



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Women's rights and misogyny in Brazil: an interview with Debora Diniz**

Bähre, E.; Diniz, D.

### **Citation**

Bähre, E., & Diniz, D. (2020). Women's rights and misogyny in Brazil: an interview with Debora Diniz. *Anthropology Today*, 36(2), 17-20. doi:10.1111/1467-8322.12563

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/87601>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

mistakes or abuses. If no entity or institution can ever get a complete overview, then who can be held accountable?

So far, we have detected a disparity between political claims that public trust in data infrastructures is a necessary basis for their functioning and the trust models reflected in emerging cryptographic technologies based on distrust. The question is how the data infrastructures and cryptographic systems that underlie more and more of our communication and management of sensitive information produce new social and political relationships. If MPC is used to protect citizens' sensitive data, then which institutions can be held accountable – and how? Will glo-

balized data environments erode trust and the legitimacy of trusted, democratic institutions? Will cryptographic, these indeed *cryptic*, technologies afford and produce distrust? Cryptographic systems are imbued with undigested assumptions about social relations, society and societal institutions, including trust, that escape public attention and rarely interest cryptographers. By studying cryptography, its debates and uses as strategic fieldsites, anthropologists can disentangle and contextualize these assumptions and feed them into wider public and political debates about what data privacy, security and accountability could mean in a digital age. ●

# Women's rights and misogyny in Brazil

## An interview with Debora Diniz

### ERIK BÄHRE & DEBORA DINIZ

Erik Bähre is an associate professor at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, the Netherlands. His research interests include economic anthropology, conflict and care. His email is [ebaehre@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:ebaehre@fsw.leidenuniv.nl).

Debora Diniz is an anthropologist and law professor at the University of Brasilia, and a co-founder and researcher at Anis – Instituto de Bioética. She is also a researcher, writer and documentary film-maker.

*In August 2018, days before anthropologist and feminist activist Debora Diniz would appear as an expert witness in a Supreme Court hearing that addressed decriminalizing abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, she was placed under police protection and forced to go into hiding. After receiving numerous death threats that sometimes also targeted her students and colleagues at the University of Brasilia, and when the police discovered a right-wing extremist gang plotting attacks against her on the deep web, Diniz went into exile.*

*She is not the only one forced to leave Brazil under such circumstances. Similar death threats were made against Jean Wyllys – a journalist, lecturer and the first openly gay member of Brazil's congress – and Marcia Tiburi, a professor of philosophy and Workers' Party politician. Many more academics and activists have received threats and been intimidated. These threats are particularly directed towards social science and humanities scholars who work with women's rights and economic and racial inequalities.*

*Diniz has received over 90 awards for her academic work, including documentary films. She has been awarded the Fred L. Soper Award for Excellence in Public Health Literature by the Pan American Health Organization for her research on the magnitude of abortion in Brazil, and this year she received the Dan David Prize for her work on gender equality. In this interview, she reflects on the current political climate in Brazil and its consequences for academics, academic freedom, women's rights and healthcare.*

**Erik Bähre (EB): What was the political and legal significance of the Supreme Court hearing and what was your contribution?**

Debora Diniz (DD): The 2018 Brazilian Supreme Court public hearing on decriminalizing abortion was the most qualified academic debate we have had on this issue in the country so far. The hearing was held in response to a 2017 constitutional case asking for the decriminalization of abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. In Brazil, abortion is legal only in cases of rape, in order to save a woman's life or when the foetus suffers from anencephaly, a fatal congenital brain disorder. The case was filed by a left-wing political party with support from Anis – Instituto de Bioética, the feminist NGO [non-governmental organization] I founded in 1999. The filing of the case itself was a struggle: any political party – and many other institutions – could have done it in the last 30 years of Brazil's current constitutional regime. But it took years of intense feminist pressure to convince a political party to step up and take the risk of losing voters by defending women's right to abortion in court. It was, therefore, a big step in treating women as equal citizens.



SAFE2CHOOSE TWITTER ACCOUNT



**Fig. 1 (above).** Debora Diniz. New York, February 2020.

**Fig. 2 (right).** Illustration of Debora Diniz shared right after the 2018 Brazilian Supreme Court public hearing on the decriminalization of abortion.

The Supreme Court public hearing made an open call for the nomination of specialists and received over 500 applications. Of 49 nominated experts, 32 were favourable to decriminalization. The academic research discussed at the hearing covered issues such as: maternal morbidity and mortality due to illegal abortions; the impacts of illegal abortion on public health; institutional discrimination enabled by criminalization related to class, race, age and region; the impact of unwanted pregnancies on women's health, including mental health; stigma and gender norms as both a cause and a consequence of abortion criminalization; comparative perspectives with countries that decriminalized abortion and experienced a reduction in abortion rates; and the secularity of the Brazilian state (Anis 2019). I was one of the experts nominated for the hearing, and I presented our research that shows how abortion is a part of ordinary women's reproductive lives: by the age of 40, one in five Brazilian women has had at least one abortion (Diniz et al. 2017). The case is still pending at the Supreme Court and we remain hopeful of the results of such a powerful debate.

**EB: How open is Brazil's current political environment to the abortion debate?**

DD: It is not open at all. The abortion debate depends solely on pressure from civil society, which is often met with repression. Last year, around 28 September, which is the Latin American Day for Decriminalizing Abortion, a Brazilian feminist outlet called *AzMinha* published an article explaining safe abortion methods according to information from the World Health Organization. The next



**Fig. 3.** Illustration of Debora Diniz speaking at the 2018 Brazilian Supreme Court public hearing on decriminalizing abortion.

**Fig. 4.** Brazilian women gather at the Festival for Women's Lives, demanding safe and legal abortion. Brasília, Brazil, 3 September 2018.



ARTHUR MENESCAL

Anis – Institute of Bioethics 2019. *Abortion: Why is decriminalization necessary – Arguments presented to the Federal Supreme Court at the public hearing for ADPF 442*. Brasília: LetrasLivres.

CPJ 2019. Brazilian outlet AzMina faces criminal complaints, online harassment over abortion article. CPJ, 25 September. <https://cpj.org/2019/09/brazilian-outlet-azmina-faces-criminal-complaints-php>.

Diniz, D. 2014. The architecture of a constitutional case in three acts: Anencephaly at the Brazilian Supreme Court. *Direito, UnB – Revista de Direito da Universidade de Brasília* 1(2): 161–183. <https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/revistadedireitounb/article/download/24593/21785/>.

— 2017. *Zika: From the Brazilian backlands to global threat*. London: Zed Books.

— et al. 2017. National Abortion Survey 2016. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva* 22(2): 653–660. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1413-81232017222.23812016>.

Fischer, M. & A. Taub 2019. How YouTube radicalized Brazil. *The New York Times*, 11 August.

Köbben, A.J.F. & H. Tromp 1999. *De onwelkome boodschap: Of hoe de vrijheid van wetenschap bedreigd wordt*. Amsterdam: Jan Mets.

Scholars at Risk 2019. *Free to think*. 19 November. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2019/>.

The Guardian 2019. 'A rapist in your path': Chilean protest song becomes feminist anthem. 6 December. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5AAscy7qbl>.

day, Damares Alves, Brazil's minister for women, family, and human rights, filed a complaint at a public prosecutor's office, demanding they press charges against the magazine for incitement (CPJ 2019). The government is treating our basic right of being able to access information, which can save lives, as encouragement to commit the crime of abortion. The disrespect toward women's lives is astounding.

I had previously led the design of other strategic litigation on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including the one leading up to the 2012 Supreme Court decision that guaranteed Brazilian women the right to legal abortion in cases of anencephaly (Diniz 2014). I have been personally involved in this debate in Brazil for over 20 years and I have dealt with defamation and threats before, but never as intensely as now. In 2018, the debate took an antagonistic turn with the rise of the far-right authoritarian populism that culminated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro. His administration's agenda is, at its core, anti-gender, especially on issues of sexuality and abortion. An example of that is in the recently proposed abstinence-only sex education programme.

**EB: You have also been attacked for your work with the Zika virus in Brazil. How have right-wing groups politicized this health threat?**

DD: To understand this issue, we need to remember that the Zika public health crisis mirrors social inequalities in Brazil, with particularly devastating consequences for indigenous, black and poor women of reproductive age and their children living in remote areas or on the outskirts of bigger cities. When the Zika epidemic peaked, many health ministries across Latin America responded by simply telling women to postpone pregnancies – just like that, without addressing any family planning policies at all! I conducted an ethnographic study to explore the narratives of the first generation of Brazilian women affected by Zika, which included talking with local doctors and scientists working to uncover the virus's impact on communities. The result of this research was a book entitled, *Zika: From the Brazilian backlands to global threat* (Diniz 2017), published in Portuguese, English and Japanese. What we learned from the research helped us frame a constitutional case that we presented to the Brazilian Supreme Court in 2016, asking for access to information, a wider range of modern contraceptives including long-acting

reversible ones, social protection policies including free transportation to health services and cash transfer benefits for children with disabilities, and legal abortion for pregnant women infected with Zika and enduring mental distress. The case is still pending.

However, while we understand Zika as one more urgent reason to protect women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, there are right-wing groups trying to do just the opposite, to restrict women's rights even more. The first congressional Zika bill proposed in Brazil intended to impose harsher punishment for abortion in cases of microcephaly (one of the potential signs of the Congenital Zika Syndrome). The bill didn't pass, but to this day Zika is used as a pretext for advancing the conservative anti-abortion agenda advocated by the 'bible caucus'. Many families of children affected by Zika, now organized into associations, are pushing back against this, telling right-wing politicians that if they truly value their children's lives, they should focus on social protection policies and on making sure kids have quality health services, accessible schools and transportation, and support for their mothers, who are often solo full-time caregivers.

**EB: Women's rights and the freedom of women to be in charge of their sexuality and reproductive rights have always been contested in Brazil and around the world.**

**What is the face of misogyny today?**

DD: This is a great question because it highlights something that is key to understanding Brazil's political landscape now. What do those of us who had to leave Bolsonaro's Brazil have in common? Jean Wyllys, Marcia Tiburi, myself and many others facing intimidation campaigns, work with and publicly speak about sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are at the centre of the repressive agenda of far-right populist governments. To understand misogyny today we need to realize that there is a new form of power at play: besides the traditional colonial patriarchy that founded most of our institutions and laws, we are now also dealing with online hate and disinformation movements that reach and engage millions of people on a daily basis. These disinformation movements may or may not have direct ties to public authorities and the current administration, but simply the fact that their discourse matches official government goals has an impact on public life in Brazil.





**Fig. 5.** Brazilian women dressed in costumes inspired by the book 'The Handmaid's Tale' hold a vigil for decriminalizing abortion in front of the Supreme Court building during the Festival for Women's Lives. Brasília, Brazil, 6 September 2018.

**Fig. 6.** Brazilian women hold a vigil for the decriminalization of abortion in front of the Supreme Court building during the Festival for Women's Lives. Brasília (Brazil), 6 September 2018.

**Fig. 7.** At the age of 15, Alessandra (in pink) gave birth to Erik, born with Congenital Zika Syndrome. Erik is raised by his grandmothers, Maria (in yellow shirt) and Alessandra Santos (in flowery top), who is currently the president of a local association of families affected by the Zika virus. Maceió, Brazil, December 2016.

**EB:** Do you see a connection between this expression of misogyny and the threats you have been receiving? Do they know who is behind the threats?

**DD:** The police investigation into the threats I have been receiving has not gone very far, so we don't yet know where they are coming from. But looking at the content of the messages from an anthropological perspective and connecting the dots with international literature on the issue, I can make some observations about the connection between misogyny today and these intimidation campaigns. The threats I get seem to be related to groups of disaffected men who meet online and bond, albeit superficially, over their resentment toward the world. Hegemonic masculinity infuses such groups with significant racist patriarchal expectations, and when these expectations go unmet – as more women, black and LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex] people occupy spaces of power – they often resort to violent speech. They find some sort of thrill in disseminating hate and misinformation that targets human rights activists. But just as they can only find power in anonymity and are heavily dependent on the weak social ties of others, we also see street protests filled with younger and younger feminists and activists chanting 'A rapist in your path' (*The Guardian* 2019), running for office, teaching, organizing and resisting. Yes, there are new menaces, but there is renewed resistance as well.

**EB:** Do you see social media as 'merely' reflecting people's political attitudes towards women and health-care, or do you see it also shaping these attitudes?

**DD:** I believe social media platforms have their share of responsibility in fuelling what I have been calling an ecosystem of hate, which refers to the use of mass media, especially online, to mobilize the dissemination of hate speech and misinformation. This ecosystem is a network of people acting together through a contagious effect: they are not bound by any formal or central coordination, but rather bounce off of each other's stimuli to engage or to take anonymous action in sharing hateful or fake content. Social media platforms make money by keeping people connected for as long as possible, and their recommendation systems often do so by suggesting more and more extremist and provocative content that play with people's emotions, like fear, anger and doubt (Fischer & Taub 2019). So, although it might feel like a connection is being made when users click on what they want to see next, it is actually made by the system.

But there is another side to understanding this new form of sociability: if an ecosystem can work to spread hate, it can also work for social justice. It is based on this understanding that I decided to join social media – both Twitter and Instagram – after having to leave my country. I am now quite an avid user, discussing academic and political issues on a daily basis. We must remember that we can also use these online spaces to have conversations and to strengthen a sense of community and belonging that is important for keeping us motivated and creative in the struggles we face.

**EB:** Do you see a specific contribution that can be made by anthropology and the kind of insights that it builds?

**DD:** In all areas of my work, whether it's abortion rights, the impact of the Zika epidemic on Brazilian communities, the ecosystem of hate, the experiences of women and girls facing incarceration, I am first and foremost an anthropologist. It is through my ethnographic work that I am able to collect the stories and frame the narratives that fuel the strategic litigation cases I support, the documentary films I make and the books, papers and opinion pieces I write. It is my understanding that anthropology and ethnography can offer key tools for democratic and social justice strug-





DEORA DINIZ

**Fig. 8.** 25-year-old Rosiene (young woman sitting down) holds her 8-month-old daughter, Maria Vitória, born with Congenital Zika Syndrome. The family lives in a Xucuru Cariri indigenous community. Palmeira dos Índios, Brazil, December 2016.

gles, whether they be as representative politics or strategic human rights litigation (the latter being the path I have always chosen to take). They can provide questions that arise from lived experiences instead of abstract theorizing. This is very important for how public debates are framed. In other words, the way we frame a moral question always implies a political decision about whom we are willing to talk to and whose experiences we are taking into consideration. Take the Brazilian abortion question as an example. If we want to see women as equal citizens and take their perspectives seriously, we need to talk about health needs and reproductive autonomy, ultimately deciding whether we want to send women to prison or force them to make life-threatening decisions when they cannot carry a pregnancy to term. However, if we want to discuss centuries-old diverse philosophical and religious perspectives, then the conversation will be about the beginning of life.

**EB: The book *The unwelcome message* (Köbben & Tromp 1999 – unfortunately only available in Dutch), examines responses towards academics who convey an ‘unwelcome’ message. One of these responses is to attack the scholar’s character and mental health. The cases that are analyzed in the book are very different from the situation that you are facing, but do you recognize this dynamic, of delegitimizing knowledge in this way?**

DD: Yes, absolutely. A key fascist trend that we see in Brazil today, as well as in many other countries ruled by right-wing populism, is the persecution of academics and threats against academic freedom, because universities are spaces of critical thinking by definition. Last year, Bolsonaro’s administration heavily attacked Brazilian public universities using fake news, campus raids, threats against minority students, interference in academic management and budget cuts. These measures were especially directed at supposedly left-leaning universities with strong humanities programmes, but were met with massive protests and strikes in defence of quality public

education. The struggle is ongoing. Brazil was highlighted in the 2019 *Free to think* report launched by the Scholars at Risk network, which monitors academic freedom and attacks against higher education communities in the world (Scholars at Risk 2019). The reason why so many far-right populist governments attack academic freedom so intensely is that, unlike elections and policy debates, they can’t take over universities using massive WhatsApp campaigns and ecosystems of hate. So academic freedom is seen by these governments as a tool of constant resistance.

**EB: Being forced into exile for 17 months now, what has been the impact on you, your work and the people you care about?**

DD: Despite all of the support I have been receiving, being out of my country forces me to examine my unnamed situation every day. I am not a refugee, I have not been banished from my home country, but its own authorities acknowledge that they can’t guarantee my safety if I return. What am I, then? I had to leave Brazil in a hurry with my family. Overnight we didn’t have a home, an income or a close community of support, so we have been trying to rebuild that. And because the threats have continued to come, I carry this ‘contagious’ status wherever I go. In order to survive and go on with my life, I have to believe that the people threatening me only want to disturb my sense of belonging. But in any case, I don’t have the right to put other people – students, co-workers, family and friends – at risk of any type of harm. Also, I can never tell whether this ecosystem of hate spreading through the deep web and social media might inspire a lone wolf to a desperate act of violence. My only comfort is that all of this has made me even more aware of the urgency to fight for women’s and girls’ rights, for gender equality, for academic freedom and for democracy. I am committed to finding ways to do just that, regardless of where I am. My academic career may be suspended for now, but I have not been silenced. The threats against me have only pushed me to become a full-time activist. ●