don't even feel represented by most women candidates; widening the gap between advocacy and representation. Additionally, women in political leadership positions risk various cases of violence and media scrutiny resulting in less women wanting to fight for their rights, as seen with various examples.

Finally, the findings show that progress will remain stagnant in the absence of a critical mass of women, men, and all groups actively promoting and advocating for gender equality and stronger institutional developments to support them. Otherwise Brazilian women will continue to be seen rather than heard in their country's politics which will continue to have drastic consequences on its society.

The proposed recommendations crafted by the interviewees are incredibly valuable when talking about Brazil's next steps and future research. The repetition of a well needed change in its electoral system as well as a reinforcement of gender quotas shows the importance of having strong, inclusive and adapting institutional structures for an equal political environment. Continuously, the need for intersectionality and all genders support is crucial if women want to effectively advance towards a more equitable political environment for all.

6.2. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis examined the factors that prevent Brazilian women from having a strong political representation as well as the impact of these obstacles on their political self-perception. It was found that these barriers are rooted within Brazil's institutional frameworks, social norms, and culture as demonstrated by the research findings and the interviews. Women's access to power and political representation is hindered from many different factors revealing how complex and interconnected this issue truly is. This thesis also showed resilience and motivation in the face of these obstacles. Going forward, more research is required to understand the long-term effect of intersectional representation and the experiences of women from marginalised groups. It is also necessary for more research to be done on the influence an exclusive and discriminatory political structure and cultural norms has not only on women but the broader Brazilian society. Brazilians must see the importance of a more inclusive political and cultural system as well as more awareness on the urgency and societal impact of this issue therefore offering women the possibility and support to thrive in politics. Finally, Brazilian women's political representation isn't just about numbers and quotas, it is about structural change, cultural transformation and solidarity and inclusion across gender, race, identity and class. Only then can the critical mass of women and their allies not only make a symbolic but a systematic transformation in Brazilian politics and society.

7. References List

- Base.Digital. (2021, July 14). *Rede de Mulheres Negras - Fundo Brasil*. Fundo Brasil.
<https://www.fundobrasil.org.br/projeto/rede-de-mulheres-negras/>
- Blake, S. E. (2011). The vigorous core of our nationality: race and regional identity in northeastern Brazil. *Choice Reviews Online*, 49(04), 49–2243.
<https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.49-2243>
- Burity, J. (2021). The Brazilian Conservative Wave, the Bolsonaro Administration, and Religious Actors. *Brazilian Political Science Review*, 15(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1590/1981-3821202100030005>
- Carriconde, G. (2023, July 28). Participation of black women in Brazilian politics increases, but violence persists (L. Peresin, Trans.). *Brasil De Fato*.
https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2023/07/31/participation-of-black-women-in-brazilian-politics-increases-but-violence-persists/?utm_source
- Childs, S., & Krook, M. K. (2008). Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation. *Political Studies*, 56(3), 725–736. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00712.x>
- Costa, S., Rios, F., & Baldráia, F. (2023). Promises and Pitfalls of Intersectional Politics: The Black Coalition for Rights in Brazil. *Social Sciences*, 12(12), 684.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12120684>
- Cruz, E. P. (2024, January 27). *Brazil: Violent deaths of LGBTQIA+ individuals reach 257 in 2023*. Agência Brasil.
<https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/direitos-humanos/noticia/2024-01/violent-deaths-lgbtqia-individuals-reach-257-2023>

- Eaglin, J., & Granville Widener, H. (2023, November 30). *Research Guides: Brazil-U.S. Relations: Military Dictatorship (1964-1985)*.
<https://guides.loc.gov/brazil-us-relations/military-dictatorship>
- Goyal, T., & Sells, C. (2023). Descriptive representation and party building: evidence from municipal governments in Brazil. *American Political Science Review*, 118(4), 1840–1855.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055423001168>
- Guajajara, S. (n.d.). *Governance Matters – Brazil’s First Minister of Indigenous Peoples*.
<https://www.chandlerinstitute.org/governancematters/brazils-first-minister-of-indigenous-peoples>
- Hessami, Z., & Da Fonseca, M. L. (2020). Female political representation and substantive effects on policies: A literature review. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 63, 101896.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2020.101896>
- Hughes, M. M. (2011). Intersectionality, Quotas, and Minority Women’s Political Representation Worldwide. *The American Political Science Review*, 105(3), 604–620.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41480860>
- Kjellén, E. & Institute of Latin American Studies. (2018). Women’s representation in Brazilian local politics. In *Bachelors Degree 15 HE Credits Latin American Studies Bachelor Programme in Latin American Studies (180 Credits)* [Thesis].
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2%3A1315416/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Koch, L., Ghawi, R., Pfeffer, J., & Steinert, J. I. (2024, March 12). *Online Misogyny Against Female Candidates in the 2022 Brazilian Elections: A Threat to Women’s Political Representation?* arXiv.org. https://arxiv.org/abs/2403.07523?utm_source

- Mainwaring, S. (1991). Politicians, parties, and Electoral Systems: Brazil in Comparative perspective. *Comparative Politics*, 24(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422200>
- Marcha Das Mulheres Negras 2025 -. (2025, April 9). *Marcha das Mulheres Negras - Marcha Das Mulheres Negras 2025*. Marcha Das Mulheres Negras 2025 - Por Reparação E Bem Viver. <https://marchadasmulheresnegras.com.br/>
- Maruci, H. (2018, February 24). *Women's struggle to vote in Brazil: Same fight, different strategies* | OHRH. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/womens-struggle-to-vote-in-brazil-same-fight-different-strategies/>
- Matos, M. (2011). *MATOS_Marlise_A sub-representação política das mulheres na chave de sua subteorização na ciência política*. https://www.academia.edu/40359118/MATOS_Marlise_A_sub_representa%C3%A7%C3%A3o_pol%C3%ADtica_das_mulheres_na_chave_de_sua_subteoriza%C3%A7%C3%A3o_na_ci%C3%Aancia_pol%C3%ADtica
- Mendes, K. (2024, October 24). *Brazil elects record-high number of Indigenous mayors, vice mayors & councilors*. Mongabay Environmental News. https://news.mongabay.com/2024/10/brazil-elects-record-high-number-of-indigenous-mayors-vice-mayors-councilors/?utm_source
- Moisés, J. Á., & Rodrigues Sanchez, B. (2014, January 1). *Women's political representation and the quality of democracy in Brazil*. https://www.academia.edu/63243783/Women_s_Political_Representation_and_the_Quality_of_Democracy_in_Brazil

- Moisés, J. Á., & Sanchez, B. R. (2016). *Women's political representation in Brazil*.
https://www.academia.edu/18012170/Women_s_Political_Representation_in_Brazil
- Nakamura, L. a. C., & Salgado, E. D. (2020). Women and politics in Mexico and Brazil.
Seqüência Estudos Jurídicos E Políticos, 41(85), 112–134.
<https://doi.org/10.5007/2177-7055.2020v41n85p112>
- Näsman, C., & Hyvönen, C. (2016). *Gender and Leadership in Brazil – a Study on Women in Management Positions*. DIVA.
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1051656&dswid=3919>
- Pereira, B., & Aguilar, M. (2021). ‘Nenhum passo atrás’ (Not a step back): Brazilian Black women’s resistance in the era of Bolsonaro’s far-right government. *Gender & Development*, 29(2–3), 447–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2021.1978719>
- Ray, Michael, Wallenfeldt, & Jeff. (2025, January 28). *Dilma Rousseff | Biography, Presidency, Brazil, Impeachment, & Facts*. Encyclopedia Britannica.
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Latin-America>
- Rodriguez, M. (2022, October 4). In a First, Brazil Elected Two Trans Women to Its National Congress. *Them*.
https://www.them.us/story/brazil-trans-congress-erika-hilton-duda-salabert?utm_source
- Rogero, T. (2024, November 1). Marielle Franco murder: ex-police jailed for decades over crime that shook Brazil. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/31/marielle-franco-brazil-murder-former-police-officers-sentenced>

- Sacchet, T. (2018). Why gender quotas don't work in Brazil? The role of the electoral system and political finance. *Colombia Internacional*, 95, 25–54.
<https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint95.2018.02>
- Sader, V., & Bernhard, I. (2023). An imperative for women's political leadership: Lessons from Brazil. In *Atlantic Council*.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/an-imperative-for-women-political-leadership-lessons-from-brazil/>
- Scheidweiler, G., & De Sousa, A. C. S. O. a. J. K. L. L. (2023). Congresswomen and substantive representation in Brazil. *Estudos Feministas*, 31(1), 1–14.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48736834>
- Tavares, P. (2022, April 1). *Little progress for women in politics in Brazil*. Wilson Center.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/little-progress-women-politics-brazil>
- Thomson, J. (2018). Resisting gendered change. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique*, 39(2), 178–191.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26956726>
- Wylie, K., & Madison, J. (2015). *Candidatas laranjas by choice? gender quotas, elite resistance, and sacrificial lambs in elections to Brazilian legislatures*. ECPR.
<https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/23380>
- Wylie, K. N. (2018). The puzzle of women's underrepresentation in Brazil. In *Party institutionalization and women's representation in Democratic Brazil*.
https://assets.cambridge.org/97811084/29795/excerpt/9781108429795_excerpt.pdf?utm_source

8. Appendix

Document 1. *Interview guide* [Interview Guide](#)

Figure 1. *Indigenous Persons in Indigenous Lands by Municipality - 2022*

