

The Ethics Committee Dilemma: Gender Dynamics in Brazilian Parliament

Analysis by



- *Of the 22 disciplinary proceedings referred to the Chamber of Deputies' Ethics Committee in 2023, 12 are against congresswomen. While they take only 17.7% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies (91 out of 513), 54.5% of the disciplinary proceedings are against parliamentary women.*
- *Historically, the majority of cases are archived. Between 2018 and 2022, 70 proceedings (96%) out of 73 were archived. Formally, this instrument cannot be seen as effective in the Chamber of Deputies.*
- *In their Instagram posts, each referred congresswomen expresses similar opinions on the disciplinary proceedings, falling under three main narratives: i) congresswomen see the proceedings as a method of intimidation and silencing; ii) they show solidarity with other referred congresswomen; and iii) they highlight the fast-paced approval of their referrals as proof of misogynistic intent.*
- *Even though referring a congressperson for disciplinary action has, in the majority of cases, no formal or legal consequences, we observe that parliamentarians use this instrument to provoke and draw attention to their opposition's behaviour.*

Since its creation in 2001, the Ethics Committee of the Chamber of Deputies has archived¹ the vast majority of cases brought before it. Until recently, the majority of referrals were against congressmen corresponding to the demography of the chamber (majority men). In 2022, the trend reversed, with the majority of disciplinary referrals relating to women deputies. In this year alone, out of the 22 disciplinary

¹ In the Brazilian Legislation, archived referrals implies that no action was taken place towards the deputies.

proceedings brought to the Ethics Committee, 12 are against women parliamentarians. This imbalance reflects a growing concern among political commentators that the Ethics Committee is increasingly being used as a tool of intimidation against women legislators in Brazil's current polarised context. This report aims to understand how the congresswomen respond to the referrals in their online presence (overwhelmingly viewed as an instrument of intimidation). For context, we outline the modern historical context of the Ethics Committee and how it has become a more common political instrument. Additionally, they show solidarity with each other for facing similar experiences. In addition, through their posts on Instagram, the majority of referred congresswomen receive considerable engagement when discussing the proceedings online. This analysis was performed by **Democracy Reporting International**.

Methodology

This report analyses Instagram posts from eight female legislators related to their referral to the Ethics Committee, identifying who talks more about the cases online, their engagement, as well as the narratives and topics found within the posts. To achieve this, we collected 3655 Instagram posts from April 1st to September 26th. The chosen dates cover the first referral of 2023, which occurred on May 30th against a congresswoman due to her behaviour in a parliamentary session on April 11th. After collecting all Instagram posts by the eight legislators within this timeframe, we filtered the posts for only those where the legislators discussed the Ethics Committee and their referrals. To filter the posts, we built a dictionary of key words guided by: (1) nominally mentions to the Ethics Committee; (2) terms related to the referrals; (3) hashtags used by congresswomen #ElasFicam (#TheyStay), and #CassaçãoNão (#NoRevocation).

For the quantitative analysis, we employed three primary models for interpreting the posts: (i) topic modelling, a model that allows us to calculate the probability of terms found in the comments associated with broader topics; (ii) most frequent words, an analysis that provides us insights into the content, highlighting the view and narratives present in the legislator's posts; and (iii) engagement rate, to understand if the deputies have different public engagement when discussing their referrals online.

This report has two sections: (I) "Ethics Committee: History of Disciplinary Proceedings Against Congresswomen", which through background and political context, explains the formal role of the committee, its purpose, and cases currently under consideration; (II) "From the Perspective of Referred Congresswoman: Instagram

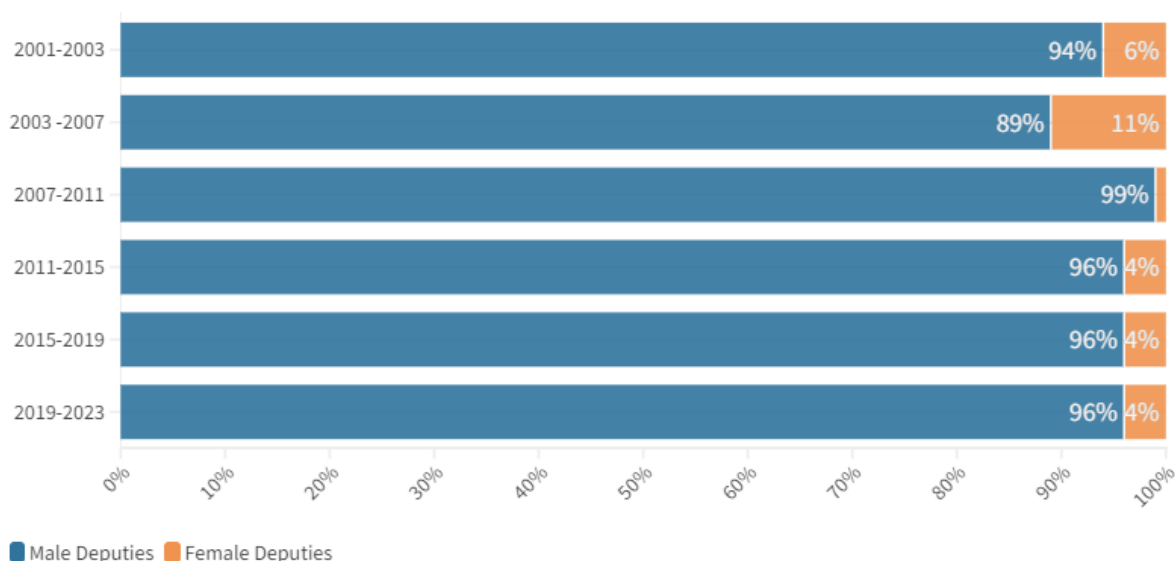
Analysis", which analyses Instagram posts from the eight female legislators, highlighting their engagement, most frequent words and main topics found.

I. Ethics Committee: History of Disciplinary Proceedings Against Congresswomen

Structure of the Ethics Committee

- The [Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum Committee](#) — referred to in this report as the “Ethics Committee”, or simply “the Committee” — was created in October 2001. Its stated purpose is “to oversee the disciplinary procedure for violations of parliamentary decorum within the Chamber of Deputies.”
- The Committee has 21 regular members, as mandated by legislation. Some of its responsibilities include: preserving the dignity of the parliamentary mandate, handling accused individuals, and initiating disciplinary procedures. The penalties for misconduct include: 1) verbal or written censure; 2) suspension of parliamentary privileges for up to six months; 3) suspension of the exercise of the mandate for up to six months; and 4) loss of the mandate.
- Since its inception, the Committee has [faced two major pieces of criticism](#): a lack of female representation among the 21 regular members, and its overwhelming tendency to archive cases. Since 2001, women have accounted for only a small percentage of the council's regular members. Despite a peak between 2003-2007, (graph below), women representation in the Committee has hovered between 4-6% since its creation.
- Since 2022, the president of the Ethics Committee can choose whether or not to accept referrals against deputies. In 2023, of the 12 distinct referrals submitted against congresswomen, three were not accepted. Additionally, as seen in our last report, the referrals against the six left-wing congresswomen were accepted faster than usual. While other referrals from as far back as January 2023 remain unconsidered, the referrals of these congresswomen were accepted within one week.

Graph 1: Members of the Ethics Committee between 2001 and 2023 by gender



Bar graph shows the members of the Chamber of Deputies' Ethics and Decorum Council by gender between 2001 and 2023.

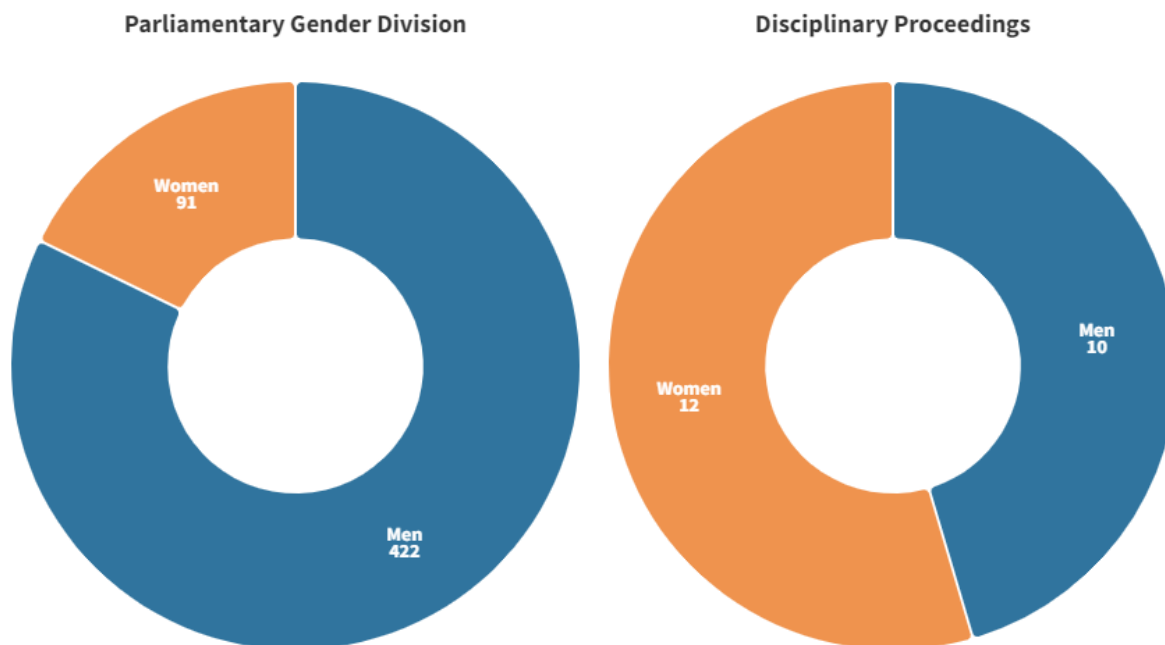
Source: [Chamber of Deputies](#) | Produced by: Democracy Reporting International

- In regards to the archival of cases, between 2001 and 2022, there were [223 disciplinary proceedings](#) presented to the Ethics Committee. Out of these, 190 were archived, that is, 85% of the proceedings had no impact or formal consequence.
- Another criticism to the Committee is by Tássia Rabelo, a professor at the Graduate Programme in Political Science and International Relations (PPGCPR) at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). She argues that the Committee may, in recent years, be used to [target congresswomen](#), considering that the number of referrals against female deputies has increased since 2022 – as analysed in the graph 3 below.

Disciplinary Proceedings against Congresswomen in the last five years

The chart below displays the division of seats in the Chamber of Deputies by gender, along with the number of disciplinary proceedings initiated against women and men in 2023.

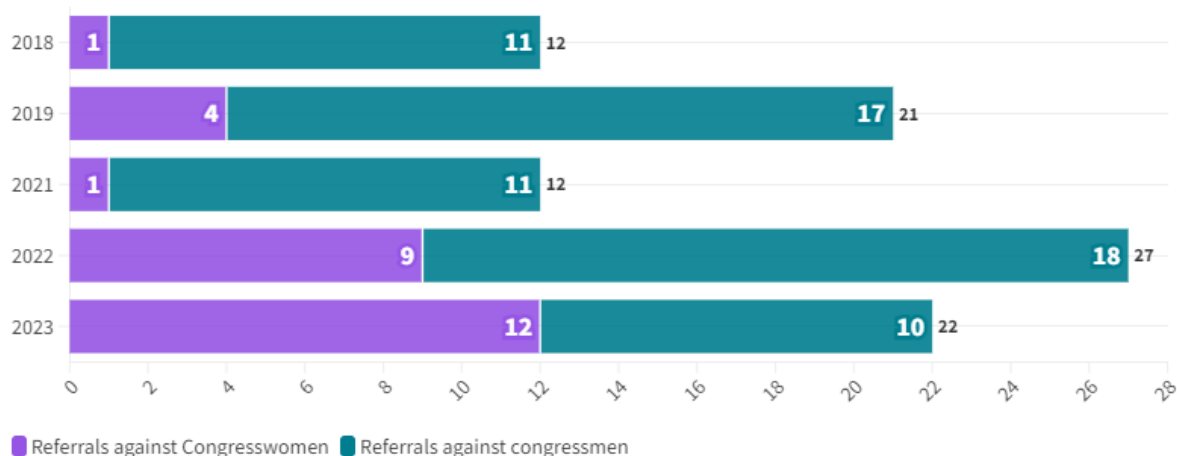
Graph 2: Parliamentary Gender Division and Disciplinary Proceedings by Gender in 2023



Source: [Chamber of Deputies](#) | Produced by: Democracy Reporting International

- The Chamber of Deputies is composed of 513 parliamentarians. Currently, only 91 are female parliamentarians, representing 17.7%, while men make up the majority with 82.3% of the seats. Women constitute a disproportionate number of the disciplinary proceedings received by the Ethics Committee in 2023.
- The number of referrals against women has been low as the historical presence of women in the Chamber of Deputies has been correspondingly low. Although the number of elected women has grown in recent years (77 women in 2018), it is disproportionate for a minority group in parliament to account for more than 50% of the referrals in 2023.
- As of October, 2023 already has the highest number of referrals against women to the Ethics Committee since its inception. It is also the first time that women outnumber men on the Committee (see below).

Graph 3: Disciplinary Proceedings by Gender between 2018 and 2023



Source: [Chamber of Deputies](#) | Produced by: Democracy Reporting International

Ethics Committee referrals in 2023

- Since the beginning of the year, eight female parliamentarians have been referred to the Ethics Committee in 12 different proceedings². Among them are: Carla Zambelli (PL - SP), Júlia Zanatta (PL - SC), Juliana Cardoso (PT-SP), Célia Xakriabá (PSOL-MG), Erika Kokay (PT-DF), Fernanda Melchionna (PSOL-RS), Juliana Cardoso (PT-SP), Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL-SP), Talíria Petrone (PSOL-RJ).
- In the cases against Carla Zambelli and Julia Zanatta, the referrals were motivated by an alleged breach of parliamentary decorum. Zambelli allegedly [offended deputy Duarte Júnior](#), while Zanatta would have agreed with a [misogyny speech against deputy Lídice da Mata](#). Both episodes occurred during a Public Safety Commission in April.
- The other six legislators, as seen in [our latest report](#), were referred to the Ethics Committee by the Liberal Party, and all the parliamentarians involved belong to left-wing parties. Initially, the party filed a single referral against all six, however, after facing criticism, they requested the withdrawal of the joint representation and filed individual complaints. The party accuses the parliamentarians of referring to the deputies who voted in favour of the urgent request in the processing of the Indigenous Land Demarcation Framework Bill as "murderers."

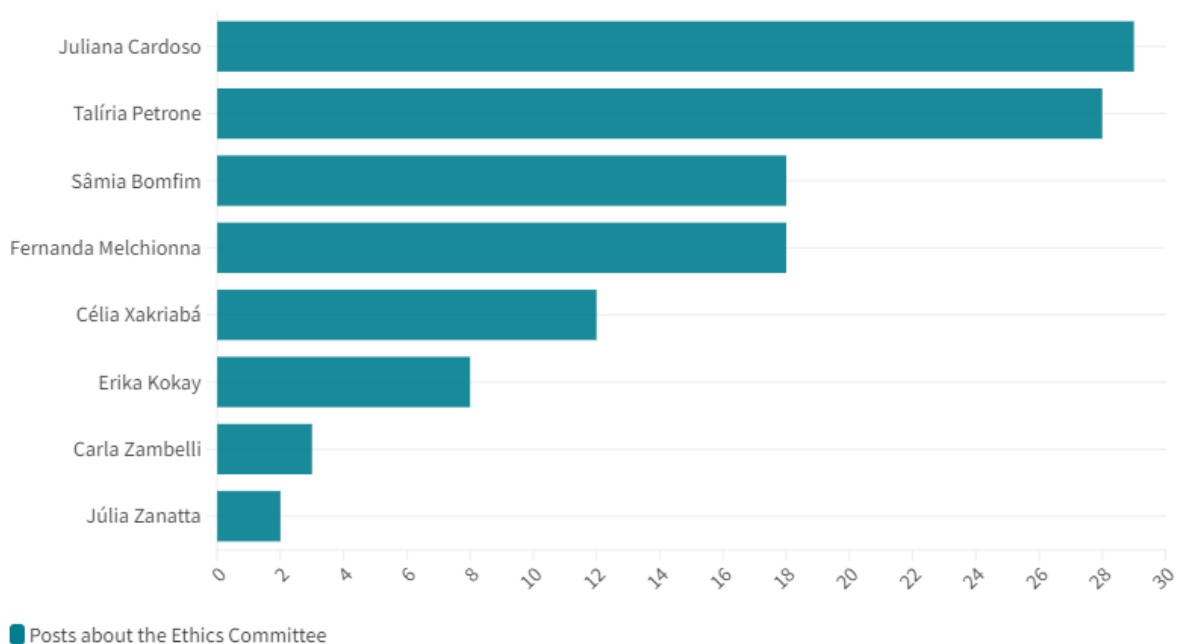
² Please note that for this report, we consider every disciplinary proceeding regardless of if it was accepted to be reviewed by the Committee or not.

II. From the Perspective of Referred Congresswoman: Instagram Analysis

Online Discussion about the Ethics Committee on Posts by the Referred Congresswomen

The graph below shows the number of Instagram posts about the Ethics Committee and referrals per congressmen.

Graph 4: Number of Posts about the Ethics Committee per Congresswomen



The graph shows the number of posts by referred congresswomen that discuss the Ethics Committee of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

Source: Instagram | Produced by: Democracy Reporting International

- Among the eight congresspeople, the two who posted the least about the referrals are among those who were not included in the original joint referral (speech about the Landmark Demarcation Framework Bill incident)
- Despite Carla Zambelli's large Instagram audience (3.3 million followers) she did not discuss her referral; instead, she expressed solidarity with Júlia Zanatta, who experienced harassment and was referred to the Ethics Committee after sharing her experience on social media.



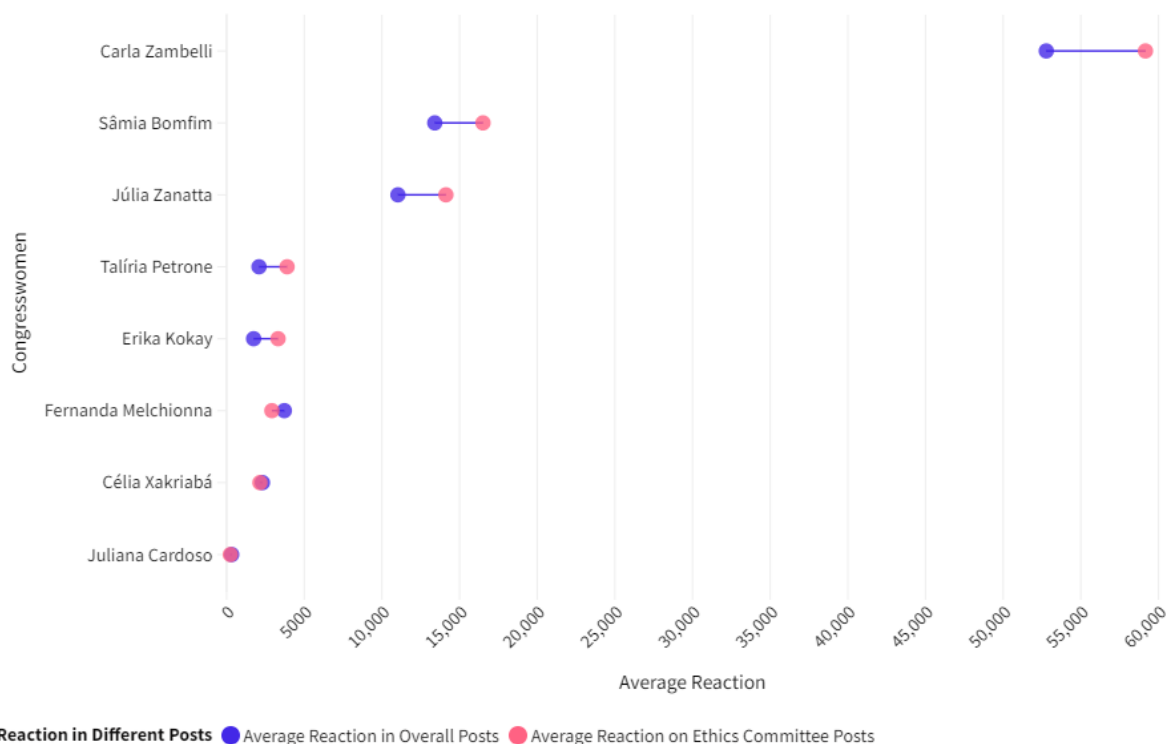
Caption: May the harassment suffered by Deputy @juliazanattasc this Tuesday be seriously investigated. As I stated in the plenary of the Chamber this week, it may be considered a political crime against women under a law recently enacted by Congress.

Congratulations to the Regional Prosecutor of the Republic for her stance in defense of women. It is worth noting that on Thursday night, our party @plnacional22 filed a request for the removal from office on the grounds of parliamentary misconduct against the Deputy from the Communist Party of Brazil, Márcio Jerry, with the President of the Chamber of Deputies.

Source: Instagram | Preparation: Democracy Reporting International

The graph below compares the average reactions to posts in general vs. posts about the Ethics Committee in the last 6 months. To calculate the average reaction, we summed all interactions received on all posts for each congresswoman (that is, likes, comments and shares) and divided by the total number of posts she made in the same timeframe.

Graph 5 Difference Between Reactions Received on Overall Posts versus Posts on the Ethics Committee per Congresswomen



Source: Instagram | Produced by: Democracy Reporting International

- Even though the female legislators did not have a high amount of posts in absolute totals about the Ethics Committee and their referrals, where they did post about the referrals online, those posts, on average, received more engagement. This is true for five out of the 8 legislators (Carla Zambelli, Sâmia Bomfim, Júlia Zanatta, Talíria Petrone, and Erika Kokay).

The main narratives found in the posts

The word cloud below shows the most frequent words in the data set pulled from each congresswoman's Instagram posts.

Graph 6: Word Cloud: Most Used Words in Posts About the Ethics Committee by the Referred Congresswomen



Source: Instagram | Produced by: Democracy Reporting International

- First, there is a group of words that refer to the legislative role of the Committee and how the process of their referral went on. Words such as “committee”, “commission”, “processes”, and “president”, showing how they describe the events and the committee.
- In [our last report](#) on the referrals against the six left-wing legislators, we observed criticism from the legislators, reacting to the speed with which the Ethics Committee accepted the referrals. In contrast, others that were proposed since January were not yet being considered by the Committee, sparking debate as to the political motivation of the Committee.



Image: More punished than men and in fewer leadership positions: women face an imbalance in the Chamber of Deputies.

Post: IMBALANCE OR SEXISM?

Does anyone understand why our cases go so quickly to the ethics committee while the cases against the January 8th coup plotters are stalled?

Source: Instagram | Preparation: Democracy Reporting International



Image: The Bolsonaro supporters have changed their strategy in an attempt to silence left-wing female parliamentarians: they withdrew the representation that called for the collective removal of our mandate and that of five other deputies, and are now taking action against each of us individually, seeking to weaken us. Lira issued the ruling in record time, forwarding the individual representations to the Ethics Committee in less than 24 hours. Meanwhile, the representations against the coup-plotting deputies remain forgotten in a drawer. They will not intimidate us; our fight is collective!

Post: They won't silence us! Sign the petition and support our fight against removal:

samiabomfim.com.br/NaoACassacao

Source: Instagram | Preparation: Democracy Reporting International

- Another group of words (“violence”, “intimidation”, “revocation”, and “fight”) illustrate the congresswomen's speech. The terms evoke political gender based violence, giving insight to their perception of the political events.



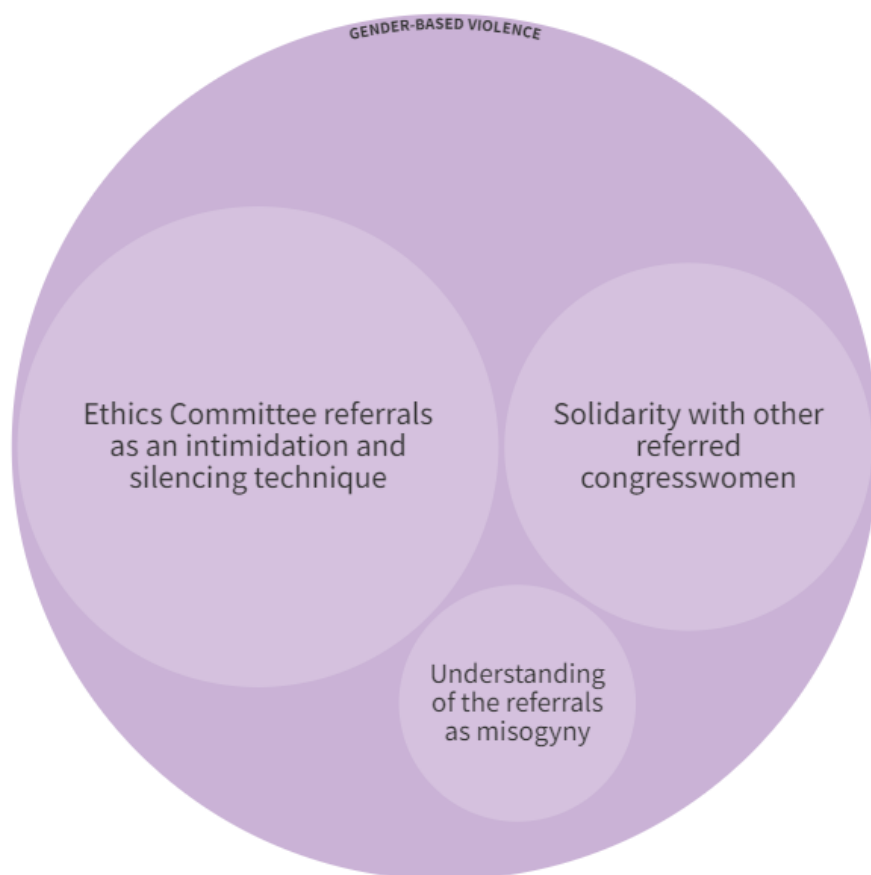
Image: In the Chamber of Deputies, only 1 out of every 7 Committees is chaired by women; Out of every 11 parliamentarians judged in the Ethics Committee of the Chamber, 7 are women; On average, the person responsible for reviewing the case is chosen after 46 days when the defendant is a woman and 86 days when it is a man. 6 Deputies from PSOL and PT are now in the Ethics Committee, accused by PL of expressing their opinions against the Temporal Framework. Against gender-based political violence!

Post: They may try to silence us, but they won't succeed. No steps back in our fight!

Source: Instagram | Preparation: Democracy Reporting International

Further analysis from [topic modelling](#) corroborates this finding. For this analysis, we used a technique that allows for the identification and extraction of significant topics from a large set of unstructured data, such as social media posts.

Graph 7: Main Topics Found among the Posts related to the Ethics Committee by the Referred Congresswomen



The cluster shows the main topics found on posts from the referred congresswomen to the Ethics Committee of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

- All the filtered posts on the Ethics Committee analysed for this report were related to the overall topic of gender-based violence. Within this overall topic, we found three main narratives to support: i) Ethics Committee referrals are used as a technique to intimidate and silence; ii) Solidarity with the other female legislators in the same position; iii) Misogyny as the main driver behind the speed of the processes.

- Referrals as an “intimidation and silencing technique” appears especially consistent among the six legislators who were initially referred together. These congresswomen argue that the culture of the Congress actively attempts to silence women, and they consider it to be referred to the committee for their comments.



Image: Enough of silencing! Let's fight against gender-based political violence and support equality of voices.

Post: The Ethics Committee has received cases to investigate alleged breaches of parliamentary decorum, and guess who is in the crosshairs? Women! We do not live in times of exception! It is unacceptable that in the 21st century, we still have to deal with this type of discrimination and oppression. The female deputies chosen to be processed seem to have common points: they dared to raise their voices and express their opinions with the determination that is inherent to them. And the consequence of becoming the voice of the indigenous people, the most vulnerable, and the defenders of the environment is the relentless persecution by those who have always oppressed our people! This is simply unacceptable. It is infuriating to think that these women are being threatened with such drastic punishments only for defending what they believe in. This is not democracy; this is a form of intimidation and repression. We are tired of the misogynistic culture that permeates politics. It's time to put a stop to it! Women have the right to occupy positions of power and have their voices heard without fear of retaliation and persecution. Gender-based political violence must be denounced, and we must fight for a fairer and more equal future. We need more women to humanize politics in Brazil, in these times of reconstruction. Women who fight are much more bothersome. They will not silence us.

Source: Instagram | Preparation: Democracy Reporting International

- When it comes to solidarity, a large number of posts show the congresswomen supporting each other, Solidarity appears to be a topic that cross-cuts online communication, as congresswomen recognize the importance of standing together when facing perceived violence.



Campaign against gender-based political violence. #TheyStay
Source: Instagram | Preparation: Democracy Reporting International

- [Our last report](#) highlighted the high level of toxicity on YouTube comments. Combining the findings of these two reports, we can observe that even if there is no resolution, the referrals have a negative impact on the political lives of the female deputies, who end up being "stigmatised" by the episode.

About the **Media and Democracy Project**

The School of Communication, Media, and Information of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV ECMI) and the European Union (EU) have established a partnership to collaborate on strengthening Brazilian democracy and the integrity of digital spaces. The initiative, known as the Media and Democracy Project, will be conducted in collaboration with the fact-checking platform Lupa, the German centre for public debate analysis Democracy Reporting International (DRI). The project focuses on debates concerning gender issues, racial inequality, minority rights, hate speech, and other important agendas in Brazilian politics. The project encompasses monitoring and analysis of digital media, fact-checking, and the establishment of a Council as a public space for promoting positive dialogue, involving researchers, civil society, representatives from the government, and platform stakeholders.

Authorship:

This report and data analysis were written and conducted by Beatriz Saab, Digital Democracy Researcher at Democracy Reporting International.

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