



Lesbocide in the Brazilian Context

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Acknowledgements

Translation from Brazilian Portuguese by Bruna Barros and Jess Oliveira

Abstract

This article presents a partial overview of my perceptions – so far – on the reception of the book “*Dossiê sobre lesbocídio no Brasil: entre 2014 e 2017*” [Dossier on the Killing of Lesbians in Brazil: from 2014 to 2017], launched by Milena Cristina Carneiro Peres, Suane Felipe Soares (author of this article) and Maria Clara Marques Dias, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 7 March 2018, in collaboration with the research and extension groups in which we take part as members as well as coordinators at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). The perspective on the receptions analysed here will be that of direct contact with society, specifically the public presentations of the *Dossiê*. The *Dossiê* had great repercussion among academic, activist and civil groups with a focus on the lesbian public; it was also presented internationally. The main goal of this paper is to analyse the possible impacts of studying lesbocide on the transformation of violence paradigms against lesbians.

Keywords: Lesbocide; Lesbophobia; Lesbian mobilisation; Lesbian visibility.

How to cite

Soares, Suane Felipe. 2020. “Lesbocide in the Brazilian Context”. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 14: 127–138.

This paper presents a reading in the first person of the repercussion of the studies about lesbocide in Brazil and it is based on the recent research performed by Milena Cristina Carneiro Peres, Suane Felipe Soares, and Maria Clara Marques Dias. The research began in 2017 with the collaboration of the laboratories, research groups and extension groups in which we participate as members as well as coordinators at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Based on this research, in 2018 we released the *Dossiê sobre lesbocídio no Brasil: entre 2014 e 2017*.¹

The reactions to the *Dossiê* varied. The population in general was shocked by the data presented, while, in spaces dedicated to the promotion of Human Rights (HR), there was a surge of worry about the issue. There were also expressions of rejection and mockery (Soihet 2005, 592), explicit in the attempts to discredit the research by conservative branches of society, in consonance with a great wave of attacks on social movements and scientific initiatives dedicated to promoting social justice and the overcoming of structures of domination. Finally, there was great support and commotion, a feeling of closeness and the strengthening of a network formed by various groups of lesbians of all ages and races, from Brazil and from other countries, engaged in lesbian activism, inside and outside the academy. Hereafter, I will discuss some considerations on these positions in a fluid way, in order to present arguments that may contribute to the consolidating of lesbian studies as a part of the struggle for lesbian rights.

With the research *Lesbocídio: as histórias que ninguém conta* [Lesbocide: the stories that no one tells] and the publishing of the *Dossiê*, we could present 126 cases of lesbian deaths (suicides and murders) that took place between 2014 and 2017 in Brazil. Since the country does not have a national system for cataloguing these deaths, and since we did not raise funds specifically for this research, we had to use data available online, in newspapers, magazines, obituaries, social media and other similar sources. This limited us to information

that was heavily marked by the ideological bias of the knowingly racist, lesbophobic, misogynistic, transphobic, elitist, sensationalist hegemonic media.

Due to this limitation, the numbers we found on deaths of indigenous lesbians were sparse. We found far less data on the deaths of black lesbians than the data in government documents regarding the deaths of black women, in general. Those data were also harder to find than the data on the death of white lesbians. The more common data to find, provided by the government, were about general female mortality in the country. It is important to highlight that we did not find data on those particular deaths of lesbians in many states and cities. There were many other relevant issues; for instance, it was not possible to recognise any openly homosexual trans woman among the victims during this period of time; besides, in some of the murders there were gaps, such as the impossibility to identify if some cases were brought to court or not. Also due to these limitations, we consider the inferences we made based on this study to be unfinished, and the research to still have an experimental character. After this brief introduction to our work, which can be more thoroughly scrutinised through the *Dossiê* itself, I will move on to discuss the publication itself, as well as its repercussions.

Between March 2018 and August 2019, there were over 30 presentations of the *Dossiê*, among which four took place abroad. Almost all of these activities took place after invitations from lesbian academic groups, lesbian social movements, and government agencies and entities, such as professional councils and labour unions with lesbian representatives in their staff. With an average of four presentations per month, the *Dossiê* was in four of Brazil's regions: the North, the Northeast, the Southeast, and the South. The Central-West was the only region that did not have any in-person activities.

Each activity was unique, each new place brought surprises and new exchanges. We are very grateful for all the visibility and recognition, but, above all, we worry a lot about the reaction we could get from the activities. There is a

great lack of research on this topic. Besides the invitations to present our work, we were also gifted with academic texts, essays, photographs, installations, performances, pieces of visual art, songs, rhymes and posters in protests about lesbocide.

There is nothing unfounded about fearing death and worrying about building lesbian resistance strategies against the patriarchy, lesbophobia, transphobia, racism, classism and other oppressions working against lesbian survival. An interesting academic consequence of the *Dossiê* was that many lesbians told us that our work helped them justify to their professors the validity and urgency of papers on this and other themes in the broad area of Lesbian Studies. Some of them reported that, before our data were presented, some groups in the academy were reticent about accepting a study on lesbians. They claimed that lesbians were not violated, harassed, killed and victimised by hate crimes, for lesbophobia occurred, fundamentally, in the realm of domestic intra-familial violence, thus being a minor form of violence, subjective and practically irrelevant. Our study stands as a counterpoint to these ideas.

Most of the reactions to the lectures, conferences and courses offered by the “*Lesbocídio: as histórias que ninguém conta*” project team were of surprise and pain; there was also sharing of experiences among different groups of people, but especially among lesbians – many of whom were unaware of the data, the numbers and the characteristics of hate crimes we identified in the cases. On the one hand, the increase in the denunciation of old and new cases was also a decisive factor associated with our presence in lesbian spaces.

On the other hand, almost all lesbians in those spaces knew the most important information we had to offer: there was a lack of data. Being conscious of this lack is more complex than merely understanding its effects and its ways of perpetuating itself as a lesbocidal tool, as a State policy and as one of the foundations of the *Heterosexual Nation* paradigm (Curiel 2013). One of the fundamental effects of the lack of information is the distancing of lesbians who

would be very close both ideologically and physically were the circumstances different. Separated by discrimination and fear of exposure while confined to their routines, they walk the paths of erased existence, shy and inexpressive. On our sleeves, we do not wear our lesbian pride nor the fearless feeling of self-validating unity with other lesbians to build safe spaces for sharing. Instead, we wear fear, guilt, and rejection that restrict us to silent existences. Lesbian invisibility comes with a silence about ourselves that makes us a fragmented category in essence.

As stated by Wittig (2013, 99), lesbians are not women. Despite our due criticism to the author's work, it is necessary to understand that, in fact, we are *patriarchy's mistake* (Soares, Peres and Dias 2019, 243) in the class of women (Curiel and Falquet 2005, 10). I will not delve further into this debate, as it has already been discussed in other occasions (Soares 2017), but I mention it to point out that it is impossible to build common ground with the patriarchal society (Elias and Scotson 2000) to legitimate our existence, as we do not find support among established patriarchy, in favour of aberrations, failed projects, or, in other words, in favour of women who are not quite women, who escape being women, who are not identifiable as women or who do not comply with the system. Thus, what cannot be legitimate, must be exterminated. Maybe, in the future, it will be possible to diagnose the condition of the patriarchal mistake as a motivation for lesbian extermination policies, i.e. the lesbocidal violence cycle and the types of lesbocide per se (Peres, Soares and Dias 2018, 88).

Analysing the motives for the murders (and the suicides, to a certain extent) made us notice a complex network of material dangers that lurks around lesbian lives. We could observe that, even when a lesbian perishes under these dangers, these deaths are not widely reported, not even within lesbian media and spaces. As a result, future victims are continually exposed and left without any investment in their protection nor in tackling the focus of the problem. Lack of information has many and deep aspects and one of its consequences is the general ignorance about cycles of violence imposed on lesbians.

Generally speaking, the advent of the concept of lesbocide in the Brazilian lesbian context, although still not widespread, already represents a conceptual field for lesbian rights. In particular, the right to life. Once we know the number, or specificities, of death we are capable of doing a more complex and complete lesbophobia characterisation as well as a more accurate mapping of the problems faced daily by lesbians in different contexts.

We can affirm, for instance, that studies on lesbocide were conducted by university female students in their respective fields of work, with subsequent presentations of their research on the theme intersecting many fields of knowledge, such as Law, Psychology, Literature and Linguistics, History, Marketing, and others. They create solid foundations to identify how lethal aspects of lesbophobia permeate different spheres of our lives and are being shaped due to their work. It also alerts us to the fact that we need specific and conscious approaches to be able to identify and fight these problems.

Throughout our contact with lesbians during these presentations, we could verify the importance of creating a space focused on the investigation of our pain and on ourselves in a place of power such as the academy. The research project *Lesbocídio: as histórias que ninguém conta* [Lesbocide: The Histories that No One Tells] ensures support for lesbians, especially for the youngest ones. It affirms that they must report aggressions, that we are a vulnerable group, that a lesbian's lifespan is most probably very low, that once we know the main factors generating lesbocide, we, as well as the people around us, can comprehend the daily struggle for our lives and its articulation as a real issue, a material and serious one.

Over and above the academic impact of the research, we also encountered social and artistic repercussions. An important element is increasing the visibility of lesbian deaths, and the promotion of the struggle for lesbian memory in relation to the names and life trajectories of those who were killed. Protagonists' acknowledgment in this process is a fundamental element in the construction of

this struggle. Names like Luana Barbosa, Anne Mickaelly, Mayara Cordeiro, Rithynha Julia, Clarice Viana, Arianne Cardoso, Eliane Possari, Camila Santos, just to name a few, were written on the streets in honour of the deceased. Many mobilisations emerged in the neighbourhoods and regions where those lesbocides occurred. Often, when we arrived in a city to present the research, local lesbians already knew the story of local victims and brought us details about the cases, reporting ongoing mobilisations in the search for justice for those lesbians.

With this research, we could highlight several ways in which lesbians' rights are systematically undermined. Two ways that most interest us now are: (1) the erasure of our deaths within the law and through decisions regarding lesbocide; (2) the generalisation of lesbian deaths, as if they were caused by the same processes that gay and trans² deaths are caused. Each category has its own specificities. Not identifying them precludes lesbian exclusive and/or specific public policies (PPs) of being implemented. As long as PPs keep considering the lesbian condition (Soares 2017, 94) to be trivial and ignoring our specific demands, they will never be able to fully meet them.

Lesbian rights need to be guaranteed equitably, taking into account what is particular about lesbian lives and about the intersections within our lives and challenges that we need to face in society, as being feminine or not; being different races; different ages; religions; belonging to different social classes; different geographical regions; undergoing, or not, a process of physical and/or mental illness, etc.

Regarding these aspects specifically, it is crucial to recognise the consubstantiality of invisibilities. It is not possible to think and theorise about lesbocide without comprehending that this phenomenon happens the way it does only because it is a contemporary symptom of the historical construction of systems of oppression in Brazil. That is to say, it occurs in association with patriarchy. Some other recurrent manifestations of this system of oppression are the marginalisation of black and indigenous peoples, and of the people living in

disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and the propagation of eugenic ideologies, among other issues regarding derogatory stereotypes about poverty and African and indigenous religious traditions; these issues directly affect lesbians who belong to these categories.

Brazil has been going through a strong resurgence of conservative waves that deeply affect lesbian lives. This can be noticed not only through the complex subjectivities permeating spaces where lesbians transit (schools, workplaces, family, neighbourhoods, public transportation and so on), but also through public and explicit speeches from symbolic figures, such as Brazil's current president, some of his government officials and their civilian supporters, for instance. This conservative wave did not start with the seizure of power by the far-right wing back in 2019, but it reached its peak at this moment due to the escalation and institutionalisation of lesbophobic policies. It is worth noting that Brazil's current president has declared, throughout his career in politics and during his presidential campaign, including in a recent interview to the media, that he is proud of being homophobic (Aranda 2018; Barbosa Neto 2011; Brasil 2011; Longo 2019).

This type of ideology that preaches prejudice as something morally acceptable brings about devastating consequences to lesbian's lives. At a personal level, they may cause mental illnesses or the worsening of such ailments, since social disapproval (Brasil 2013, 21; Carvalho 2015, 35) is a determining element of these conditions. At the collective and structural level, they compromise lesbian lives by restricting our public, political, and social representation (Pains 2019; Revista Veja 2019).

Due to this historical moment, the fight against lesbocide becomes more urgent and gains a much more complex facet, one that not only consists of the increased obstacles for institutional and governmental gains, such as PPs and other initiatives, or the efforts to maintain a few acquired rights. It includes the fight against a conservative agenda that continuously engenders the

destruction of the rights we fought to gain, as well as engendering the marginalisation of representative minorities.³ The inherent feeling is that the pathways leading to lesbocide are being shortened and that our probabilities of death are increasing. We are talking about a reconfiguration and strengthening of lesbophobic violence cycles that affect, to a greater degree and more rapidly, the most vulnerable lesbians. At the micro-level, we can identify the impact of emergent conservative ideologies through lesbophobic attacks against research on the broader theme of lesbian rights. For all these reasons, in the face of the politicisation of the real effects of a lack of data, the reactions of most lesbians with whom we were able to meet and talk to, in the last months of the project, made us realise that we still have a long way to go to deconstruct lesbophobic ideas about our deaths. Lesbocide is nothing more than a patriarchal political ideology, and we must claim urgency for a qualified fight against our extermination.

In this article, I sought to present some considerations on the current state of research about lesbocide in Brazil, starting from the analysis of this study's reception by social movements, governmental agencies, the third sector, the working class, the academy, and conservative wings of society. Additionally, I made an effort to contribute the main considerations I was able to bring to aid in building resistance and confrontation. It is fundamental to emphasise the fact that black, indigenous, and poor peoples have been suffering the immediate and worsening effects of new governmental policies. This government, in addition to being neoliberal, is also strikingly lesbophobic and misogynistic. This scenario worsens the situation of all lesbians and points to the urgency of the national and international construction of new tools to guarantee the lives of all lesbians in Brazil, but especially of those most affected by such policies. It is also urgent to propagate ideas of valorisation and visibility of non-feminine, black, indigenous, and feminist lesbians; for instance, to prevent the institutional reinforcement of a reactionary moral paradigm that is aimed at perverting a human-rights based moral agenda, and eliminating equity and universal rights values.

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¹ E.N.: See <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/direitos-humanos/noticia/2018-08/lesbians-still-made-invisible-and-plagued-violence-brazil>

² Currently, the records on the murders of trans people usually mention only the fact that they were trans people. Their sexual orientations, for example, remain unknown. There are remarkable differences regarding the types of oppression that each category suffers when it comes to death processes; this is also influenced by the fact that the same person can be in more than one of the groups of the LGBTQI+ acronym.

³ E.N: "Representative minorities" are groups of people that, despite being large in number and, sometimes, the majority of a country's population, are social minorities – and have few representatives – in political spaces of power. In the Brazilian context, representative minorities would be, for example: Black people, indigenous people, women, LGBTQI+ people and so on. As of Lula administration, from the Worker's Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*), some federal initiatives to increase the political representation of such groups were created, but most were dismantled by the following administrations. Currently, there are initiatives of this kind in many states, cities and towns in Brazil, maybe because of the debates that arose because of Lula's initiatives and the struggles of the Workers' Movement, the Black Movement, the Indigenous Movement, the Women's Movement and the LGBTQI+ Movement – which pushed former president Lula to act in the first place.