



3rd International Conference on Gender Studies and Sexuality

“Never feminist enough”: gender justice and lutheran women in Brazil

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Abstract

There is a facility for the Lutheran religion to provide a social space for women that do not occur in other Churches in Brazil. Even so, being a woman, a Christian, and a feminist is conflicting and “never feminist enough”. The ecclesiastical hierarchy is where the historical religious subordination of women arises and it is from there that I have outlined the intersectionalities, strategies, and viability of women in the IECLB. The objective was to discuss the processes of ecclesiastical participation of women in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confessionality in Brazil (IECLB). As a Church constituted by German Protestant immigrants at the end of the 19th century, attempts at religious freedom, construction of presence, and frameworks configured a process of Brazilianization of the Lutheran Church in Brazil. I carried out a multisited ethnography in the Southeast and South of Brazil and a bibliographic review on the subject. I experienced the way they question patriarchal and androcentric notions in Christianity and how they act in the traditions and public incidences that feed their desires for structural changes in society. Part of the research process followed an advance in clerical citizenship and women's articulations around gender dissidence in the Church. It is noteworthy that the Lutherans establish a relationship and cultural appropriation of the particular southern culture, the so-called Gaucho Traditionalist Movement. A Church project in Brazil is underway and the recognition of women is increasingly guaranteeing them a fairer and more representative position in the Church.

Keywords: evangelical churches, feminism, lutheranism



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1. Introduction

The present work was carried out with the proposal of developing an understanding of the meanings attributed by women who participate in feminist theological production in the Lutheran Protestant-Evangelical tradition in Brazil and of the practices that legitimize a religious authority in broader contexts of the public of believers¹. Women who participate in the historically recent construction of representation and recognition that emerge through their practices in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil.

The actions of women descended from German immigrants in the context of European immigration in Brazil, from 1824 onwards, were related to work and care in the immigration colonies, serving the internal communities (Dreher, 1984; Blasi & Streck, 2009). The very close relations through associations between groups with Germany boosted the progressive arrival of other immigrants and missionaries and women trained in diakonia and professionalized. These and these immigrants and missionaries collaborated for the exercise and direction of immigrants and their communities located in southern Brazil. In the following century, the 20th century, religious communities began a path of more organization of churches, emphasizing the Protestant evangelical spiritual direction in synods (Radünz, 2008; Dreher, 2014; Gertz, 2013a).

In the national context of the Proclamation of the Republic of Brazil (1889) and the separation of the State and the Church (which corresponds to the end of the Padroado), a process of mutual help began between German and Brazilian women.

According to Dagmar Elisabeth Estermann Meyer (2000), a production process of different discourses between the period from 1900 to 1940 in Rio Grande do Sul, built the notion of a German-Brazilian-evangelical culture, discussed by a historiographical branch initiated by Jean Roche (1969), revised and used by historian René Gertz (2013a; 2013b, 2013c). According to Meyer (2000), what was presented as being a German culture or spirit was seen, after the Second World War, as an ethnic group and used in the studies of the sociologist of religion Paul Freston (1998) on the Protestants of German immigration in Brazil as a group of ethnic composition in the country. However, we consider the process of Brazilianization of the IECLB in recent decades, which includes a greater plurality of theological conceptions.

¹ This text was extracted from the thesis entitled: ““Never enough feminist”: women and feminisms in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil”.



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2. Feminisms in the IECLB

In a movement to update the Church, women, in the processes of evangelization, have been guiding the ideas of justice, equality, and sexual diversity. Articulated in international associations, and new historical movements in Brazil, mainly in feminism, they form a locus of support for the intellectualization and inclusion of women in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the deprivatization of religion in Brazil.

However, acting in the same places as men, directly, does not mean equal conditions. Marcia Blasi (Ph.D. in Theology at Faculdades EST, professor of Feminist Theology at Faculdades EST, and current executive in the Gender Justice and Women's Empowerment Program at the Lutheran World Federation) and other women linked to the Graduate Program in Gender and Religion (PGR) at Faculdades EST, exposed difficulties in the last five years to experience work, religion and feminism in Brazil.

“It seems that feminists are never enough”, declared theologian Sabrina Senger, after our first presentation of the research at the PGR, in São Leopoldo, in 2022. The feminist theologian is still little recognized and legitimized. The traditional conception of scientific neutrality, aligned with patriarchal and androcentric Christianity, is still hegemonic in the field of theological knowledge and institutions. The theme “women”, in some contexts, is treated with indifference, it does not seem relevant or urgent. The feeling that remains, according to Sabrina, is of an insufficiency of feminist women who are also religious or even recognized as fewer feminists for being religious. In the subjective scope of women's experiences, for the theologian Marcia, being a feminist and being in religion is another constant conflict.

The project of redefining female subjectivity in terms of sexual difference – understood as a sign of multiple differences, including those materialized in institutions and bodies and which opposes the traditional idea of difference as pejoration –, according to Braidotti (2004, p. 22),

it is equivalent to egalizing and promulgating the lack of symmetry between the sexes, that is, their radical difference. This elevates the feminist project to an epistemological but also an ethical dimension, by focusing on the alternative values that women can contribute. Defending the feminine feminist specificity as a function of a new, situated and therefore relational mode of thought, feminism seeks reconnection while accepting non-complementarity and multiplicity. Likewise, it positively highlights the importance of incarnation or embodiment and the lived experience. [our translation].



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In this sense, we are facing a non-essentialist feminist project, but a project in motion for the social integration of women, preserving their differences. But Sabrina considers that it is not “easy” for women and men to discuss sexual or gender dissidence and, at the same time, remain in the ordained ministry in the IECLB.

Still questioned about the condition of feminism in Brazil, theologian Sabrina observes that it is not enough to think of just one feminism, but feminism (S), in the plural. According to the theologian, market feminism is on the rise, and it plays a prominent role in society and considers that “[...] it is a trend that does not intend to deconstruct the dominant and violent structures [...]”. In this aspect, “[...] it turns out that there are concrete and social advances, when in reality their achievements are individualizing, they do not reflect or guarantee women's rights [...]”, says Sabrina. The strand of ecofeminism is with which Sabrina most identifies, because in the “[...] ecofeminismo é possível enxergar homens e mulheres conspirando num lugar onde a Terra e a Natureza são pontos centrais para pensar as relações e estruturas sociais [...]”, argue.

Gender studies are present in this work with the proposal to reflect on “[...] the complexities of consciousness even in the face of the most dominant cultural formations.” [our translation] (Ortner, 2007, p, 399) and offer a perspective of understanding the meanings of Lutheran feminism. Considering the tensions, negotiations, and interests of women in religion and the feminist movement in Brazil, we explored as a research method the theoretical perspective of Sherry Ortner (2011[1984]) to understand the dynamics in which these Lutheran women are situated. There is a new conjuncture of demands for gender justice in which theologians act concerning the IECLB against the androcentric and patriarchal power present in the religious context.

Discussing these issues through the chosen theoretical-methodological approach and ethnography, we apprehend the social dynamics, in the face of hegemonic sexism (Moore, 1988; Ortner, 1997). As for the discussion on religion, this was developed from the participation and identification in the production of speeches and representations of women, involving efforts of theological authority and their processes of subjectivization.

In this way, we start from an assumption of the generalized precariousness present in women's lives, especially in religions of Christian patriarchal traditions, and we find in Butler (2018) the premises for understanding the condition of women and their active frameworks in religion because, in the condition of feminist theologians, they are acting within a patriarchal system seeking to overcome the gender inequalities present in the religious institutional sphere.

The advance of the secularization of society and the propagation of new conceptions of feminism, as well as the growth and incorporation by different social segments of feminist discourses, the denunciation of discrimination based on sex and domestic violence, configure a framework in which some Churches have proposed to update and restore to the public their



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ideologies about the representation of the feminine. The beginning of the 1970s, which brought the progressive entry of women into the labor market and universities, also led to the creation of new moral and sexual parameters in the Churches, which aimed, in this way, at maintaining their competition in the field. Brazilian religion.

In contemporary times, Marlise Matos (2010, p. 88) states that there is a reconstruction of feminism from the global South, and we believe that feminist Lutherans act in this process:

“[...] It is for the first time that it is possible and even palpable to glimpse and recognize the idea of flow, of movement in a critical perspective between feminist thought and praxis at the turn of a “fourth” wave. [...]”
[our translation].

Empirical sources can support our assertion that there is, in Lutheran feminism, yearnings for more engaged and up-to-date international dialogues, based on the strong alignment with the World Council of Churches, which allows feminist theologians to carry and update in their advisory work and theological production, the transnational aspects and the widening of the conception of justice, discrimination, and human rights.

Corporeality is a topic discussed among Lutheran theologians. By exercising the pastorate, Minister Paula realized the need to re-elaborate her corporality to occupy a rightful place conquered by women in the IECLB but historically established by the male body in the culture of Christian religions. Now, the body is vulnerable by its definition, a social phenomenon that is exposed to other bodies (Butler, 2018, p. 58). Paula recognizes that she is betting on a different conduct to exercise the pastorate concerning male pastors, in the sense of offering more attention to people and involving the community to participate in Bible studies. But she recognizes that people see her in a way that is often not how she would like to be seen, and that is why she must show her difference, at the altar, in the community, and her life as a Lutheran pastor. This can be understood as a women's strategy, according to Rosi Braidotti (2004), in politicizing the sexual difference historically perceived as inferior and asymmetrical for a recognition of the positivity of the difference, in this case, built-in theological and ecclesiastical spaces of knowledge (Furlin & Tamanini, 2017).

What might be the criteria for judging a woman's degrees of feminist success? According to Nancy Fraser (2022), second-wave feminists generated a ramified and simultaneously systematic critique, and in the following decades, the so-called three dimensions of gender injustice, economic, cultural, and political, became separated from each other, regarding the critique of capitalism. For the Lutheran theologian and psychologist Anete Roese (2004), feminism would then be more linked to cultural aspects:



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[...] Feminism is a movement and a philosophy that understands that there are unjust social, cultural and historical structures, systems, gender roles that subjugate and cause suffering to women and men differently. It is a prophetic movement of denunciation and announcement, as it seeks, in addition to the deconstruction of oppressive structures, propositions of new references based on relational justice and the implementation of flexible and egalitarian structures. It is a way of life based on an inclusive ethic that recognizes a plurality of human experiences as healthy, viable and fair, such as the great variety of family forms that are constituted in society. Feminist philosophy postulates a review of stereotyped and unfair ways of thinking and structures in relation to issues of gender, ethnicity, class, age, etc. that permeate human life [...]. [our translation] (Roese, 2004, p. 185).

Starting from Roese's (2004) understanding of what feminism is, I will discuss whether this is a trend that corroborates the construction of a new profile of the Church that “cares for” and “welcomes”. We will see that, in this sense, the IECLB still conceives an expected female social role in women's work, and the representation of ordained Lutheran Christian women encourages the social and professional development of believers.

There is an insertion in the transit of Lutherans in the processes of formation and action in liberation theology and feminist theology (Anjos, 2009). These theological strands relate secular feminism and spiritualist feminism, elaborated by women in the Church, and mark the “[...] progressive and intellectual tendency of the IECLB.” (Anjos, 2009, p. 303 [our translation]). This characteristic has been opposing the traditional and communitarian tendencies of the Pentecostal Churches.

In everyday life, feminism does not appear clearly or centrally in Paula's concerns. Social structures, as she recognizes, are involved in the routinization of other tasks. Feminism emerges in some situations. Feminist thinking is triggered when social structures and institutions are not sufficient to enable women's actions. Paula recognizes the strength of feminist thought and identifies with some ways of positioning herself as a feminist. During a semi-structured interview, the pastor explained how feminism can be applied in her life and the community, the difficulties of discussing the subject in the parish, and some limits that she establishes on feminisms and their understandings.

Within this movement carried out by these Lutherans, the claim for other female roles, in the context of reviewing women's practices in the Church's ecclesiastical hierarchy, more recently propelled gender policy actions in other confessional areas. This also occurred in decision-making and the continuity of the cultural organization of populations descended from a certain Germanness, because of aspects of whiteness and Germanic descent in some regional niches in Brazil.



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In 2013, the idea of gender justice in the Lutheran context was first disseminated by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and materialized in official documents called the “Gender Justice Policy”, which served as inspiration for the creation, in 2014, of the Gender Justice Policy of the Lutheran Foundation of Diaconia (FLD); for the approval, in 2015, of Faculdades EST's Gender Justice Policy – which adopts it “[...] as a theological, pedagogical and ethical principle [...]” (PGR-EST, 2015, p. 1[our translation]), and last year, in 2022, inspired the creation and approval of the IECLB's Gender Justice Policy.

In this radical core, the human right of women is affirmed. And, therefore, the woman must be treated as a human being, she can vote, she can speak, she can occupy the public sphere, politics and she can occupy a privileged locus.

We understand that, in traditional history, feminism is described in the three most expressive moments, which can be called “waves” of feminism, according to Djamila Ribeiro (2018). In the first wave, we can identify the final period of the 19th century and its main characteristic has to do with the objective of women's suffrage.

According to Ribeiro (2018), feminists, in this first wave, sought to join efforts to refute the supposed feminine frailties, the belief in the inferior intelligence of women, and the condition that made expression possible only in the private sphere of families and the home. This was because of the contingent historical conditions of women's suffrage.

For the Brazilian feminist historian Luzia Margareth Rago (2003), in the 1970s, and here is the second wave, feminism emerged consisting of intellectualized women from the middle classes. In this period, in the context of the military dictatorship, feminists, as a possibility to manifest themselves, were inserted in spaces composed mostly of men and in left-wing political parties. And the possibility of acting in the feminist struggle necessarily occurred by carrying out the speeches that were authorized for them. Thus, to make the feminist political movement reliable, the position of women had to be directed toward the struggle for the country's re-democratization (Rago, 2003).

Participating in the processes of struggle against the dictatorship, feminists understood it as a political strategy to carry out the expansion of their political conceptions to, in some way, adapt their themes to the enunciations that occurred in the public sphere in that context (Rago, 2003). Therefore, by positioning themselves in the political framework of the left, women questioned power relations and had to mobilize knowledge about the class struggle in the country through the “Marxist-masculine language” to be seen as an important political group of trust (Rago, 2003).

In the case of Lutheran feminists, for it to be possible to continue maintaining the achievements already achieved, for example, the participation of women in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, they still need to solve problems that remain, even after the redistribution of institutional power occurs. They need to fight disputes in the still androcentric field of



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theological knowledge. According to sociologist and theologian Maria José Fontelas Rosado Nunes – founder of the Catholic NGO for the Right to Decide (CPDD) –, androcentrism is inherent in Christian religions (Nunes, 2001). In this theological and institutional field, all act, even those located outside the academy. This is because, in ministerial and pastoral work, they need to discuss, elaborate and spread theological notions. And, in this case, androcentrism can be broken with theological reflection, giving the notion of difference to women's participation in religion and positivizing the representation of women in this process, now as empowered by the Reformation.

The so-called third wave of feminism in Brazil is characterized by the generalization of the movement and conceived by traditional history, according to Ribeiro (2018), as it was practiced during the period of redemocratization of the country, the mid-1990s. Feminism focused on social movements and new theoretical and political perspectives emerging in Brazil. It is at this moment that the groups representing minorities can approach the feminist movement and ideas. According to Rago (2003), this renewal offered feminists new languages for a more diffuse movement, which guided the construction of identities and the recognition of women as new political actors in history. It is important to highlight that the problems and issues most portrayed by the subjects of feminism today are violence, sexism, and sexual harassment (Gonzaga, 2018).

About the work of feminist Lutherans on the internet, this is not a main resource for a feminist diffusion of the religion used by them. They are more concerned with treating, discussing and elaborating a feminist “look” or feminist theology, properly speaking, outside of digital platforms. That is, feminist action takes place in religious communities, in sermons (even if it is more difficult), in women's meetings, in OASEs² and, mainly, in classrooms. It is the way in which it is possible to continue caring for their community's face to face, maintaining and, in a way, sustaining the bonds of identification with the history of Lutheranism and its constitution in Brazil. A constitution realized with active actions of women (Dreher, 2007).

Disputes over the condition of the supposed 'true feminism' occur in different areas of Brazilian society. This issue was investigated in research carried out by Beatriz Costa, Camila Rocha and Esther Solano (2022), in which they found that all their interlocutors emphasized the importance of public policies that would help women to reconcile work outside the home, socializing and take care of the family. The authors also noted that not all the women they spoke to declared themselves feminists, even so “[...] it is possible to say that they are all permeated, to a greater or lesser extent, by a feminist spirit of the time [...]”.

² The Ordem Auxiliadora de Senhoras Evangélicas (OASE) is a centenary women's organization of the IECLB, created in 1899, in Brazil. In several Lutheran communities, the OASE is a space for women to hold meetings for biblical studies and social action (aiming at the integration of witness, service, and diakonia practices). <https://www.luteranos.com.br/organizacao/oase>



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(Costa et al, p. 26 [our translation]). The opinions and meanings of what it is to be a feminist in Brazil, in contemporary times, are about the theme of abortion, female empowerment, digital influencers, sexism, motherhood, the issue of gender and sexuality, and women in politics. These are pertinent considerations that demonstrate the need for research that focuses on every day and contextualized practices.

In this sense, we understand that – to better understand the production process of different discourses of women in religion – knowing the historical processes of women's practices in instances of the IECLB corroborates the understanding of the spiritualist feminist strand that we study.

Regarding the ideologies formed around the female condition and its forms of mobilization in the Churches that occurred before the advance of feminism in the 20th century, according to Anjos (2009), feminist theological elaborations are linked to the forms of mobilization of the historical feminine social role carried out by women in the Churches, since they are competing ideologies. This refers to the articulations of attributes related to the feminine (docility, care, and emotion, among others) and the condition of women in the Churches, in opposition to and concerning feminism and its impacts on the traditional forms of mobilization of women located in the contexts religious (Anjos, 2009).

3. Conclusion

Lutheran confessionality presents politics – in the parameters of decisions and obligations of society in an agglomeration – as a memory and tradition arising from the processes of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, during the 16th century. In this sense, we saw that the practice of religiosity, widespread and reconfigured, including in the process of incidence of feminism on the subjectivity of women in Brazil, is also investigated by the contesting logic that comes from Protestantism of German origin. The IECLB, through the so-called care, recorded by feminists of the Lutheran confessionality as the historical action of women acting in “mutirão” – an emic category present in the speeches of the interlocutors – in different regions of Brazil (Silva, 2010), has the investment of the ethics of conservation and care that builds regional representations of progress concomitant with the cultural influences of southern Brazil.

We realize that the ethical life of these Lutheran women, built by the contextualized reading of the biblical gospel, is the receptacle of a historical mystique - movement of historical strength - that implies feminism, in the second half of the twentieth century to the present day in Brazil. This is a movement that produces, from religious women, the desire for a perspective and action of social justice, in an aspect that includes Christian mysticism and the Church.



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