



Gendering the crisis: austerity and the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil

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Abstract

In this article, by showing that the burden of retrenchment in social spending in Brazil has been overwhelmingly borne by women, we assert that austerity is not gender neutral. Our research investigates the specificities of the gendered impacts of austerity in the country that have rendered Brazilian women structurally more vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis. We base our argument on a comprehensive literature review summarizing the links between austerity and gender. In the Brazilian case, we explain women's vulnerability in two main aspects: (1) the direct and indirect gendered impacts of austerity in Brazil since 2015, examining the underfunding of policies prior to the pandemic; (2) the gendered effects of the pandemic on already vulnerable groups, amplified by the underfunded policies and the lack of appropriate measures. We show points of proximity between the existing literature on austerity and gender in the Global North and the urgent, structural Brazilian problems.

Keywords Austerity · Public policy · Gender inequality · Covid-19 pandemic · Brazil · Welfare

JEL Classification J16 · D63 · N36 · O54

1 Introduction

Economics is often presented as a neutral and technical science, as if the conflict for resources and policies remains uninfluenced by political and ideological interests. This paper argues that this supposed neutrality masks the effects of economic

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policies on socioeconomic inequalities, especially if gender issues are not taken into account. More specifically, we claim this is the case for austerity (Rossi et al., 2020). Having replaced the term neoliberalism, austerity can, however, be considered a new form of this, which has shaped economic and social policy in Latin America since the 1990s. Under the label of austerity, neoliberal policies—manifest in a reduction of the welfare state and of state regulation in various forms—have made a comeback. The term refers to responsibility, stringency, moral and even religious sentiments that guide good governance of public affairs, in order to maintain an allegedly balanced budget (Konzelmann, 2014). The concept further serves to invoke a sense of guilt that is passed on to society (Gálvez & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2016). Above and beyond such rhetoric and lexical choices, austerity involves a reduction in public spending and in the role of the State as the driver of economic growth and promoter of social well-being (Deleide & Mazzucato, 2019; Oliveira, 2020). It comprises discretionary measures that “affect the structure of the welfare state in terms of social security, public administration, the public sector, public services, the taxation system, labour market institutions, and so on” (Périver, 2018, p. 30–31; Mazzucato & Kattel, 2020). Austerity is seen as a way of controlling the budget with a view to reducing deficits. The latter can also be achieved by increasing taxes, though this alternative tends to be unpopular.

As Martínez et al. (2020) and Dweck et al. (2020) argue, the advocates of austerity assert it to be the foremost way to maintain “healthy” public finances, crucial for the resumption of economic growth, employment, and private investment, as well as a way to keep inflation under control, a particularly sensitive topic in Latin America. Its promises, however, have not been fulfilled; as austerity is procyclical in nature, it tends to worsen recessions and reduce overall investment (Dweck et al., 2020; Deleide & Mazzucato, 2019). As such, austerity is neither a solution for overcoming economic crises, nor a solution for the historical and social vulnerabilities which characterise Latin American societies. We thus echo global criticisms of austerity’s negative effects, which include hampering countries’ abilities to swiftly respond to the challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic (New Statement, 2020). More specifically, we echo Bohoslavsky and Rulli (2020), in arguing that the adoption of austerity measures in Brazil prior to the pandemic has increased vulnerability, taking its heaviest toll on the most vulnerable demographics, as we will further outline in this paper.

Based on a neoclassical standardised conceptualisation of the human being, the advocates of austerity are unable to explain inequalities which structurally shape contemporary capitalist society. They argue that gender and racial inequalities are individual problems, leaving unexplained the fact that these inequalities are a necessary component of the capitalist system (Almeida et al., 2020; Gibb & Oliveira, 2015). We underscore that gendered effects of fiscal austerity are extensive and must be integrated into any analysis (Karamessini, 2014). Bohoslavsky and Rulli (2020) emphasise the negative impact that orthodox economic policies, such as austerity, privatisation, and deregulation of labour, among others, have had on women’s human rights. Moreover, analysis of austerity’s overall gendered effects must also consider its effects on men, so that an overall reduction in wellbeing is not conflated with a reduction in inequality between men and women (Addabbo et al., 2015).

We argue that most of the burden of cuts in social spending in Brazil has been borne by women. These include: a reduced budget for policies which support social reproduction, such as day-care centres; a reduction in policies to combat gender-based violence and guarantee economic autonomy, as well as cuts to areas where women represent the bulk of the workforce, such as health and education (Oliveira et al., 2020). In a sense, the Constitutional Amendment (CA) 95/2016 increases structural, gendered inequalities in Brazil, leading to a deterioration in the social structure and fabric many women had and would have benefitted from during the Covid-19 pandemic (Oliveira, 2020). Based on the understanding that welfare state mechanisms have a key role in stabilising and enabling responses to the Covid-19 crisis, we show how the existing gendered effects of austerity have made Brazilian women structurally more vulnerable during the crisis.

This paper begins with a comprehensive review of the literature on austerity and its gendered impacts. The following section on women's vulnerability addresses two aspects: (1) the gendered impacts of austerity in Brazil since 2015, highlighting the effects of the underfunding of policies prior to the pandemic and (2) the impacts of the pandemic on already underfunded programmes and policies, intensifying gendered effects and previous vulnerabilities. Our final remarks highlight the centrality of this discussion in understanding the unfolding of the pandemic and its aftermath for vulnerable groups from a gender perspective.

2 The gendered impacts of austerity in the literature

Debates over the consequences of the austerity paradigm prevalent in Europe since 2007 (Deleide & Mazzucato, 2019; New Statement, 2020) have been wide-reaching; however, in this paper, we focus specifically on Périvér's (2018) contributions regarding the channels through which austerity affects gender inequality on the continent.¹ First, as the sectors most affected by austerity are dominated by female workers, austerity leads to job losses, and a decline in women's participation in the labour market. Second, austerity affects work–life balance as a result of the combined effect of cuts in public services and labour market deregulation. Due to the sexual division of labour, this can reinforce the discouraged worker effect (Périvér, 2018). Labour market flexibility can also affect women more, due to an over-representation in sectors that are potentially more susceptible to such changes, hampering their work–life balance. Third, the retrenchment of welfare states, through a contraction of social rights and public policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities, worsens conditions for the most underprivileged women. Last, gender equality and women's rights are directly jeopardised when support for equality bodies is reduced, via the extinction of ministries and budget cuts, as this paper will outline in further detail.

¹ In Europe, the collapse brought about by the global economic crisis in 2008 affected female employment less than male employment (“he-cession”), whereas austerity has been particularly harsh on women (“sh(e)-austerity”) (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014).

We explored the links between austerity and gender issues by carrying out a broad literature review. On December 12th, 2020, we conducted a search on the web of science using the keywords *gender** and *auster**. The search returned 352 papers, of which 166 were open access. Most of the 166 articles were written by authors located in Europe: 77 in England, 22 in Spain, 10 in Portugal, 9 in Scotland, 8 in Greece, 8 in Sweden and 6 in Finland. Beyond Europe, studies conducted in English speaking countries appeared to be most prevalent: 9 papers were authored by researchers based in the US, 4 in Canada, and 4 in Australia. This shows the links between austerity and gender have been subject to greater scrutiny in Europe.

The articles were manually analysed based on their titles, abstracts, and keywords in order to select those pertinent to the issues explored in this paper. The 26 selected articles were then categorised by their predominant area of focus. The main channels through which austerity affects gender issues and increases vulnerabilities for women found in the literature are synthesised in Table 1.

Most of the literature gathered in this section refers to Europe. However, we suggest that the channels through which austerity impacts gender inequality in Brazil are largely similar to the patterns observed in the Global North. Therefore, our analysis in the next section, while firmly anchored in international literature, addresses an identified gap by investigating the case of a large country in the Global South.

To properly analyse Brazil, we look at some of the overarching features of austerity in Latin America. Oliveira (2020) argues that in this region, neoliberalism, austerity measures, and the consequent underfunding of social infrastructure are key to understanding the progressive abandonment of a Welfare State model and a less structured response performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. As stressed by Mazzucato and Kattel (2020), the state's capacity to manage a crisis depends on cumulative investments. The government's action and/or intervention can only be counted on if the capabilities of the public sector have benefitted from such investments, which help to ensure the long-term resilience and stability of society (p.1). Thus, even though in the early 2000s the region's social spending and social infrastructure improved, this was not enough to solve Latin America's vulnerabilities and chronic underfunding. As far as social rights are concerned, significant private sector participation, and subsidies for private access schemes still prevail in the region. This severely limits social protection systems' capacity to deliver equity and broaden social justice.

According to Oliveira (2020), the region's grave vulnerability leaves many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unattainable. Overall, Latin America and the Caribbean show below-world-average rates and indicators regarding the SDGs. Moreover, as stressed by the author, differences among countries have the potential to deepen inequalities across the region. Those facing the crisis in more favourable conditions (considering countries and social groups alike) are bound to move forward faster, thus accentuating differences. While Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile spend around 17% of their GDP on social policy (17.7%, 17.2%, and 16.4% respectively), countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic spend around 8% (8%, 7%, and 8% respectively). And while health expenditure has increased across the region (from 1.6% up to 2.2% of GDP between 2000 and 2018), it remains far from the 6% recommended by the Economic Commission for Latin America and

Table 1 Main channels through which austerity affects gender inequality Source: Authors' own elaboration

Categories	Austerity's effects on gender inequality
Health indicators and healthcare	Under-funding leads to temporary solutions becoming entrenched producing a lasting emergency in healthcare. Austerity worsens healthcare indicators (especially related to mental health) and gender gaps (Grotti et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2018)
Labour market	The retrenchment of the welfare states reduces the scope for 'defamiliarisation' and worsens women's labour-family life balance. Austerity pressures women to enter professions with lower earnings. Women are more vulnerable to recession due to being predominantly engaged in part-time, temporary jobs, as well as informal or self-employment. Downsizing of the public sector may widen gender inequalities due to a larger gender wage gap in the private sector. Austerity fosters gender discrimination by driving employers' expectations of women's productivity downwards as budget cuts to care services occur. Austerity reduces the already low probability of women being employed in high-paying sectors and exacerbates family-related constraints. Dual earning households often result from economic necessity and the re-emergence of the traditional male breadwinner is also often the result of female unemployment. Inequalities among women might increase (Alcañiz & Monteiro, 2016; Anastasiou et al., 2015; Antón & Bustillo, 2015; Barba & Iraizoz, 2020; Guerrina, 2015; Perugini et al., 2019; Pimlott-Wilson, 2015; Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019)
Poverty	Cuts to public policies risk increasing the feminisation of poverty. Austerity's discourse seeks to make the poor responsible for their lack of access to resources, especially by targeting single mothers. In many cases where austerity was associated with a decrease in gender gaps in poverty this was due to an increase in male poverty (Martínez et al., 2020; Montgomerie & Tepe-Belfrage, 2016; Rossilli, 2018)
Retrenchment of public policies	Austerity curtails education, health and social benefits, on which women rely for their well-being. Austerity also pushes reforms—framed as technical—to legitimise the adoption of gendered austerity measures. Governance reforms are often harder to oppose and overturn (Bohoslavsky & Rulli, 2020; Elomäki, 2019; Girón & Correa, 2016; MacLeavy, 2011; Murphy, 2015; Rubio-Marín, 2016; Sanders et al., 2019; Tepe-Belfrage & Steans, 2016)
Social reproduction	Austerity relies on shifting public provision of reproductive work to the private sphere. Pension cuts and postponing retirement age are likely to increase women's family workload by reducing the availability of grandparents for childcare (Daskalaki et al., 2020; Gálvez & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2016; Power & Hall, 2018; Tarrant, 2018)
Gender-based violence	Reductions to welfare provisions and entitlements impact women's equality and safety (Sanders-McDonagh et al., 2016)

the Caribbean (ECLAC), envisioned to effectively reduce inequalities. In terms of health expenditure, significant differences between countries are also noted, ranging from US\$94 in Venezuela to US\$1592 in Uruguay. It is worth mentioning that in 2017, private health expenditure in Brazil was 58% (the second highest in the region,

following Guatemala) of total health expenditure. This crucially reduces the public sector's capacity to deal with the current crisis. Historically, housing and sanitation in Latin America suffer from structural, social, economic, and health problems, which produce a knock-on effect on containment measures of both the current pandemic and recurrent epidemics. As Oliveira (2020) asserts, despite increased spending on this issue, the percentage of the population with access to basic sanitation in Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) is around 31.1%, with extremely low percentages in countries such as Colombia (17%), Bolivia (23%) and Venezuela (23%). We stress this indicator since it conveys how precarious the sanitation level is in the region, while simultaneously illustrating how the simplest of hygiene measures recommended to deal with the pandemic (such as handwashing), cannot easily be fulfilled. As such, the indicators highlight how social expenditure is still insufficient in the region, while austerity aims to reduce it even further (Oliveira, 2020). Thus, during the Covid-19 crisis, the consequences of years of austerity-based reforms have become increasingly stark, as well as having a direct impact on how States respond to crises and provide support to the most vulnerable.

3 Women at risk in Brazil

As laid out in the introduction, austerity policies fail to identify, understand, or tackle structural inequalities. We use the latter to refer specifically to populations and groups that are systematically marginalised and/or disadvantaged. By way of illustration, in Brazil, women, especially women of colour, whose frequently informal labour is underpaid, find themselves at a particular disadvantage. They endure a markedly unequal share of unpaid domestic and care work *vis-à-vis* men and represent the majority of single parent households. According to the 2010 National Census, 87.4% of single parent households in Brazil were led by women, a total of 7.4 million. This shows an increase from the 5.6 million households registered in the 2000 Census (IBGE, 2010, 2019a). Among these, households led by single women have grown (by 1.8 million), while those led by single men have diminished (by 300 thousand).

In a context in which poverty has increased, as we show in this section, households led by single mothers are more vulnerable than others. 56.9% of these households were below the World Bank poverty line by 2017 (IBGE, 2019b). Also, 64.4% of those led by single, Black women were below the poverty line, compared to 41.5% led by White women. This leaves single, Black mothers, whose number has steadily increased since 2010, in an increasingly vulnerable situation and with more urgent need for social assistance policies and support.

As in many countries in Latin America, Brazil is characterised by an unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work: weekly, women spend between 8 and 10 h more than men on these activities (IBGE, 2018). This overburdening relegates women to part-time jobs and self-employment, whose more informal arrangements allow them to simultaneously partake in unpaid domestic labour (IBGE, 2018). In 2018, IBGE reported that 28.2% of employed women were in part time jobs. This figure, however, varies according to race: 25% of White women and 31.1% of Black

women work part time. Informal arrangements are particularly salient among Black women since, historically, a greater number of them have been employed in niches such as domestic work, which is strongly shaped by informality, flexibility, and self-employment (Pinheiro et al., 2019).

In this context, fiscal austerity not only produces gendered effects, but more specifically, its impacts are felt more keenly by women whose experiences are further marked by their intersectional position of race, family arrangements, and income. As proposed by Addabbo et al. (2015) and Pinheiro et al. (2019), these conditions both contribute to and are a consequence of the deterioration in labour market conditions. This scenario leaves an increasing number of people facing poverty, putting predominantly Black women—and their families—in precarious situations, while failing to protect and support human rights.

3.1 Austerity prior to the pandemic

Following our literature analysis, we argue that austerity policies produce both direct and indirect gendered impacts. Brazil exhibits similarities with the main aspects of the reviewed literature, as well as serving as a potent example whose analysis may enable us to better understand characteristics of Latin America and the Global South, which have not yet been subject to greater scrutiny.

Our analysis centres on two main points. Firstly, CA 95, which was approved in 2016, established a limit on primary public spending for the following 20 years, both impairing and threatening core aspects of the 1988 Federal Constitution. This fiscal rule freezes the central government's primary expenditure in real terms for 20 years, pushing expenditure down as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as it grows. In other words, the rule does not foresee expenditure growth in real terms, or as related to a growth in either GDP or in the population. This amendment, inspired by the austerity paradigm, has had several, detrimental impacts on social rights in the country (Dweck et al., 2018), which we show in Fig. 1. The latter illustrates how, as social security expenditures continue to grow—despite a significant social security reform in 2019—in terms of GDP, all other expenditures (gender related or not) are already being compressed to fit into CA 95/2016. The estimate is as follows: in 2017 the primary expenditures represented 19.8% of the GDP. As the primary expenditures remain frozen and GDP is expected to increase, by 2036 Dweck (2020) estimates they will represent 13.2% of the GDP. Moreover, as social security expenditures are expected to grow according to demographic projections, all other expenditures contained in the primary will have to be compressed in terms of GDP to fit the fiscal rule.

Secondly, the country has faced a progressive contraction of spending since 2015 (Rossi & Mello, 2017); its lowest point so far having been reached at the beginning of Jair Bolsonaro's administration in 2019. Even within the established limits of the federal budget, some areas related to social policy showed zero spending in 2019 (CDVM, 2020; INESC, 2020). Moreover, the current administration has redirected its budget to accommodate conservative interest groups, such as churches and the

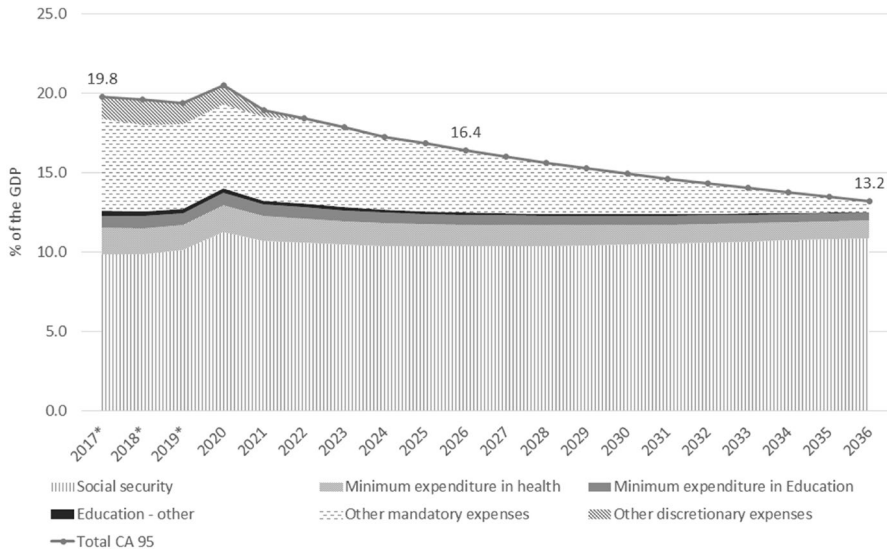


Fig. 1 Simulation of the impact of CA 95/2016 on primary expenditures of the Brazilian central government as a percentage of the GDP. Source: Dweck (2020), figure translated by the authors. The figures related to the period from 2017 to 2019 are those effectively executed, from 2020 on are simulations by Dweck (2020) based on an estimation of growth and inflation as per the 2021 budget

military, most of which have publicly voiced the claim that gender inequalities are given and natural (Fares et al., 2021a, b).

In Brazil, these two trends hinder the public sector's capability to ensure human rights, leading to the progressive deterioration of pre-existing institutional infrastructure as a result of underuse (e.g. cash transfer programmes such as *Programa Bolsa Familia* (PBF), developed further on). Therefore, the aftermath of austerity policies and the unfolding of the pandemic produce long-term effects that plausibly both reproduce and reinforce structural inequalities (Oliveira, 2020). To show how austerity is not gender-neutral and that women experience the heaviest burden of social cuts, we outline the main areas affected by a decrease in social spending in Brazil since 2015, stressing that all budget data are deflated and in real terms.

We start by drawing attention to three direct gendered effects of the reduction in public spending on women's autonomy. First, the progressive reduction of PBF, a programme which serves a considerable number of low-income families, largely led by single women (Mariano & Carloto, 2009). By law, PBF prioritizes women as the beneficiaries of this cash transfer. This has produced an increase in women's empowerment, children's nutrition, and school assistance since its implementation (Bartholo, 2016). As we mentioned, families led by single women, especially Black women, increased by up to 32 million in 2018, while poverty simultaneously rose (Oliveira, 2020). Considering these women's conditions, this clearly conveys the need to widen this programme. Thus, its reduction since 2016 threatens its potential to fight poverty (Martínez et al., 2020), or to increase the wellbeing of women and families. In addition to its reduction, since 2019, Jair Bolsonaro's administration

has been largely ineffective in including families on the waiting list (Oliveira et al., 2020).

The second direct gendered effect refers to the programme “Women in the countryside”, that aims to support single parent households. This programme targets women who work as farmers and are the head of their household. Of the total budget for 2019, only 62% was used that year (INESC, 2020, p. 164). This affects small farmers’ production and the possibility of rural communities to both deliver and access food. More specifically, it cripples the economic means and capacity of women in rural areas, who are overburdened by the responsibilities of farming, domestic and care work. The resources designated for this demographic fund actions which foster inclusive citizenship, training and support for production and management, and different forms of technical assistance. Additionally, the budget for the policy “210 W—Support for the Economic Organization and Promotion of Citizenship for Rural Women” suffered a considerable cut between 2012 and 2015. An average of R\$ 115 million was reserved for this project, from which only 50% was actually used in this period (CDVM, 2020, p. 167). These cuts took place amid the dissolution of the Ministry of Agricultural Development in 2016, effectively transferring these programs to the Ministry of Agriculture, which has historically been dominated by the interests of large-scale commodity producers.

Lastly, another direct impact these budget cuts have had on women’s lives relates to policies aimed at combating and preventing domestic violence. The introduction of the Maria da Penha law in Brazil in 2006 served to recognise violence against women as a specific crime, for which convictions may be sought. The years that followed saw a shift in police procedures (such as the creation of women’s police stations) to deal with situations of domestic violence. Despite this, official statistics regarding the number of complaints remain alarmingly high and the real number of offences is estimated to be yet higher (Kind et al., 2013). Femicide rates in Brazil are among the highest globally (Garcia et al., 2015). Even with domestic violence being a real and frequent threat to Brazilian women, the Commission “Rights are Worth More”, or “*Comissão Direitos Valem Mais*” (CDVM, 2020) reports that between 2014 and 2019 there was a decrease of 75% in resources allocated to policies aimed at combating gender violence in real terms (INESC, 2020, p. 156). In fact, in 2014 the total amount of resources allocated to policies that protect and promote women’s independence (including combating gender violence) was R\$185 million; whereas in 2019 (the first year of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration) that figure was just R\$46 million. In the same year, an increase of 7.3% in femicides was registered in the country compared to the previous year (CDVM, 2020, p. 166). As of April 2020, the Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights had spent just 0.1% of its available and authorised resources to combat violence against women.

According to the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies (INESC, 2020), not only have resources destined to the programmes managed by the office of the Secretary for Women diminished considerably since 2015, but it has also been increasingly difficult to effectively use these. In the last multiannual budget, the Secretary for Women had administered less than 50% of its resources. The main challenge in implementing resources is that they are destined from the Federal Government to cities and States. In order to utilise them, local and regional governments must

find local networks to develop actions and interventions (INESC, 2020, p. 158). A notorious example is how the programme “Brazilian women’s housing” (i.e. shelters aimed at accommodating women fleeing domestic violence), were included in the federal budget in 2014; yet since 2017 the execution and spending of resources related to this policy have been extremely scarce (INESC, 2020, p. 161). When established, this budget foresaw the construction of 27 new shelters (at least one in each state), of which only 3 have been delivered. In 2019, zero resources were used from the R\$20 million available for the creation of new shelters (CDVM, 2020, p. 166). This disservice with respect to violence against women is produced by slashing funding, coupled with the poor execution of resources, leading us to speak of state-sanctioned violence against women, as per Sanders-McDonagh et al. (2016).

We now move on to other areas of social policy affected by austerity that we consider having indirect gendered effects. These areas have a crucial impact on social reproduction and include cuts and progressive defunding of an array of programmes, policies, and initiatives, mostly affecting women in low-income groups, mirroring patterns identified in the Global North (Sánchez-Mira & O’Reilly, 2019). Broadly speaking, fiscal policy regarding social assistance has been suffering significant reductions in most, if not all, areas since 2015 (INESC, 2020, p. 44). Though examples of this abound, to follow, we examine those we consider most pertinent to our analysis.

The first case in point is Brazilian social assistance. This is structured as a federal, unified system (*Sistema Único de Assistência Social*—SUAS) that provides free services for individuals, families, and groups in conditions of vulnerability. Since 2012, a continuous, increasing demand for SUAS’ services has been registered, yet the system has undergone budget cuts since 2016. These cuts have affected 25 million vulnerable people. This includes 280 thousand homeless people no longer receiving support or assistance, as well as a 133,000 reduction in vacancies at shelters and institutions which cater to children, adolescents, the homeless and the elderly (CDVM, 2020). The system further provides social protection for families and individuals at risk of violence through Specialized Centres for Social Assistance (*Centro de Referência Especializado de Assistência Social*—CREAS). The resources for the Centres have been reduced by 50% since 2015 (CDVM, 2020, p. 161–2), resulting in a reduction in staff numbers and opening hours, as well as in the array of services and type of support the centres can effectively offer, significantly affecting their capacity to assist individuals and families.

The second case we would like to highlight refers to food security, adequate nutrition, and family agriculture. This produces a range of different impacts: from adversely affecting the living conditions of low-income groups, to the aforementioned increase in single-parent households led by women, (further exacerbated by progressive cuts to PBF’s coverage), and the role of family agriculture in women’s capacity to both budget and earn a living. Although adequate nutrition has been enshrined as a constitutional right in Article 6 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, CA 95/2016 significantly cut back the funding for several programmes that make up the National plan for food security and nutrition. The latter was the main strategy that made Brazil a world reference in fighting poverty and malnutrition (Leão & Maluf, 2013). The CDVM (2020) reports that seven of

this national plan's key programmes have suffered cuts of between 86 and 100% since 2016. Among them, the Programme for Food Acquisition, which grants income for family agriculture and delivers quality and healthy food to vulnerable populations, suffered a cut of 88% to its budget between 2014 and 2020. As previously mentioned, this conflates with the already existing defunding of programs and actions that target women farmers and women in rural areas.

Thirdly, we address a reduction in resources allocated to the alleviation and ultimate eradication of extreme poverty. Between 2018 and 2019, the households of 34% of children and adolescents in Brazil (18 million) were unable to purchase basic food supplies. Black children and adolescents show a higher rate of deprivation (58%) and extreme deprivation (24%), compared to White children and adolescents (38% and 13%, respectively). Among single-headed households led by women with children, 56.9% are below the poverty line, while the figure for Black women in this situation is 64.4%. The policy of assistance to children and adolescents suffered a 50% budget cut between 2014 and 2019 (from R\$221 million to R\$116 million). Moreover, the budget line "Eradication of child labour" planned for the period from 2016 to 2019 was eliminated from the 2019 budget. Lastly, the federal plan for policies targeting basic health assistance for adolescents and youth decreased from R\$10 million in 2014, to R\$3 million in 2019 (CDVM, 2020, p. 162–164).

We stress that this severe reduction in funding, institutional support, and resource execution was implemented as poverty and inequality increased; meaning that at this moment, more than ever, an increase (rather than decrease) in social protection was needed. According to data from SUAS, in August 2019 around 13.2 million people in Brazil were considered in extreme poverty (CDVM, 2020). Neri (2019) adds that the prevalence of poverty in Brazilian society increased from 8.38 to 10.8% between 2014 and 2018, meaning that 22.6 million people entered poverty in this period. Regarding racial inequality, we further highlight here the Federal Government's lack of success in promoting racial equality, a goal that has traditionally been underfunded and was almost dismantled following CA 95. The budget line "2034—racial equality and overcoming racism" suffered an 80% decrease between 2014 and 2019 (CDVM, 2020). The combination of these retrenchments specifically puts poor, Black women in an increasingly dire situation.

Inequalities of various forms are structural features of Brazil's social and economic history. Yet several policies and economic advances have been achieved since the enactment of the Federal Constitution of 1988, especially during the first 14 years of the twenty-first century; however, these are now being dismantled. We highlight here that CA 95 and more recent decisions made by Jair Bolsonaro's administration (Fares et al., 2021a, b) are likely to produce long term damage since they structurally cripple spending on welfare, social assistance, and gender equality. This renders women—especially those in precarious conditions—even more vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis. In the next section we use an intersectional approach to show how Black women, women in low-income groups, and those at the head of the household, experience austerity, cuts in resources and institutional support more acutely, finding themselves particularly exposed to the effects of the pandemic, both in terms of health and socioeconomically speaking.

3.2 The impacts of the pandemic

As Brazil became the epicentre of the global pandemic in early 2021, voices of alarm went beyond the number of cases and deaths, warning that the country similarly faces “a hunger epidemic” (Londoño & Milhorange, 2021). Widespread increases in unemployment, poverty, and hunger bear witness to the acute precariousness felt by low-income groups. This has led NGOs, charities, religious organizations, and social movements to attempt to compensate for the lack of social assistance provided by the current administration, by providing food for families who have lost their income during the pandemic, amongst other initiatives. The current scenario of socioeconomic despair stems from the failings of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration, as we have been outlining. We have shown how austerity policies implemented in Brazil since 2015 have significantly impacted the lives of women and poor people, the majority of whom are Black. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of these effects have been intensified, leading to more intense pressure on women. We examine this outcome with the caveat that official data gathered by the Ministry of Health is limited, provisory, and presents several biases.

In 2020, as the Brazilian parliament became convinced of the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic, a “wartime budget” was established, lifting fiscal restrictions, including CA 95/2016, until the end of the year. Therefore, the country was able to make use of resources to assist the population, equip hospitals, buy personal protection equipment (PPE) and medicines, as well as construct infrastructure to contain the virus. Moreover, this suspension similarly enabled the country to use its fiscal resources to support the population in economic terms. Most achievements in terms of Covid-19 policies were only made possible by intense public demand and/or by pressure from the Brazilian National Congress. Despite global questioning of fiscal austerity dogmas (New Statement, 2020; IMF, 2020), and increased budgetary freedom, Jair Bolsonaro’s finance minister, Paulo Guedes, repeated the mantra that the government could not spend (Globo, 2021). At the same time, Jair Bolsonaro’s son Carlos, a key figure in the government, criticised the cash transfer for vulnerable individuals during the pandemic labelling it a step towards “socialism” (Istoé, 2020).

Fares et al. (2021a, b) show that there was no gender budgeting in response to the pandemic in 2020. Together with the previously explained underfunding of policies, this results in increased vulnerability for women, especially Black women, and those in low-income groups. In their critical review of policies implemented in 2020, the authors show how the Brazilian government failed to consider gender and racial perspectives in an already weakened response to the pandemic, stressing that the shrinking of PBF’s coverage before and during the crisis contributed to women’s vulnerability. Moreover, they stress that despite the Ministries having received extra resources because of the crisis, the Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights had, by September 2020, spent only 21% of the resources available.

According to this analysis, one policy stands out in support of women: the “Emergency Benefit”.² Though only implemented after considerable pressure from both society and Congress, this benefit consisted of R\$600 per month bestowed on individuals with informal jobs, monthly/annual incomes below a defined threshold and was limited to two people per household. The National Congress added teenage mothers and single mothers who live in a single parent home with their children among the recipients of two instalments per month. The monthly value of the benefit was later reduced by 50%, as the federal government protested its “enormous” fiscal cost. Nonetheless, Fares et al. (2021a, b) emphasise the key role of this benefit in mitigating the effects of the crisis, particularly for households led by Black women.

Their calculation of income per household considers those led by White men, those led by Black men, those led by White women and those led by Black women. The authors show that the first three categories presented an income of 2.55, 1.41, and 1.88 times higher than the income of Black female-headed households in August 2020, respectively. However, when the benefit is included in the overall income of the household for families headed by Black women the distance in income between this group and the other three is reduced, even when compared to the pre-pandemic period. In other words, the emergency benefit was able to not only lift people out of poverty compared to the situation prior, but also to diminish inequality based on gender and race, by particularly improving the situation of Black women. According to Fares et al. (2021a, b), without the emergency benefit in 2021, the highest rates of poverty and extreme poverty correspond to the same demographic: Black women, reaching 41% and 14.6% respectively. The reduced emergency benefit that followed the initial instalments resulted in 5.4 million people finding themselves in poverty, equivalent to 28.9% of the Brazilian population and thus an increase of 4.1 percentage points. Moreover, 9.1 million are to be considered in extreme poverty, 2.5 percentage points higher than that of the pre-pandemic period (Globo, 2021). While the pandemic continues to “ravage the country” (Londoño & Milhorange, 2021) and Brazil witnesses more vulnerable people entering poverty than has been seen in the last decade, the emergency benefit was discontinued by the end of 2020 and only resumed in April 2021, though with significantly lower payments, an average of US\$ 47 per month (Nassif-Pires et al., 2021).

In order to fully assess how the pandemic impacts women’s lives, further public policies may be considered. Firstly, the closing of day-care centres, schools, and institutions that support social reproduction, within a country with a strikingly unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work between women and men. Considering the onerous amount of time women dedicate to these activities, these institutions are indispensable, especially for those in part-time jobs, self-employment, or with informal working arrangements. Moreover, these institutions also provide meals and assist children in various ways. Their closing has increased both the amount and the diversity of work women are able to undertake at home.

In an interview with Vasconcelos and Bezerra (2021), Humberto Miranda, coordinator of the Institute “Menino Miguel”, asserts that the closing of schools and

² “Auxílio emergencial” in the original.

other social institutions (day centres, shelters) has both increased and intensified violations to children and adolescents' rights, particularly in terms of food security, housing, and safety more generally speaking. Moreover, Miranda stresses the key role of schools in providing safety for children from low-income groups. He highlights that, in March 2020, the rate of sexual abuse against children and adolescents rose 85% in Brazil, compared to the same month in 2019. Yet in April 2020, the number of complaints dropped significantly. According to Miranda, this drop can be attributed to an underreporting of abuse, which stems from the closing of schools, (since victims and their families do not have access to social workers and teachers to confide in), rather than corresponding to a reduction in violence or abuse itself. Moreover, social confinement increases tension between families, as well as providing greater opportunity for abuse to take place. Therefore, the closing of institutions compromises people's lives in different ways, by increasing psychological pressure, violence, and conflicts, as well as exacerbating long-term inequalities in already vulnerable households and individuals.

With respect to the increased time spent at home by women, as well as the pressure to do so, the *Sempre Viva Associação Feminista* (SOF) (2020), reports that 50% of Brazilian women started taking care of someone during the pandemic. Among these women, 72% reported an increase in the time they already spent accompanying or supporting those being taken care of. In other words, the situation reproduces and reinforces women's role as caregivers, further increasing pressure and time spent on unpaid domestic and care work (Bahn et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Fares et al., 2021a, b). As has been reported in other countries, social distancing measures in Brazil have diminished or even eliminated social networks on which women rely to provide care for children and the elderly. These networks also offer opportunities for exchange of goods and services, and support in taking care of children or elderly, which are crucial for family budgeting and the sustenance of families in low-income groups (SOF, 2020, p.16). The scope of the negative impact of social distancing measures on the most vulnerable groups is largely incremented by the on-going defunding of policies and programs which previously alleviated this situation.

Food insecurity is a long-term structural problem in Brazil. Despite limited data, in 2020, 19 million people experienced hunger in Brazil and about 117 million (55% of the population) faced food insecurity to some degree (Uneafro Brasil, 2021a, b). Unemployment, financial instability and precarious working arrangements, and disease have been exacerbated by inflation since the beginning of the pandemic. Over the course of the pandemic thus far, the price of staple food items in Brazil, (such as rice and cooking oil), has first doubled and then further tripled. The resulting lack of nutrition and widespread hunger is yet compounded by the aforementioned retrenchment in programmes and policies, particularly those supporting women in farming and the delivery of quality food to vulnerable groups. In 2018, 37% of Brazilian families experienced some degree of food insecurity, of whom the majority were families led by women, those in rural areas, and Black families. In Fact, as many as 74% of those facing food insecurity were Black by 2018 (Barbon, 2020). Alpino et al. (2020, p. 7) show the importance of cash transfer programs, such as PBF, for the nutritional wellbeing of beneficiaries and their families. Fares et al. (2021a, b) highlight the shrinking of PBF's coverage before and during the crisis as a key

element which has contributed to the vulnerability of women and their families' during the Covid-19 crisis. As we stress, intersection is germane to understanding the various aspects of these social phenomena. A notorious case of this is the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE), or “National School Meals Programme”. With schools closed, this programme lacks the tools and means to assist students and families who receive meals at school, at the same time as it increases the amount of time women spend on unpaid work at home and deprives young people of support in cases of abuse.

Moreover, the worrying trend observed in the Global North—that social distancing and lockdowns lead to a significant increase in domestic violence—has similarly been identified in Brazil. The Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights registered an increase of 9% in calls to emergency helplines following the introduction of social distancing measures in March 2020 (CDVM, 2020, p. 166). Domestic violence is a complex phenomenon, at once multidimensional and influenced by several factors. Research conducted by SOF (2020) shows that while 91% of women report the perception that domestic violence has increased, only 8.4% of the participants reported suffering some kind of violence during the period of social distancing. According to the organisation, this reflects the difficulty in recognising different types of violence and the complicated process of acknowledging this on a personal level (SOF, 2020, p. 17). Nevertheless, among those who reported suffering domestic violence, women living on minimum wage and those in rural areas were the most frequent victims. According to an analysis carried out by the Brazilian Forum for Public Security (FBSP), reports of domestic gender violence decreased during the first months of social distancing (March to May). As pointed out by Miranda in relation to child abuse, this is a result of the fact that reports must be filed by the victim personally. However, the researchers used other resources, such as messages on social networks (Twitter), and found a staggering increase of 431% in messages reporting some kind of altercation between couples between February and April 2020. Out of a total of 52 thousand messages, almost 6 thousand pointed to the occurrence of some kind of domestic violence, whose reporting peaked at weekends and in the early hours of the morning (FBSP, 2020).

For women facing domestic violence, social distancing hinders the possibility of finding an alternative place to live, or of seeking refuge with family and friends. Shelters in big cities, such as São Paulo, have only been able to offer women fleeing their homes due to domestic violence stays of up to 48 h (Candido, 2020), due to the risk of overcrowding. The progressive lack of funding, limited spending, and the failure to construct shelters for women and individuals facing domestic violence over the last few years, as highlighted in the previous section, leads to this precarious situation. We further stress the case of women who are primary carers for children and/or elderly family members, who cannot simply leave the household, as well as women living in crowded households in slums and/or rural areas, where institutional presence (police, social workers) is limited. Moreover, the social networks that provided support for these women have been weakened by the same social distancing measures. According to Spadacio and Alves (2020), from a broad public health perspective, women who are exposed to domestic violence, significant proportions of the Black population, and those in precarious living conditions may be considered

vulnerable because of long-term structural conditions. Amid the pandemic, the effects of EC 95 and austerity policies have rendered the public health system deficient in properly assisting these groups in terms of prevention and treatment (Spadacio & Alves, 2020, p. 63). In other words, the system lacks an articulated response to Covid-19 regarding the social markers of gender, race, and social class. Simultaneously, it is limited in safeguarding already restrictive basic reproductive rights and psychological assistance to those who solely depend on public health.

To sum up, public policy responses during the Covid-19 crisis have been so lacking that Brazil finds itself last place in a ranking of 98 countries' efficiency during the pandemic (Löwy Institute, 2021), in addition to failing to specifically address gendered concerns (Fares et al., 2021a, b). This is due to an explosive combination which includes the dismantling of instruments to deal with inequalities due to austerity, as well as the deepening of a view that social policy is "socialism" and that the country should seek to increase marketisation at all costs. Additionally, we include the concentration of conservative interests' groups in the government, leading to greater decision-making powers for fundamentalist representatives who view gender inequalities as natural in key areas which ought to be focused on combating the gendered impacts of the pandemic.³

4 Final remarks

Our literature review highlights several detrimental effects of austerity on women, particularly the most vulnerable, across the Global North. Studies conducted thus far highlight that gender inequality may be exacerbated by austerity measures/policies since they worsen women's labour-family life balance and render them more vulnerable to recession due to being predominantly engaged in part-time, temporary jobs, informal work, and self-employment, as well as accentuating inequalities between women. Cuts to public policies risk increasing the feminisation of poverty, hitting single mothers particularly hard, as well as overburdening women who absorb the retrenchment of public policies by the State. Austerity curtails education, health, and social assistance, on which women, children and disabled people rely. Women are also more vulnerable to gender-based violence when welfare provisions and entitlements impact women's equality, safety and financial autonomy.

In order to comprehend these phenomena in the Global South, particularly in Brazil, we stress the country's difference in approach towards welfare, as well as highlighting the way in which its socioeconomic indexes differ from those of Europe (to which most of the literature refers). Drawing on Oliveira (2020), we underline the overall disadvantages in Latin America regarding basic needs and sanitation, public health systems, and social spending. This serves to illustrate how the dismantling of the few public policy instruments in Brazil following austerity measures

³ For example, the Minister of Family, Women and Human Rights and the Minister of Education are both neopentecostal pastors who base their decisions and policies on biblical principles. For further details, see Cunha (2019).

has produced a daunting challenge to the achievement of gender equality. We have discussed how austerity policies and CA 95 in Brazil have crippled possible distributive power of spending on welfare, social assistance, and gender equality on a structural basis. The combination of retrenchments in social policy adopted in the country since 2015 have specifically left poor, Black women in a dire situation, even before the pandemic. Thus women—especially those most affected by the policies we have been discussing—find themselves more vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis. As the pandemic ravishes the country and the public response shows itself to be inefficient, gender inequalities are on the rise.

Our analysis focuses on aspects of the pandemic in Brazil, while underscoring their relation to direct and indirect gendered effects of the existing austerity approach. The unfolding of the pandemic finds Brazil with a precarious Public Health System, compromising low-income families' access to treatment, reproductive rights, and support for people living in vulnerable conditions. The Social Assistance System has also been extremely limited in its provision of shelters, social assistance, family, and individual support. The autonomy of women who are responsible for their households has been jeopardised by the shrinking of PBF, the increased burden of unpaid domestic and care work, as well as increased food insecurity for vulnerable populations. We stress that women are also facing an unprecedented increase in domestic violence due to social distancing measures, which is further exacerbated by a lack of resources and appropriate support, means, and mechanisms of intervention.

In Brazil, public policy responses during the Covid-19 crisis have been severely lacking and have not specifically considered its gendered effects, indicating a significant shortfall. The existing institutional infrastructure, such as PBF, has been underutilised in recent years. With the onset of the pandemic, most of the measures taken have been of emergency nature, thereby having limited capability to address and deal with aspects of structural inequality and long-term disparity.⁴ We emphasise the explosive combination of a dismantling of instruments to deal with inequalities, a deepening of the view that the country should seek to increase marketisation at all costs, and a combination of conservative interest groups in the government.

This paper contributes to the current global discussion regarding austerity, its overwhelmingly negative consequences, inadequacy to deal with the pandemic and failure to advance social, economic, and global recovery. In a sanitary and socio-economic crisis such as the current scenario in Brazil, a disaggregated analysis of austerity policies, which contemplates racial and gender axes, such as that presented in this paper, is essential. Only by carrying out such analyses will we be able to fully understand and assess its impacts on gender equality before, during and after the crisis. We need further work on gender, race, inequality, vulnerability, and austerity,

⁴ For example, to reach the target population of the Emergency Benefit, the government used an app in order to register users. Now the government is studying the cancellation of face-to-face interactions between social workers and vulnerable populations and the so-called “active search” for those in poverty which is to be substituted by an app in a country with still high illiteracy rates and low internet access (Campello, 2021).

paying particular attention to the characteristics and history of Latin America and the Global South. The complexity of these topics and the paucity of data must be addressed in order to fully comprehend the aftermath of the pandemic, as well as the effects and accountability of political decisions. Well-informed policy making is key to the development and betterment of welfare state mechanisms that are urgently needed to prevent an increase in already existing gendered inequalities.

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